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Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

EDUCATION AND CULTURE COMMITTEE

Tuesday 27 November 2012

Session 4

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EDUCATION AND CULTURE COMMITTEE

31st Meeting 2012, Session 4

CONVENER

*Stewart Maxwell (West Scotland) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*George Adam (Paisley) (SNP)

*Clare Adamson (Central Scotland) (SNP)

*Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)

*Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab)

*Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP)

*Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD)

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

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Malcolm Barron (Skills Development Scotland)

Derek Cheyne (Unison)

James Corry (Unison)

Danny Logue (Skills Development Scotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Terry Shevlin

LOCATION

Committee Room 2

Scottish Parliament

Education and Culture Committee

Tuesday 27 November 2012

[The Convener *opened the meeting at 10:00*]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Stewart Maxwell): Good morning and welcome to the 31st meeting in 2012 of the Education and Culture Committee. I remind members and those in the public gallery to switch off all electronic devices, because they interfere with the sound system.

The first item is a decision on whether to take in private agenda item 3, which is consideration of the committee's work programme. Do members agree to that?

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): I move that we take item 3 in public.

The Convener: We usually take such items in private. How do other members feel about it?

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): Normally we would take such items in private for very good reasons. Given the controversy around college funding, which we will discuss as part of the work programme, it is probably more appropriate for us to discuss it in public, although with obvious caveats as to how we do that.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): I am comfortable to take item 3 in public.

The Convener: As no other members wish to speak, we seem to be agreed to take item 3 in public.

Skills Development Scotland

10:01

The Convener: Our next item of business is an evidence session on Skills Development Scotland.

I welcome to the committee Danny Logue, director of operations, and Malcolm Barron, head of operations for the south-east, from Skills Development Scotland; and Derek Cheyne, Unison SDS branch secretary, and James Corry, Unison SDS chairperson of the non-departmental public bodies group, from Unison Scotland.

We will try to cover a number of areas this morning, and I will begin the session with a general question. For the benefit of the committee, will SDS witnesses outline the organisation's main priorities and its main challenges?

Danny Logue (Skills Development Scotland): Thank you for the opportunity to come and speak today.

SDS has several main priorities. First is our focus on the careers service that we provide to individuals of all ages, which prioritises young people in schools and other, adult groups. Our second priority is how we respond to the needs and demands of the customer groups that we work with, particularly employers, parents and individuals. Another priority is the delivery of modern apprenticeships and national training programmes on behalf of the Scottish Government. We are delivering 25,000 modern apprenticeships each year.

Other priorities include the modernisation of the careers services. That involves building on research on what has been happening internationally and locally in the context of developments such as the curriculum for excellence. We want to develop our service in relation to the career management skills that support young people and adults to fulfil their career ambitions.

How we respond to the needs of employers is another priority for us. Employers are looking to fulfil their skills and recruitment needs, and we have been working with them through sector skills investment plans and regional plans. We recently launched a web service called our skillsforce to help employers find out what is available through public channels, such as local and national authorities, our organisation and jobcentre plus.

Other priorities include the partnerships that we work with and the infrastructure in local authorities and local communities. Developments are happening through things such as opportunities for all and our work with community planning partnerships, particularly on the delivery of single

outcome agreements. We are focused on service delivery agreements, with which we align our services to those in local communities.

My last point on priorities relates to our staff. The majority of staff in Skills Development Scotland deliver services to individuals. We have record levels of investment, and the question is how we engage, develop and invest in the services and the professionalism of our staff.

On the challenges as we go forward, we must ensure that SDS and its partners align the services and resources that we have; for example, we play a strategic role at the local level in aligning single outcome agreements and community planning partnerships.

The other challenge for us is the policy framework. I mentioned career management skills, curriculum for excellence and how we align our services with schools. We also take forward our policies post school in, for example, the opportunities for all initiative, in which some changes are happening. Those areas are therefore key priorities. There are also challenges around working with our partners to address youth employment.

My last point on challenges is that, as in any time of change such as the one that SDS is going through now, it is important that we work with our staff and partners to fulfil the ambitions that were developed and highlighted in the report "Career Information, Advice and Guidance in Scotland: A Framework for Service Redesign and Improvement", which the Scottish Government published last year. There is a big challenge for us in how we engage and work with staff and with our trade union colleagues who are here today.

The Convener: Thank you. I will not ask any supplementary questions at this stage. You outlined a lot of priorities and challenges, so I will move straight to questions from members and we will get into the detail of the issues.

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): If I am an employer and I approach Skills Development Scotland to seek its assistance to engage a young person in training, what options do I have in terms of public money support for that training opportunity?

Malcolm Barron (Skills Development Scotland): I will start, but my colleague might add to what I say if I miss anything.

There are one or two programmes that support training. The first is obviously the modern apprenticeship programme, which will provide some support if the employer is offering an apprenticeship. For small businesses, there is the employer recruitment incentive, which is available

for targeted young people. There are additional support mechanisms—

Neil Findlay: What does that mean in monetary terms?

Malcolm Barron: In terms of the cost?

Danny Logue: It is £1,500.

Neil Findlay: Is that a wage subsidy?

Malcolm Barron: In effect, it is a wage subsidy to take people on.

You will know that some local authorities supplement that support and put in additional resources. On top of that, there are some supports if the employer wants to put the young person through initial training. If we set aside the modern apprenticeship programme, there is also the flexible training opportunities programme, which can be targeted at small businesses and help to recover half of the cost of training; it is therefore a shared responsibility with the employer.

Neil Findlay: My understanding is that most of the employers who approach SDS are predominantly being pushed down the modern apprenticeship route. Somebody might want just to have some vocational training, but SDS is pushing them into an apprenticeship.

Malcolm Barron: My sense of it is that we look to see what the employer's needs are. There would be no point in pushing someone down a particular route if it was not appropriate either for the role involved or for the employer. It is positive if a young person can secure a modern apprenticeship, which prepares them well for the future and gives them good opportunities to work from. However, it is a question of listening to find out what the employer's needs are and responding to that appropriately.

Neil Findlay: A constituent came to speak to me about the modern apprenticeship programme because they are concerned about it. They have a teenage daughter who works in a restaurant one day a week because she is at school, and her employer said "You're doing very well; we can put you through an apprenticeship." She works only one day a week, and yet she will have an apprenticeship. On the face of it, that seems a good thing, but people are concerned that the term "apprenticeship" is being abused and that it is not what people think it is. Does that view have any legitimacy?

Danny Logue: We have emphasised, as the Scottish Government has done, that the focus on modern apprenticeships is very much employer demand and that the modern apprenticeship frameworks that have been approved through industry and the modern apprenticeship group must be followed. There is a record number of

modern apprenticeship frameworks, which are available at various levels.

The purity of the modern apprenticeship programme is essential. It is about employed people in a particular job, who have employed status, undertaking a modern apprenticeship framework. Other organisations and companies have used the term “apprenticeship”, but they would not gain financial support from Skills Development Scotland to support that particular framework—it has to be in one of our areas.

You raised an issue to do with vocational skills in schools and the ambitions in curriculum for excellence on skills for learning, life and work. How do we balance educational attainment in school through curriculum for excellence with the search for valuable work experience, which complements what the young person is doing in school and prepares them to move into the world of work?

We are about to publish a number of reviews. The first is a review of modern apprentices themselves. What have people been doing in their modern apprenticeship? What happened to them after the apprenticeship finished? Secondly, early in the new year we will publish a survey of 2,500 employers who have been involved in modern apprenticeships, who have given feedback on the value of the scheme and how it meets their business needs.

Neil Findlay: Does that mean that it is conceivable that a person who is working only one day a week could be fulfilling the requirements of a modern apprenticeship?

Danny Logue: No, because they are still at school. I think that the young person in your example was at school four days a week—

Neil Findlay: Yes.

Danny Logue: So they are still a school pupil. They would have to be employed by the company in relation to undertaking that particular modern apprenticeship once they left school.

Neil Findlay: They are employed, one day a week.

Danny Logue: Yes, but they are still a school pupil, so that cannot be a modern apprenticeship.

Neil Findlay: Okay. What about fixed-term apprenticeships? How many people in the programme are on, for example, a one-year fixed-term contract?

Danny Logue: The funding that we provide employers is for the duration of the modern apprenticeship framework that is being undertaken, which will depend on the framework and the level. The key issue is that a young person or adult must be employed by the company

to undertake the modern apprenticeship. They are employed from day 1 and have employed status.

In the survey that I mentioned, we are following up the 2,000 young people who finished about six months ago. Where are they now? Are they still employed by the same company or have they moved on to another job in another organisation?

Neil Findlay: I had an exchange of correspondence with Skills Development Scotland earlier this year. A number of modern apprenticeships are completed within three to six months, and a very high number are completed within one year. I do not expect you to give us all the statistics just now, but can you give the committee statistics on how many people are completing modern apprenticeships in such timescales, so that we can see whether the vast majority of apprenticeships are three or four-year apprenticeships or are being completed within six months or a year? Am I correct in saying that the majority are probably completed within a year?

Danny Logue: I think that the majority would be longer than that. We can provide the committee with detailed information on all the frameworks and the average duration of apprenticeships for individuals who follow a particular job route.

Clare Adamson (Central Scotland) (SNP): What is Skills Development Scotland doing in the context of its equality action plan, particularly in relation to gender in the modern apprenticeship system? I was a member of the Equal Opportunities Committee when we took evidence on underrepresentation of ethnic minorities in areas such as the building trade. Where are you with your action plan?

Danny Logue: We undertake equality impact assessments on all the programmes and services that we provide, including modern apprenticeships. We regularly undertake such assessments.

There are probably two issues in the question. On the split between male and female apprentices, a number of years ago about 73 per cent of the cohort were male. The proportion has dropped to 57 per cent, with females at 43 per cent. We have seen a gradual increase in the ratio of females to males in modern apprenticeships. That is partly reflected in the range of modern apprenticeships that are now offered to young people and adults.

10:15

We also work closely with a range of organisations that promote equality—whether it is between males and females or in terms of young people—in relation to take-up. There are a number of initiatives and incentives in that area, including

in relation to encouraging young people with additional support needs. Malcolm Barron mentioned the employer recruitment incentive as a good example. It targets young people who have particular needs and promotes them to employers in relation to undertaking a modern apprenticeship.

Career-wise, the Scottish Government has recently been looking at ways of encouraging young girls into modern apprenticeships in science, technology, engineering and maths. There is a lot of activity and there are a lot of people in this space. Perhaps it needs to be a bit more joined up, given the range of initiatives and organisations that are involved.

A lot of work is happening. Some of you will know about last week's modern apprenticeship awards, which demonstrated the range of young people and adults who follow modern apprenticeships.

Finally, there is our web offer—the my world of work website—in which we encourage young people and adults from different backgrounds to consider career routes that traditionally they would not necessarily have considered.

Malcolm Barron: I am sure that Derek Cheyne and James Corry will want to speak about this, but our advisory staff are also there to challenge gender stereotyping. The whole point of careers guidance is to broaden horizons and make people think beyond what might be immediately obvious to them.

Clare Adamson: The next question touches on Mr Findlay's earlier question. We have had a lot of discussion about the college sector and how short courses and flexible courses seem to appeal to women. Is there flexibility for part-time working within the modern apprenticeship programme? Are the shorter modern apprenticeships gaining support from people who, as we are hearing in the evidence on the college sector, do not want to commit to a three or four-year course?

Malcolm Barron: The critical thing is that they achieve the qualification. If it is possible to do the qualification on a part-time basis, that should be available. Older people in particular have developed skills over time but may have had no official recognition of those skills, which means that the portability of a qualification does not exist for them. That is the kind of thing that would be picked up in relation to the issues that you mentioned.

The Convener: You mentioned the my world of work website and the careers advice service that your staff provide. A number of members want to come in on that.

Neil Bibby: I start by asking the Unison representatives how the role of careers advisers has changed over the past 12 months.

James Corry (Unison): We represent about 70 per cent of the front-line staff in Skills Development Scotland. Our members are keen to participate in the modernisation of the service but they have concerns about the value of careers websites in supporting individuals' career development or career management skills. They are concerned that the websites remain untested or that a lot of assumptions are being made about the value of those websites. They are further concerned that the input in schools in relation to the new model is based on the assumption that pupils will use the my world of work website and may not need individual contact with a careers adviser. There is no research to date that implies that that is correct.

Historically, we offered a system whereby pupils who were perceived as academic could self-refer to see the careers adviser. That was very useful because it gave an opportunity to young people and allowed them to recognise the benefit of seeing a careers adviser.

With the new system, we are asking young people first to register on the website and use some aspects of it, and then to come forward and perhaps see the careers adviser. Any person who deals with young people or has a son or daughter will know that that is a tremendously idealistic approach. Young people need a lot of encouragement to get them to carry out tasks that they are asked to do.

Our members' concern about the new delivery model is that many young people may not necessarily come forward and seek to see a careers adviser. We are assuming that young people will still undoubtedly go to college or university, but will they make a well-informed choice about their college or university course or will they make a last-minute decision? Our members are concerned about that. They welcome the my world of work website, which is a very useful information tool, but massive assumptions are being made that it offers high-quality advice and guidance.

Young people need advice and guidance on how to interpret and evaluate careers information. That is the important thing for our members, and they are concerned that the new service overrelies on web-based services and makes a lot of assumptions. That is their concern about how advice and guidance will move forward over the next 12 months.

Derek Cheyne (Unison): What we are saying about our members is not just anecdotal. We recently conducted a survey with them and found

that the vast majority think that there is an overreliance on web-based services. There are fears that we will place far too much emphasis on those services in the future as opposed to face-to-face services, which our members value as crucial when young people are making decisions about their future.

James Corry: Since 3 September, many of our members have been in schools. Some 140,000 pupils in Scotland are in secondary 4 to 6, and our members have been raising the profile of the my world of work website in an attempt to encourage young people to register on it. It appears that the registration figures are not very high to date, which should be a worry to all of us here as parents and people who are concerned about how young people will make a successful transition from school to the world of work.

We are making the massive assumption that many young people will manage their own careers over the next six months or so, and we and those in higher education are concerned about the possible drop-out and retention rates of young people. The new model ultimately says that 75 per cent of young people will be directed to or have their needs met by the website service for information, and we are concerned about that. We want the organisation to look at that issue over the next 12 months and consider what fine tuning is required.

Neil Bibby: You mentioned—

The Convener: I am sorry to interrupt but, before we move on, can we get a response from the SDS management to the serious concerns that have been raised?

Malcolm Barron: I will try to give some background.

The development of the service was informed by work that was done by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the World Bank and the European Commission, which identified a number of elements that need to contribute to a modern careers service. Those elements included highly qualified staff, in which area we have made a huge commitment; web services, which are an immediate access point for many young people nowadays, and which allow young people access over a longer period of time during the day and the week; the service being lifelong, because people change their jobs many times during their careers; and the need for the service to be a basis for developing individuals' career management skills. The service should allow individuals to manage their careers as they work their way through their working lives and respond to the different challenges and changes that confront them.

Currently, 146,000 people are registered on the service, more than half of whom are young people under the age of 19. In the past two months, there have been between 15,000 and 18,000 registrations per month. The work that James Corry and Derek Cheyne are doing to promote the service that is offered on the my world of work website is therefore bearing fruit. Young people are registering. We have had strong support from directors of education and headteachers around the basis of the service and what is included in it.

My world of work is not purely an information and advice service. There are a number of tools to help young people to develop the career management skills of self, strengths, horizons and networks, in order to better prepare themselves and allow them to understand how they might plan their careers. The scenario up to now is that young people are working their way through that service and using those tools. Clearly, we want to publicise that more, and that work is going on, as Derek Cheyne and James Corry outlined.

The scenario beyond that is that we recognise that some young people need face-to-face support. We have identified some young people who are particularly at risk, and we want to target that support to them. They do not necessarily have support at home and they might not have access to the internet or various other sources of information. Those young people suffer from a number of disadvantages, which is why we are trying to target them with a coaching approach that takes them through what they require to better prepare themselves for the transition.

As Derek Cheyne and James Corry outlined, we are encouraging some of our more capable and better supported young people to use the resources, but the simple scenario is that, if they find that they are still confused, uncertain and unsure about what their next step should be, they should get advice from a highly qualified, professional careers adviser.

The Convener: I want to clarify something before I bring in Neil Findlay. If an individual who is not obviously struggling has been advised to use the website, how do you know that they are using it properly? How do you know that they are gaining the information that they require from it and making the right choices via it if they do not come back to you and say what they have done?

Malcolm Barron: The other aspect is obviously the support of the school and the guidance staff within it. We have talked about that and worked it through. The identification of those who are most at risk is not done only from information that we hold. It is also based on the school and what it knows about the pupils, given that it works with them day and daily. The scenario is therefore that there is additional background.

The other point is that, if a parent feels that their son or daughter is struggling, they have an opportunity to make the application as well.

Neil Findlay: I have two points, but to pick up the point that has just been made, I note that, first, many kids will not tell their parents that they are struggling and, secondly, even more of them will not tell their teacher, so there are massive gaps.

I am looking at a table that shows the picture to 31 October 2012 and it tells me that, across the regions, 17 per cent of 12 to 25-year-olds are registered. In areas such as East Renfrewshire and East Dunbartonshire, the figure is as low as 10 per cent. The highest figure in the table is 37 per cent. I do not know what measure of success you regard an average in Scotland of 17 per cent to be but, to me, it is worrying.

The Convener: Before the witnesses respond, will you tell us what the table is and where it comes from? That will give us a chance to—

Neil Findlay: I have my own source for the table, but it shows registrations for the my world of work service from 1 April 2011 to 31 October 2012.

Danny Logue: As Malcolm Barron said, a lot of work has been happening with schools, particularly in the past six months, and we have seen 15,000 to 18,000 new registrations in each of the past few months. In time, there will be more of the investment in staff that James Corry mentioned.

We are working closely with local authorities and schools. Our chief executive has been out to meet local authority chief executives, and my world of work is one of the key topics that they have talked about. We are keen to work—and we have been working—with local authorities and schools to ensure that we see more registrations and more use of the website.

There are three aspects to the issue. First, the development of career management skills is embedded in curriculum for excellence. It is mentioned in “Building the Curriculum 4” as a key life skill along with literacy, numeracy and other skills. Work to develop career management skills is happening in the classroom, and we are working with teachers and schools to look at that.

The second aspect is the work that we have undertaken with schools across the country in which we have run a number of sessions with groups of pupils to look at two things: career management skills, and my world of work and how they can use it.

The third aspect is the one-to-one coaching service in schools, which Malcolm Barron mentioned. Again, there is a targeted group for that, as was mentioned earlier. We work closely

with school staff to identify the group of young people who will need that important face-to-face service if they are to achieve.

10:30

No one will be left behind. Even if those who look as if they are sorted because they happen to have a certain number of highers or whatever want to see a professionally qualified careers adviser in their school, we will look at that. As we have said before, 2012-13 was very much a year of development in taking forward the modernisation of services, and we see a three-year horizon for developing services with regard to the professionalism of staff, the investment in the skills that we have in Skills Development Scotland and work with schools in rolling out and further developing curriculum for excellence. A lot of activity is going on, and throughout 2012-13 we will be learning a lot of lessons that we will want to build on.

Neil Findlay: Just imagine that I am one of the 80 per cent of pupils who do not register, but I am in your green category and have been told, “There’s the website, Mr Findlay—on you go”. If I do not register—and if I do not tell my guidance teacher or my parents that I have not registered—what careers advice am I going to get? Who is going to check that I am getting any careers advice at all? I cannot see where that is going to happen.

Malcolm Barron: We are playing out the worst-case scenario here—

Neil Findlay: It looks as though we are talking about 80 per cent of pupils. That is not a worst-case scenario—it is a common one.

Malcolm Barron: If a young person finds that they are struggling, they will come forward. They have done so in the past in schools, and there is nothing to stop them doing so now. If that young person comes forward and asks for help, we will first of all identify the issue. I am sure that if the issue is simple the careers adviser will deal with it there and then; after all, that is what they are there for. If more detailed action is required, we will encourage the young person to register on the website and use its resources to ensure that their engagement with the adviser is much better informed and that they get much more out of the process than if they come to the whole thing blind and spend a lot of time on basic information instead of really dealing with the issues that they want to address.

Neil Findlay: I apologise to the committee for taking up time on this matter, but I want to pursue it. Under the previous system, if you did not register, there would at least have been some sort of one-to-one meeting or class contact with a

careers adviser. Someone would have registered the fact that you had been spoken to—the basics would be known. Now, if I am in the green category—and have therefore been identified as being okay to be directed to a website—but I do not register, how will the school or SDS identify me? At the moment, I am not convinced that I would definitely be picked up. You talked about young people coming forward to ask for help—perhaps I do not want to come forward.

Malcolm Barron: But if you had been in that situation last year—if you had not spoken to the school, had not come forward or had not gone to your parents—you would not have been picked up either.

Derek Cheyne: I think that there have been missed opportunities this year. To some extent, young people have been guinea pigs for the modernisation of the service. I understand that we should be supporting those most in need but I note that early entrants to university courses such as dentistry, medicine or veterinary medicine this year have not, in the main, been seen by careers advisers, which can have a fundamental effect. It is all very well saying that many people who go into those professions come from families who are articulate and understand the process, but many do not understand it and need additional support. We know that people this year have not had that support, which might have an impact later for parents, or with people being unsuccessful or whatever. It is important to point out that, although we are at a very early stage of the process, people have already been missed.

The Convener: I will come back to Neil Findlay in a moment, but Clare Adamson would like to ask a supplementary.

Clare Adamson: I have a couple of questions for the witnesses from Unison.

You mentioned that you have surveyed your members—indeed, the survey is also mentioned in your submission. Are you willing to share the details of that survey with the committee?

My second question relates to the comparisons that are being made between what is happening now that we have the website and the previous system. A figure of 80 per cent has been mentioned with regard to pupils who have not registered, but do you have a figure for the percentage of pupils who self-referred to the careers service in the previous system, before my world of work was introduced?

James Corry: We plan to produce an MSP briefing on the survey results in the next week to two weeks. We need to share that information with our members first, as they participated in the survey. That survey was completed by almost 400 members of staff at SDS, which currently has a

staffing complement of 1,150. The 40 per cent of the staff who completed the survey were predominantly on the front line or on the operations side of the organisation, which currently has some 995 staff.

In terms of the discussion over the past five or 10 minutes, from our members' point of view we ask whether we can consider taking a step back. We talk about registrations on websites but, frankly, our members would ask what that means. Someone who registers on the Skills Development Scotland my world of work website is provided with information, but our members would argue that we then make massive assumptions about what young people actually do with that information. I go back to the previous point. Our members would argue that it is incredibly idealistic to presume that young people will be very proactive, will look at that information and will put their career plans in place. Our members' experience of working with young people is that they need a guiding hand or support throughout the academic year to ensure that they make well-informed and realistic career decisions.

We welcome the fact that young people are registering on the my world of work website, but I will tell you a story. I registered on the Very website because my daughter, who is eight years of age, loves Monster High dolls. I registered on the website because it saved me £10 when I got her Monster High doll. Have I registered on the Very website?

The Convener: That is beyond my expertise.

James Corry: Of course I have. Have I been back to the Very website? No. We need to be careful when looking at the raw numbers of people who have registered on websites. What counts is not whether someone registers on the website but what they do with the information on it and whether that helps them to become better at career planning and development.

From a trade union perspective, we look to the leading academics in Scotland—Sheila Semple and Cathy Howieson—who are currently carrying out research into the merits of the my world of work website and how it helps young people to develop their career planning and career management skills as compared with other career-related interventions such as face-to-face interviews with careers advisers and group talks. We hoped that that academic research would be used over the year of transition in Skills Development Scotland to help to shape and develop the my world of work website. However, at the moment, Skills Development Scotland appears to be a bit reluctant to participate in that exercise. We think that that is a shame because there is a lot to learn from that academic research.

The Convener: Let me bring in Mr Logue, to respond to that, and I will come back to you.

Neil Bibby: Can I ask a question before that, convener?

The Convener: Okay—a quick one. On you go.

Neil Bibby: James Corry says that Skills Development Scotland is reluctant to take part in that research, and Unison's written submission states that

"SDS have now instructed all staff not to participate in this research which could have played a valuable role in improving service delivery."

I would like to ask SDS why that is the case.

The Convener: You can address both points, Mr Logue.

Danny Logue: Thank you.

I go back to a point that Malcolm Barron made earlier. The self-referral model of young people accessing services in schools was introduced in 1984—I was involved in the pilot scheme. We are going back a number of years to when young people either could decide to see an adviser or could be referred by guidance staff. In 1985, we discussed the introduction of a careers database called microdoors; in 1993, we discussed careers company websites; and in 2002, the Careers Scotland website was introduced. Development has been cyclical, from websites such as the previous Careers Scotland one to web services such as we now have in the various tools that are contained within the SDS website.

It is not all about the services that we have now starting to exclude people; in the past, people have chosen whether to see an adviser, and not everyone needs to see an adviser face to face. Since 1984, there has been an on-going discussion about the value of such one-to-one contact, and various pieces of research have been done through the UK Commission for Employment and Skills. The Scottish Government's career information, advice and guidance strategy also talks about web services and the my world of work website.

Within SDS we have just launched a research and evaluation strategy. Early in the new year, a detailed plan will be pulled together that will contain our own timeline for independent research and evaluation of the services that we provide across the board. As well as the survey work on modern apprenticeships that I mentioned earlier, we will look at our career management skills service and my world of work. All of that is programmed and planned to be taken forward from next year.

From an SDS perspective, another issue with the current survey on career management skills is

that we introduced our career management skills service only in October. It is far too early to start evaluating career management skills in relation to what we are delivering in schools when we have only just introduced that service. Going forward—again, in partnership—we want to look to see how we can all work together on the issues that Derek Cheyne and James Corry have mentioned. Working with the other partners they mentioned, we want to look at how we might consider such research going forward.

The Convener: Sorry, but I am not sure that you answered the second question directly.

Danny Logue: Was that the question on why we are not involved in that research?

Neil Bibby: Why did you instruct your staff not to take part in it?

Danny Logue: As I said, we are conducting our own research and evaluation strategy, which has just been agreed by the organisation's senior management team. Early in the new year, a detailed plan will be produced that will include how we will undertake research and evaluation across all our services.

We know that it is important to work with staff during any period of change and uncertainty. To start evaluating a service that we have only just introduced would place an extra burden on staff in relation to the services that we provide. We felt that any evaluation of career management skills would be inappropriate at this stage because it is too early. I met both the University of Edinburgh staff to say to them that we feel that this is too early and that we would prefer to do the evaluation at a later date.

Neil Bibby: I am not sure how that necessarily precludes staff taking part in research conducted by Unison—

Derek Cheyne: Sorry, the research has been commissioned by Unison. It is independent and impartial research.

Neil Bibby: Are the researchers the same Howieson and Semple from whom Careers Scotland commissioned research in 2009?

James Corry: In 2008-09, on behalf of Skills Development Scotland—or Careers Scotland as it was then—Semple and Howieson conducted academic research on careers websites. To be fair to Skills Development Scotland, Semple and Howieson looked at careers websites such as the PlanIT Plus website to which Danny Logue referred and the old Careers Scotland website.

One argument that was made was that there was too short a timescale between the initial and secondary questionnaires that the researchers gave the young people. Understandably, some

argued that the timescale was too short to see what difference had been travelled in terms of careers management skills. However, the timeline between those two questionnaires was not in the academics' control because Skills Development Scotland wanted the survey results.

The academic research that is currently being carried out—as my colleague mentioned, this is not Unison research but impartial academic research—is, frankly, a follow-on from the research commissioned by Skills Development Scotland. The research is ultimately asking what impact, if any, careers websites have on the career management skills of S4 pupils, alongside other formal career-related interventions, such as group talks and careers interviews. Equally important—I am glad that Malcolm Barron mentioned this—the research is also looking at other personal socioeconomic factors, such as whether there is a history of low income in the family, whether anyone in the family has previously gone to university or college and whether there is any parental support for the young person's progression from school to the world of work.

We hope that, once that academic research is published, it will benefit the organisation. We hope that, as impartial independent academic research that has not been funded by the organisation, the research will be looked at by the Scottish Government and by Skills Development Scotland. We hope that the research will help to inform—not on its own but as one of various pieces of research that have been done—and shape the service going forward.

From our members' point of view, it is a bit of a public relations disaster that the organisation has decided not to allow its staff to participate in a piece of research that is being carried out by leading academics in careers guidance north of the border. That is the organisation's decision and we accept it, but our members think that it is not exactly a good thing. The independent research that is being carried out by academics could help shape the new model going forward, especially given that, as Danny Logue said, this is the year of transition.

The Convener: Mr Logue outlined all the research work that is going to be undertaken. Do you accept his point that, given that the service was introduced only in October, it is a bit early to jump into research?

10:45

James Corry: I appreciate that, but you need to understand that the researchers will not report back tomorrow. The research will take further cognisance of young people's career management

skills early next spring and report back next summer. It will not outline fundamental implications for career management skills, but it is certainly a piece of academic research that should be considered in the year of transition.

The Convener: We have spent a lot of time on this. I will come back to you, but other members want to come in.

Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP): I have just a couple of quick supplementaries. First, Mr Logue said earlier that the advisory staff were there to challenge gender stereotyping. If a young person does not get a careers interview and relies on the my world of work website, how can any gender stereotyping be challenged by an adviser? Secondly, if a young person feels that they need a careers interview, what are you doing to tell them that that is still an option? Are there posters in schools? How do they physically go about getting a careers interview if they want one?

Malcolm Barron: I will take the second question first, if you do not mind. I think that that might be a bit easier. On the interview, I suppose that—[*Interruption.*]. I am sorry, but I have lost my point. Can you repeat your second question?

Joan McAlpine: If a young person in school wants a careers interview, how do they go about getting one? Are they encouraged to do that? I have not looked closely at the website, but does it encourage young people to seek a careers interview if they are still not sure what to do? Is there stuff up on school notice boards telling them that a careers interview is an option and encouraging them?

Malcolm Barron: The scenario that we planned this year is that every fourth, fifth and sixth-year pupil will have an input from an adviser such as James Corry and Derek Cheyne who will describe the background to career management skills and the services that are available from the my world of work website. I am sure that the advisers would be able to say to a young person who has used those resources but is still finding it difficult to make a career decision that they have the option of approaching guidance staff and asking directly for additional help.

We can respond to such requests in a number of ways, including providing a full interview or a group activity for young people in a senior school who have shared issues. We want to work through such things as we go through the year of implementation.

You are right that gender stereotyping cannot be challenged if a young person does not have a careers interview. However, we must try to create the atmosphere or environment in which such thinking can take place. Schools do a lot of work on gender stereotyping, and the website tries to

portray a lot of positive examples in addressing issues such as gender stereotyping. I am sure that we could do campaigns through the web service that would promote and highlight such issues. We did a campaign recently about Universities and Colleges Admissions Service applications, but we could build campaigns on issues such as gender stereotyping into the schedule.

Clare Adamson: I did not get an answer to my question about the percentage of people who self-referred. If you have that answer, I would like to hear it.

Malcolm Barron: I cannot give you that off the top of my head, but I can get back to you on it if that would be helpful.

Clare Adamson: That would be useful.

Danny Logue: We can provide that information to the committee.

We have talked a lot about careers interviews. The notion that a one-off careers interview will fundamentally change a young person's life has been debated for many years. With career management skills—again, this is linked to curriculum for excellence—we are looking at how we build young people's capacity to manage their careers, not just at the transition point of leaving school but throughout their working lives, given the changes in the economy and employers' demands. The process is fundamentally about making the connection with young people's experiences in schools.

Schools have responsibility for delivering curriculum for excellence. We do not want programmes to be bolted onto the young person's experience of the curriculum, as happened for the past 30 years when the careers service delivered careers education programmes; we want the work that we are trying to develop on career management skills to be embedded in the learning experiences that the young person has at school: in their academic learning, in their work experience and in the vocational and employability skills that they gain, which we have talked about. There is a whole-school experience in that regard in relation to what SDS does and what teachers and other partners do in delivering within the curriculum.

The Convener: This is rather an old example, but when I was at school we were sent—I think once in the entire time that we were at school—to have a look in a card-index file in a wee broom-cupboard. Things have moved on substantially since then. There is the website, but in addition to that, are you saying that the whole system of career management and careers advice is no longer a stand-alone item but is integrated into curriculum for excellence and the working school life?

Danny Logue: Rather than what we used to call careers information, advice and guidance being something that is done to a young person and which depends on the person coming to see somebody, we are trying to develop the capacities and skills of the young person—or adult; we are not excluding adults. In building the curriculum and looking at all the skills for learning, life and work that we have talked about, we are trying to consider how we ensure that the young person's experience is actually articulated in terms of the support they receive in starting to develop their skills and manage their careers.

Malcolm Barron talked about the self; it is about how the young person develops their particular self, looking at their strengths in the context of what they want to do and looking at the whole horizon around planning for when they leave school and other transition points. Then it is about utilising the networks and various infrastructures that are out there to help people to gain the employment, careers and learning that they want. It is about embedding all that experience in the school, as you said, rather than it being something separate.

Neil Bibby: What was the total cost of the my world of work website, and what savings has it generated?

Danny Logue: I do not have that information with me, but I can provide the committee with information.

Neil Bibby: That would be great.

Mr Barron mentioned inputs. What is an input? Also, how many young people have not been assigned a traffic-light colour?

Malcolm Barron: I am not sure that I understood your question about inputs.

The Convener: Maybe I can help. I think that you said that every fourth, fifth and sixth year would have an input.

Malcolm Barron: Right. I beg your pardon. That means that a group session would be delivered to pupils by a careers adviser, which would cover the kind of things that I outlined. Does that help, or do you want additional information?

Neil Bibby: It is group input, not one-to-one input.

Malcolm Barron: It is a group situation, yes.

Neil Bibby: Will you also comment on how many unassigned young people there are?

Malcolm Barron: I am not sure whether the committee is familiar with the approach, so please bear with me. When we did the analysis we tried to identify the young people who were most at risk. If we are not sure which category some young

people fall into, we have a discussion with the school. The key point is that we and the school try to identify the young people who are most at risk of not making a successful transition from school to the next stage, and we consider what additional support we need to provide to help them to make a successful transition. We have a shared interest in doing that, so we share information to ensure that nobody is unassigned.

Neil Bibby: That means that you have X red lights, X amber and X green. How many do not have a colour?

Malcolm Barron: We identify a number of young people on whom we want to target our resource. In effect, after we have had the discussion with the school, there will not be anyone who has not been assigned a group.

The group is not fixed. I do not want the committee to get the idea that we are simply putting a stamp on someone and that is that. It is all about working with the school to target the best possible support at the people who need it.

The Convener: We must move on, but a number of members still want to ask questions about this area, so I will take one question each from Colin Beattie, Liam McArthur and George Adam.

Colin Beattie: Looking at some of the figures that have been provided to the committee, I note that Unison says that there are 100,000 in the green category, 35,000 in the amber category—I would appreciate confirmation of that number—and 200 to 400 in the red group. Obviously, you work with schools to determine who these students are, but what are the criteria for putting students into particular slots? Are they based on academic ability, attitude or what?

Malcolm Barron: A number of factors play into that. The strongest predictor of young people who are most at risk of not making a successful transition when they leave school is their indication that they will leave at the earliest possible opportunity from fourth year or that they will be a Christmas leaver from fifth year. However, we supplement that with other information that we discuss with the school. If a young person is in care, for example, they are more likely to be at risk and other factors, such as whether they are receiving social work support or have had issues with the police, are built into our consideration and worked off. Does that help?

Colin Beattie: Just to clarify, can you confirm whether it is the school, rather than SDS, that determines the allocation?

Malcolm Barron: It is a combination of the two. For example, if we are talking about fifth or sixth-year pupils, we might well have seen them already

or have received information about them. One predictor will be academic achievement and how the pupil is getting on at school, but the range of factors tends to be taken together. We might have some information and will use other information from the school.

Liam McArthur: I welcome two fellow Mo Bros to the meeting and salute their contribution to the Movember campaign.

Derek Cheyne: What do you mean? I have this all the time.

James Corry: Yeah—what's "Mo Bro"? [Laughter.]

Liam McArthur: I assume that it is not a style choice.

The Convener: That is a dangerous route to go down, Mr McArthur.

Liam McArthur: I thought that I would go there—I have waited long enough.

I welcome the statement in Unison's written submission that careers advisers

"will not turn people away when they seek help just because they haven't registered on a website",

because that very much chimes with what Danny Logue told me when we met in Orkney a number of months ago. Given that registration is not a requirement for being seen by a careers adviser, given the common consent across the board on the website's contribution to expanding the information that is available, and bearing it in mind that we are still a little unclear about what that precise contribution is, should we not be moving away from the perception that registration on the my world of work website is a requirement for being seen by a careers adviser? After all, registration does not seem to be happening in practice and is a potential inhibitor for those who are self-referring for careers advice.

Malcolm Barron: One of the key things that we are trying to get young people to do is to develop their career management skills and our web service has been designed to replicate those skills in that kind of environment. It is helpful if the young person can register and use the tools. Not all the facilities on the web service need registration, but young people must register if they want to access a lot of the tools. That helps them to get a better understanding of what they need to think about if they want to get the best value out of their engagement with, say, Derek Cheyne and James Corry.

Liam McArthur: There is a difference in wording there. You can encourage people to go down that route, but the current perception is that registration is a requirement before you can be seen by an adviser. That seems to me to be

unhelpful, if we are seeking to assist the widest possible cohort of young people.

Malcolm Barron: I understand your point. Nevertheless, I encourage young people to use the website because it will help them now and in future. You are quite right; we are not trying to stop young people getting the advice and support that they need. If they tell us that they need that support, we will provide it. That said, I encourage young people to use this fantastic resource, which will support and benefit them in the future.

11:00

Derek Cheyne: There are and will continue to be problems with that. Our well-qualified and conscientious members are not turning away those in the green category, but they have to see those in the amber category—and amber is split into light and dark—six to eight times. There is no spare capacity for them to see a high number of greens. Although our members say that they do not want to turn away people who come to them for help and support, not to do so will be extremely difficult if they are working to the highly prescriptive model that says that they must see the ambers six to eight times. The figures do not add up.

Danny Logue: I said earlier that this year is very much a year of development. As Derek Cheyne has mentioned, we have identified the amber group as being a priority group. We have looked to quantify the resource involved. We have said that those people might need to be seen between six and eight times, but for some young people it will be less than that; it depends on their needs. I do not think that the system is as rigid as has been suggested. It is about responding to individuals' needs and assessing what support they require from the one-to-one service.

We said earlier that any young person who falls outwith the amber category can still get access to an adviser. We are building on good practice from the careers services in their previous manifestations and the Careers Scotland website, which is where we have come from historically. What we have now is much more of an interactive service. We want to encourage young people to access those resources. If they have to come and see an adviser, they will be far better prepared and informed to have a discussion about what their needs are with that adviser. As we have said, the website is a valuable resource for delivering the service. We feel that that is a more effective way of delivering the service.

James Corry: If I could just come in on that—

The Convener: Very briefly.

James Corry: Our members are concerned that, ultimately, we are making people in the green group jump through hoops. After the initial registration, as Malcolm Brown said, they have to access elements of the website that will, arguably, make them well informed for face-to-face interaction with a careers adviser.

We have talked a lot about young people who are at risk, but for our members the devil is in the detail. What do we mean by that terminology? Our members—the careers advisers, the personal advisers and the key workers—feel that we should be engaging with young people who are at risk of not achieving their full potential. Ultimately, that means being able to see quite easily, without asking them to register on the website, an academic pupil or a young person who has no history of anyone from their family being in higher education. We think that the debate should be about working with young people who are at risk of not achieving their full potential, rather than being about focusing on young people who are at risk of not achieving a positive destination.

That is the difficulty for our members, because as careers advisers and as parents, they feel that the suggestion that some 75 per cent of pupils will have their needs met by a website is an extremely worrying development. They have no concerns about the my world of work website—it is an extremely good website—but it is an information tool that should complement and supplement careers advice and guidance, and it should never be seen as a replacement for those.

The Convener: I will let Mr Logue respond to that briefly.

Danny Logue: We are not saying that 75 per cent of young people will be satisfied just by using the web service. We know that a number of them will no doubt access face-to-face services as well, so it is not a black-and-white 25:75 split in how we allocate the service. I keep making the point that the service that we have now and the tools that are available as part of it are very much an enhancement and a development of the previous Careers Scotland website.

The Convener: I should have said this at the start, but it would be helpful if witnesses could please not touch the microphones—they will come on and off, as if by magic.

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): Like the convener, I gained my experience of the guidance service in around 1984-85. I was probably very challenging for the advisers I saw. I see my own daughter going through the service now and she is probably equally challenging, so I appreciate what members of the service have to go through.

All young people are different, so flexibility is extremely important. In my view, some young

people need the opportunity to receive face-to-face management and some could probably do without it, as we have discussed. Should people need face-to-face management, are there still the same number of careers guidance people in schools for that?

Danny Logue: There is a slight increase in the number of dedicated staff who work in schools this year from last year. The number was slightly increased to ensure that those particular needs could be responded to in the classroom.

James Corry: That is an interesting comment. One of our members' particular concerns is about the way that Skills Development Scotland is developing. In 2009, for example, it had more than 1,400 staff. We appreciate that there are public sector financial difficulties, but there has been a reduction of 20 per cent or so in front-line staff over the past two years. I am talking about careers advisers, key workers and personal advisers not only in schools, but in local centres that deal with the unemployed. Statistically, it could be that more interventions—whatever an intervention means in drilling down—may be carried out in schools, but our members are concerned that there is a considerable lack of front-line staff available for both school work and post-school work. There has been a reduction of some 20 per cent in front-line staff over the past two years because of a voluntary severance and early retirement programme.

Danny Logue: When SDS was created a number of years ago, we had a voluntary severance programme that did not focus on any front-line staff at all. One of the criticisms that we took then was that we—including the four of us who are sitting here—came from careers service companies, regional councils before that, and then Scottish Enterprise or Highlands and Islands Enterprise, where no front-facing staff could access voluntary severance. We were criticised for that, including in discussions that we had with the trade unions.

For the past year, we have designed and developed the service and identified the resources that we need to take it forward. The chief executive and I have made a commitment to all staff in all the roadshows that we have done. The front-line, face-to-face staffing resources that we now have at our disposal are what we will need as we go forward to deliver a modern careers service in schools and, importantly, post-school.

The Convener: We have spent quite a lot of time on that area, but members obviously had a number of questions that they wanted to pursue. I ask Neil Bibby to take up the next issue.

Neil Bibby: I will ask about SDS funding for college places. I understand that SDS will procure

4 per cent of the provision of the 116,000 full-time equivalent college places in 2012-13. What does that mean in terms of head count and full-time equivalents this year and next year? How do you devise full-time equivalents? I think that you use head count or starts to begin with. Is the calculation the same as that used by the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council for the remainder of the 116,000?

Danny Logue: For the 2012-13 academic year, we had agreement between the Scottish Government and the funding council to support 5,800 student places in colleges, and there was £13.1 million to support those places under the new college learning programme. We have been working with all the colleges and the funding council across Scotland to agree proposals that the colleges submitted to undertake that programme.

For 2013-14, the Scottish Government and the funding council have asked us to look at supporting 11,000 places within that programme. It is worth highlighting the components of that programme. There are a number of areas, but a key component is employability skills. We have asked the colleges to look at vocational skills in the taught learning part of the programme, but we felt that it was crucial to build real work experience into that for the individuals who are taking part. That is being supported by something called the certificate of work readiness, on which we have worked with employers. The certificate allows young people and adults to demonstrate their skills and achievements to employers. We are delivering 5,800 student places this year, which will increase to 11,000 for 2013-14.

Neil Bibby: What is the full-time equivalent for those head-count figures?

Danny Logue: That is 5,800 places.

Neil Bibby: Is that full-time equivalents?

Danny Logue: Yes.

Neil Bibby: What is your definition of full time?

Danny Logue: I cannot remember. Is it more than 16 hours?

Malcolm Barron: The programmes are negotiated with the colleges, which organise them for various durations. I will check this and get back to you, but I think that they tend to be about 16 to 20 hours. It varies, depending on how the college delivers the programme. It might be better if we get back to you with a specific answer.

The Convener: You can write to us.

Malcolm Barron: Yes.

Neil Bibby: Has the Scottish Government asked for that information?

Danny Logue: Yes. The key point about duration is that we have built a mixture of taught learning in the college environment and work experience. Colleges are utilising that work experience in different ways. As Malcolm Barron said, we will ensure that that information is sent to the committee.

The Convener: Thanks.

Joan McAlpine: On the employability courses that you provide, I take it that the employability fund will be an expansion of the college learning programme, as opposed to adding something new to the programme.

Danny Logue: Yes. Next year, the college learning programme will be part of the wider employability fund that will be available to take forward a range of initiatives in that area.

Joan McAlpine: So there will be extra this year, not just in terms of students and hours: you will be teaching more and the courses will be more wide ranging.

Danny Logue: Yes. The part of the new college learning programme that colleges deliver will be increased to 11,000 places. In addition, the employability fund for 2013-14 will encompass other employability programmes that we have had before, such as get ready for work and training for work.

Joan McAlpine: How do these employability courses differ from what was happening two or three years ago in colleges?

Danny Logue: We built in key components that are different from how colleges were in the past. First, lots of college courses are vocational. We are building employability skills as well as vocational skills into the college provision. A further key component is the work experience element that we have built into the programme, which means that it can be quite different from other mainstream courses.

In addition, there is the certification of work readiness, which we feel is very important. That came from feedback from employer groups and representatives, such as the Federation of Small Businesses and the chambers of commerce, and from employers themselves. In terms of young people's ambitions to move into the labour market, the new courses allow them to make a connection between what they are doing in college and the needs of the local labour market. It also allows young people to demonstrate the skills that they have gained when they have undertaken the programme.

We have discussed at regional college level the way in which the employability skills programmes fit within the wider employability skills pipelines in each local authority. That is where our building

blocks are. We ensure that there is an alignment of the services and resources that SDS provides with those that we are delivering through the colleges, the wider employability fund for next year and, importantly, the finances that local authorities spend in this space. It gives us a degree of alignment and integration in the employability skills pipelines in local authority areas.

Joan McAlpine: Sure. When we met college chiefs there was a lot of discussion about hard-to-reach young people. I take it that the majority of participants on these courses are hard-to-reach young people.

Danny Logue: Yes. We work very much with local centres and local partners. In each local authority area, there are established local employability partnerships, which have youth employment action plans. That allows us to identify the young people in the area who require various types of support, and the programmes are working closely with colleges to align the support to those young people's particular needs. That is why it is important that, within each area, the services are joined up. SDS is at the forefront of establishing service delivery agreements with local community planning partnerships. That enables us to align our resources and services with what is happening locally.

With any new initiatives that the Scottish Government asks us to deliver, such as the new college learning programme and the social enterprise and third sector challenge fund, we ask partners to engage at the local level with the local employability partnership to ensure that there is no duplication and that all the provision in the area is aligned.

11:15

The Convener: Mr Findlay has requested a short supplementary question.

Neil Findlay: You mentioned the get ready for work programme. Some people are concerned that such programmes are just part of a circuit whereby people go on a course, go back into unemployment, and then go on another course. I understand that, although get ready for work was for under-18s, that is to be changed, and that people will be allowed to repeat it. Is that the case?

Malcolm Barron: There has always been provision for young people over the age of 18 to enter the get ready for work programme if it is suitable for them. That has applied particularly to young people with additional support needs, but also to young people who are making their first transition. Recently, we re-emphasised that that is an option, because there are now more young people who leave school later and who fall into

that age category. It was not so much of a factor before, but it has become a factor. That is the key point.

Having given that answer, I have forgotten your second question.

Neil Findlay: It was about the repeated cycle.

Malcolm Barron: I think that that is a genuine anxiety about what we do. We monitor achievement rates within the get ready for work programme, as we do with all the programmes, to see what impact it is having, and we look at individual providers.

That is a concern, but we aim to ensure that young people progress within the programmes. The key thing is that they are getting work experience, additional vocational skills and employability skills. The one thing that we cannot do is guarantee a job at the end of the programme.

Neil Findlay: Previously, people could not repeat the programme, but they will be able to do that in future. Is that correct?

Malcolm Barron: Only in circumstances in which it is deemed appropriate. Someone who has been in a particular vocational area might decide, in discussion with an adviser, that they want to change direction. I am sure that we would recommend that option if it were appropriate for them, but only in those circumstances.

Danny Logue: I add that SDS has established a data hub for 16-plus learning choices, which supports opportunities for all. That is about how we share information with our key partners, particularly Jobcentre Plus and local authorities, and other partners. It allows us to track and monitor young people collectively within the local employability partnerships.

The Convener: Gentlemen, I thank all four of you for your evidence. It has been very helpful and very interesting.

I suspend the meeting briefly to allow the witnesses to leave.

11:18

Meeting suspended.

11:20

On resuming—

Work Programme

The Convener: Item 3 is to discuss our future work programme. The clerks have prepared a paper showing the current work programme as agreed. Members now have the opportunity to discuss that paper and any other areas that they wish to suggest.

I will begin the discussion by referring members to annex A of the work programme paper, which is a response from BBC Scotland to the evidence that was presented to the committee on 30 October by the trade unions. As members will be aware, we requested on more than one occasion that BBC management come to give oral evidence to the committee, but they declined to do so and have instead submitted a written rebuttal of the unions' evidence, if I can put it in that fashion. Do members have any comments on this area?

Joan McAlpine: I think that it is quite an insulting way to treat us. The BBC is rebutting the trade unionists in a way that allows it to control how it is examined by the committee.

Colin Beattie: In spite of the statement from the BBC that the convener read out earlier that stated that it intended no disrespect to the Parliament—

The Convener: I am sorry, but I did that prior to the start of the meeting. For the *Official Report*, I say that the BBC sent a response to us saying that it was not willing to come to the committee on this issue but meant no disrespect to the committee. I will just give the exact wording so that we are clear on it and so that members are aware of what has happened. The statement said:

"We would respectfully decline the invitation to attend an evidence session with the Education and Culture Committee for the reasons set out within the conclusions to the paper submitted earlier this week. This, in no sense, is intended to be or should be regarded as disrespect towards the Parliament."

I am sorry, Colin, but I just wanted to ensure that everybody was aware of what was said.

Colin Beattie: I apologise. I forgot that you read that out prior to the start of the meeting.

To me, it is disrespect. The BBC has been asked several times by the committee to appear and it has had the opportunity to do so. It has responded in writing, but that is no substitute for the committee having it here and being able to take evidence directly from it. What the BBC has done is disrespectful.

Liam McArthur: I echo that comment. In its conclusion, the BBC reiterates the reasons why it did not attend, but the fact that it has submitted

written evidence, which is quite helpful in providing a context for what we heard the other week from the union representatives, slightly undermines the reasons that it set out for not appearing. I think that the BBC has entirely needlessly got itself on a bit of a spike here.

Neil Findlay: I think that this is dreadful. I cannot think of another publicly funded organisation that, having been asked to come before the committee, would respond in such a manner. Frankly, I think that it is outrageous that the BBC has done that. If we allow the situation to degenerate to the point at which we are having committee meetings by correspondence, we are in a very sticky situation. I do not know whether this is a precedent or whether it has happened before—I am sure that it probably has—but if we now have organisations that simply say, “No, we don’t want to appear before you, but we’ll send you a letter,” that questions the system that we have here.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Convener, can you update us on whether the matter has been discussed by the Conveners Group in relation to not just the BBC but witnesses at parliamentary committees in general?

The Convener: It was raised briefly earlier in the session as something that we should keep an eye on. As you know, there have been a couple of cases, particularly as far as this committee is concerned, in which people who had been approached to be witnesses declined to come forward. However, the issue seems to have receded since then and, as far as I am aware, this is the only case in recent times.

Liz Smith: The committee’s general and I think pretty unanimous feeling is that this does not help the scrutiny process of the Parliament and the committee system in particular. As a result, I suggest that we raise the general issue.

The Convener: That is helpful. Just for clarity, I point out that I sought guidance on whether we could make a stronger request or indeed require the people in question to attend. However, that is outwith the Parliament’s powers. I certainly cannot force the BBC to attend the committee—we just do not have the authority—and we are therefore left with the current situation in which the BBC has declined to attend and has instead provided a written submission.

The question for the committee is, as we are about to discuss, what we do about that. We have a number of options: we can do nothing and leave things as they are; we can write back to the BBC with various questions and points that the committee might want to raise; we can write and publish a report; and we can seek a debate in the chamber before or after the publication of that

report. I seek guidance and comments from committee members on those options.

Liz Smith: Do Westminster committees have powers to bring people before them?

The Convener: Yes, I believe so.

Liam McArthur: The explanations for non-appearance seem to be a combination of, “We’ve already appeared before the committee on this issue,” and, “It would be inappropriate to carry out industrial relations negotiations in a public forum such as a parliamentary committee.” However, the BBC has undermined its second argument with its written submission and, as for the first argument, the question whether its appearance is appropriate is surely a judgment for the committee. It is of course up to the BBC what it chooses to say or not to say when it comes before us; after all, we have had plenty of witnesses who have indicated that there is territory that, for whatever reason, they do not feel able to go into. We can only imagine how the BBC would cover this if another witness were involved, and I think that we should impress that point on it.

The Convener: I certainly agree. I think that the BBC’s evidence is unhelpful and has indeed undermined its own argument. In any case, as members will be aware and will agree, the committee would not discuss or debate private negotiations between a trade union and management on wages, conditions or redundancy packages and I do not accept that that is a valid argument for not attending the committee. Indeed, I think that that is what Liam McArthur has just indicated.

What do members wish to do with this?

Liz Smith: I recommend that you as convener—on the committee’s behalf, obviously, as the feeling is unanimous—directly appeal to the highest authority in the BBC; indicate our disappointment; suggest that, whatever our views on the matter might be, in the lead-up to the referendum debate it does not help good scrutiny of, as someone has pointed out, a public institution if it will not appear before the committee; and make strong representation that the decision be reversed.

11:30

The Convener: I am happy to do that, although we have asked the BBC to give evidence twice recently.

Liz Smith: If we were in another Parliament, it would be compelled to appear—

The Convener: It would not have to be compelled—it would appear.

I am happy to do what is suggested. One option is to write, and we have already written. Helpfully, the clerk has just handed me the most recent letter that I sent to the then director general on 2 November—the postholder has changed since then. How do members feel about writing in the way that Liz Smith suggested?

Joan McAlpine: I endorse what Liz Smith suggested. Is the highest authority the BBC trust's chairman, Lord Patten, if he is responsible for governance?

The Convener: We can write to either the chairman or the director general and copy the letter to the other person. If the committee is minded to write, we will work out who to write to and copy in the other individual.

Neil Findlay: Will you give us a look at the draft letter before it is sent?

The Convener: Of course. The letter would be circulated for members' agreement before it was submitted in my name, on the committee's behalf.

What do members feel about the evidence that has been received? Do we want to begin to write our report?

George Adam: I say yes. We have given the BBC ample opportunity to get involved. Its response says that

"there was little ... to add",

but it has given us about an extra 10 pages of word-for-word quotes of everything that was said. We should go on with our report. The BBC has been given an opportunity to appear.

Colin Beattie: I agree with George Adam that we should carry on. There is no immediate prospect of the BBC coming to the table, so it will have to take the consequences if there is anything in the report on which it would have wanted to give evidence.

The Convener: Nothing prevents us from doing both things. If we start to draft the report, it will not be available for publication immediately, as we will have to consider it. At the same time, we could write in the way that Liz Smith proposed. If the BBC reverses its decision and comes to give evidence, that will help the committee in producing its report. If it refuses for a third time, we can finish our report. Do members agree to proceed on that basis?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: Another issue that has emerged in the past two weeks relates to college regionalisation and reform. The committee will be aware that I received a letter from the four Opposition members on the committee, which was circulated along with my response last week. I

circulated that letter to members immediately because it was in the public domain and so that members could see it.

Before receiving that letter, I received correspondence from Mr Findlay, which said:

"Dear Convener,

Given the weekend coverage of the call by the Cabinet Secretary, Mike Russell for the Chair of Stow College to resign, I would urge you, as Chair of the Education and Culture committee to recall the Cabinet Secretary to the committee to give evidence on this episode as part of our sessions on the colleges and the regionalisation agenda."

My response to Mr Findlay said:

"It would be my intention to call the Cabinet Secretary to appear before the committee on the issue of college reform and I think we may have already agreed to do that when we discussed the work programme recently. I am sure there are a number of witnesses we would want to hear from on the regionalisation issue."

Joan McAlpine: When did you receive that correspondence?

The Convener: The email from Mr Findlay came at 5 pm on 12 November and I responded at 10 to 8 the same evening. The letter was dated 14 November, which was a Wednesday, but I did not receive it on that day. Members will be aware that the letter was with the press on Wednesday at lunch time, when I was made aware of it through comments by journalists on Twitter. It subsequently appeared in the press on the Thursday. Neither I nor the clerks had received it by the afternoon of 15 November, but then I—luckily—bumped into Liam McArthur and I asked him for a copy of it. The media relations officer for the committee was being asked for comment and a response to the letter from me, as the convener. The letter was in the public domain with journalists on the Wednesday lunch time, and I eventually received it some 25 or 26 hours later, on the Thursday afternoon.

Joan McAlpine: I was very disappointed that Twitter knew about the letter before the committee did.

The Convener: It is unfortunate that, for whatever reason, the letter appeared in the press and in social media forums before it was received by the committee, either by the clerks or by me. That is unfortunate, but it is by the by. That happened last week. We now have, in effect, two bits of correspondence on the same matter. I ask members to comment on those issues, given that they now have all the information that I have.

Liz Smith: As we develop our work programme, there is an issue about the scrutiny process in general. There are various issues in the Parliament at the moment about what constitutes effective scrutiny and its publication. Joan McAlpine has also raised an important point. It is

absolutely right and proper that there should be the correct timescale.

Generally speaking, I think that there is an issue about the scrutiny process in any committee of the Parliament, not just this one. I had cause to look at various bits of the standing orders recently, and I understand that we must ensure that the convener of any committee represents the views of their committee. Therefore, any statement that is made on our behalf must be agreed to. That has not been the case over the past two weeks, and not just within this committee. We must be careful, when we develop our work programme, that the correct witnesses are brought to the committee, that the cabinet secretary has a specific role that is very clearly laid out and that the convener has a specific role. We must also be careful in how we approach not only the study of an issue but the decision making in reaching our conclusions. That is something that we need to tighten up on.

The Convener: Thank you. Do other members have comments?

Liam McArthur: I echo the comment that I made to you privately, convener, about the timeframe within which the letter was received and reiterate the apology for that discourtesy, although I suggest that it is perhaps a little synthetic of Joan McAlpine to complain about those particular inconsistencies.

As Liz Smith says, there are wider concerns about the scrutiny process. It was not helpful that, on the back of the decision by Kirk Ramsay to resign, you found yourself on a programme with a story that was changing by the hour. That put the committee in a difficult position, as you were represented as the convener of the committee rather than a spokesman for your party. I have no real concerns about the ability of the committee to undertake its role to date. We have had healthy and robust discussions on a range of issues and have had the opportunity to express our differences of opinion where appropriate.

On the issue that arose around the cabinet secretary's behaviour in relation to the chair of Stow College, there is a commonly held view that the cabinet secretary's behaviour towards some of the leading figures in the college sector goes beyond what is healthy and needs to be looked at, not simply in relation to the reform programme and regionalisation, which command wider support than Mr Russell sometimes seeks to portray. When a cabinet secretary demands the resignation of a college chair, that throws up serious questions about his judgment and the relationship that he has with the sector. Therefore, I think that it is worthy of specific review by the committee.

Neil Bibby: Given the resignation of the chair of Stow College and the issues around college funding in recent weeks, I agree that we must not only look at the college regionalisation agenda but have further evidence sessions on the culture within FE and the relationship between the Government or cabinet secretary and the colleges. That certainly needs to be investigated in further evidence sessions.

Neil Findlay: Convener, for me the issue is that you made public statements, without any discussion with committee members—certainly not with me as deputy convener—in which you dismissed the idea that the committee would look at the issue further. That is a problem for the integrity of the committee and how the committee conducts itself. Many of us have a worry about that.

The Convener: I am happy to respond to that. I expressed my view on the information as it was available at the time. Clearly, it is always the case—that is why I have put this item on the agenda—that the committee decides these things. I expressed my view, not the view of the committee. I thought, and still think, that the position that I expressed at the time was based on the evidence that was available.

As I said to Mr McArthur in the earlier discussion to which he alluded, it is unfortunate that it was portrayed that I had some sort of power to block the committee's decision. I do not have such a power and I did not say that I have such a power—of course, the issue is for the committee to decide—and I accept that that is unfortunate. I certainly do not want members to feel that I was trying to speak on their behalf or override their rights to discuss these matters or decide the committee's work programme. That is why I immediately requested that a discussion of the work programme should be on the first available committee agenda.

Liz Smith: Convener, thank you for clarifying that point. Given that your comments were made prior to other evidence appearing about difficulties with the numbers and various data that we were provided with, might you have changed your mind since then?

The Convener: I will answer that specific point, but let me first ask whether any other members want to speak.

Joan McAlpine: First, I think that the fact that the letter appeared on Twitter and in the press before it was made available to the committee convener shows that it is a politically motivated initiative.

On the criticisms of the convener, I think that the convener has always conducted himself impeccably. Not everything that we say should be

interpreted as the view of the committee. The deputy convener often says things that I disagree with, but as a committee member I do not think that when he talks about various aspects of education he is speaking for me.

On the scrutiny provided by the committee, I think that our budget report, when it is published, will show that the committee is a very effective vehicle for scrutiny. Given that our work programme includes looking at college regionalisation, I think that the scrutiny of that issue will be as robust as anything that we have done. There will be an opportunity to look at the issue then.

George Adam: As Joan McAlpine has said, we need only look at the report that we recently finished on our scrutiny of the budget, in relation to which the convener dealt with matters with patience—

The Convener: For everyone's benefit—I know that you are probably not going to reveal anything—I should say that the budget report is still confidential, as it has not yet been published and is still with the Finance Committee. Before we go on, I just want to ensure that no one discusses any details of our budget report.

11:45

George Adam: I had no intention of doing so, convener.

The Convener: I am sure that you did not, Mr Adam, but I just wanted to make sure.

George Adam: We have had hours and hours of discussion and I think that it stands as a perfect example of how you have taken things forward in an inclusive manner. You certainly showed a lot more patience than I would have in your position, and I have no doubt about the work that you have done.

I also agree with Joan McAlpine. When other committee members—particularly Mr Findlay, who appears quite regularly on various channels—say things on television, they are not necessarily speaking for the committee. On the whole, I do not think that that is an issue.

Neil Findlay: You must be watching different channels to me, then, George.

Liz Smith: Forgive me, convener, but that is a separate issue. We can speak as spokesmen for our parties, but that is not the same as speaking for the committee.

The Convener: It is a separate matter. I do not want to have an extended discussion on an issue that is not central to the work programme. This item is about the work programme, and our discussion should stick to that subject.

Clare Adamson: I support comments that Joan McAlpine and George Adam have made. Liam McArthur mentioned a common consent about where we are with certain matters, but I absolutely disagree with him. There is no comment consent. There might be calls in certain areas, but the very robust evidence that the committee has taken from the college sector should allay some of the concerns that have been expressed. A lot of these issues were aired in last week's chamber debate, which the Liberal Democrats asked for, and the previous debate, and there are many opportunities to question the cabinet secretary on these matters in the chamber. The work programme is in place, and I am sure that it will be robust enough if the committee wishes to ask any questions.

Colin Beattie: I have been a member of this committee for only a short time but, in that period, I have had no reason to be concerned about its convenership. However, like other members, I am concerned about the timescale for the presentation of the letter to the convener, which does not seem to have been particularly well done. The letter itself seems to continue allegations about which not a single scrap of evidence has as yet been produced. As for its reference to a

“culture of secrecy, bullying and intimidation”,

those are emotive words but, when the newspapers went around the colleges, they were unable to bring up a single person to support such statements. In light of that, I tend to agree with Joan McAlpine that this is politically motivated.

Neil Findlay: I think that that sums up our case. If we have an inquiry, we will find out what the evidence is. It might well come up with nothing but I note in the transcript of an interview with the convener that he said, “The purpose of an inquiry is to find out the facts,” which is what I think is being asked for. The interviewer then said, “Right, you're saying no,” to which the convener replied, “Yes, because the facts are not in dispute in this case.” So the issue has already been decided.

The Convener: I am sorry but, as I said earlier, I do not want to get into this matter. This is a discussion about the work programme. In the interview, I was responding to a question about my view on the issue. That is my view on it. Can we stick to the matter in hand, which is the work programme?

Liam McArthur: It is dangerous to suggest that this is politically motivated. I cannot speak for others, but I am certain that if a Labour or Liberal Democrat minister had called into his office a chair of a college and demanded his resignation, there would be calls from each of the SNP members of this committee for some form of inquiry if not into that specific incident then into the relationship

between ministers and the sector. I do not believe that this is politically motivated and think that there are sufficient concerns to address.

It should surprise no one that a series of college principals has not popped up on the airwaves in recent days to denounce the cabinet secretary. However, at least a couple of the other chairs have expressed concern about the education secretary's management style, and a number of trade unions at specific colleges have expressed grave concern. That is sufficient to suggest that some form of inquiry is justified.

As I said, the problem might have been triggered by the reforms and regionalisation, but it goes wider than that. Some members were made aware of concerns in the primary and secondary sector about the implementation of curriculum for excellence, in particular, which speak to the concerns that have emerged from the college sector.

I dispute the suggestion that the initiative is politically motivated. There is justification for an inquiry into the cabinet secretary's relationship with the college sector. I do not think that such work would sit comfortably with a wider investigation into regionalisation, but if that is where it needs to sit we will find a way of accommodating it.

Joan McAlpine: Representatives of all the trade unions gave evidence during the budget process. As I recall, the Educational Institute of Scotland's spokesman for the further and higher education sectors was pretty critical of the Government. He did not appear to be intimidated: he criticised the Government's approach but he said nothing about bullying and intimidation. None of our witnesses has said anything about bullying and intimidation, either in our budget meetings or in meetings last year, when we heard from several college principals. I do not know where the concerns are coming from, given that in all the critical evidence that we heard, bullying was not mentioned.

The Convener: Does Liam McArthur want to respond to that? I do not want to curtail debate on the issue; I want to give members as much opportunity as they want to make points. I am quite happy for you to come back in, if you want to do so.

Liam McArthur: We invited the EIS to give evidence and to answer questions on the budget. Had that meeting taken place after the events in relation to Kirk Ramsay, I think that we might have been inclined to pursue a line of inquiry in that regard, and I suspect that we would have got a different response. The argument that there is no case to answer because Larry Flanagan did not

mention the issue when he gave evidence on the budget does not stack up.

Enough has happened in the context of the events relating to the chair of Stow College and issues that a number of members have picked up anecdotally. I accept what Clare Adamson said about there being no common consent, but I think that enough of us have heard similar stories from across the college sector and other parts of the education landscape to suggest that we are entirely justified in asking that work be done by the committee.

Neil Bibby: We have heard concerns about the Scottish Government's and the cabinet secretary's dealings with colleges. We should have an inquiry, in which we gather the evidence and find out what is happening to that relationship. It would be wrong to dismiss what we have heard and what has gone on during the past few weeks. There are issues that need to be looked at and it would be wrong to sweep them under the carpet.

George Adam: I know that we are heading into the panto season, but we have to focus on what is important. We are dealing with the reform of further education, and a lot of the good work that has been going on has been lost in the personality politics that we have witnessed, in which we know the public do not want to get involved. They will start to think that everyone is as bad as everyone else. We have to move away from that, because in the current scenario all that is happening is that Parliament, the committee and everyone else are being dragged into a bun fight.

That is not what we are here for; we are here to ensure that we make a difference to education in Scotland. We need to kiss and make up and get on with it. Larry Flanagan has made that point. The important point is that we have to move ahead, see what we can do and get on with the debate and with proper politics, as opposed to personality politics.

Colin Beattie: Convener, will you read out the Labour group's original proposal again, just so that we can keep it in mind?

The Convener: I will sum up the proposals that are before us, but I first ask whether members have any other comments.

Liz Smith: I want to put on the public record again that I think that the issue is scrutiny; it is not to do with personalities. There is a fundamental issue about scrutiny of a cabinet secretary and how he or she operates in the sectors. I am not commenting one way or the other, but we have a significant concern of which we need to be mindful, so I very much agree with Liam McArthur's points.

Joan McAlpine: I want to respond to that point on the record. The cabinet secretary has had two debates on colleges in which it was possible to scrutinise him. He is also answering questions; I believe that, for education portfolio questions this week, every single question is on college reform, and I understand that topical question time last week ran over because there were questions about college reform and the Presiding Officer allowed many supplementary questions. No one can doubt that the cabinet secretary has been put under considerable scrutiny, and we will have an opportunity to scrutinise him again when the committee covers college regionalisation.

The Convener: Everybody has had their say.

There has been correspondence between Mr Findlay and me. It was not in the public domain, which is why I did not circulate it, but everybody now has a copy. I hope that everybody heard me the first time but, for Colin Beattie's benefit, I will read it again. It states:

"Given the weekend coverage of the call by the Cabinet Secretary, Mike Russell for the Chair of Stow College to resign. I would urge you, as Chair of the Education and Culture committee to recall the Cabinet Secretary to the committee to give evidence on this episode as part of our sessions on the colleges and the regionalisation agenda."

It is clear that we have a difference of opinion on the work programme. On the work programme more widely, we have already agreed to do a number of things. We still have to deal with the Donaldson review of teacher education. We have asked members to suggest possible witnesses; some members have responded, for which I am grateful. We also have the post-16 education reform bill, which I believe will be published this week and will come to us in the new year. Those are the main items. I will not go through all the others—the paper sets them out. We have our current inquiry into the decision-making process in removing children from the parental home, as well as some petitions, secondary legislation and other matters. That is the current work programme.

In effect, we have two proposals on the same issue. One, which was originally made by the Labour Party, is that we ask the cabinet secretary to

"give evidence on this episode as part of our sessions on the colleges and the regionalisation agenda."

We then had a subsequent letter and the further comments today. I am paraphrasing but, in effect, the second suggestion is that we have a separate inquiry on the issue. I think that Liz Smith talked about a "scrutiny process". That is what has been suggested.

We have a number of options. To sum up, we can do one or the other, or we can do neither, or we can do something else. How do members wish

to proceed? I leave the issue in your hands. I ask members to say what they would prefer to do and when they would prefer to do it.

Liam McArthur: My preference is to have something that would stand apart from our work on college regionalisation. There would be a requirement to do that sooner rather than later, notwithstanding the work to which we are already committed in relation to the inquiry. That might be before the Christmas recess or immediately after it, but that would be the timeframe.

George Adam: My preferred option is to make it part of the discussion about college regionalisation that we are going to have anyway. We can discuss everything, whether it is through the bill or whatever, and we can have the debate then. I think that that is the most important thing, as was stated earlier.

The Convener: Just for clarity, what is your suggested timescale?

George Adam: I think that we have options with the bill. We also have further education in the work programme for later, but if we are going to discuss issues with regard to colleges, we may as well do it when we have the bill in January.

12:00

The Convener: I was just double checking. I do not want to overstep my authority, but my expectation is that we will agree to look at the bill as soon as possible and that stage 1 will begin in January. However, we have not seen the bill yet, so we cannot say that for certain.

Colin Beattie: I have given the matter quite a bit of thought while members have been talking. It would be good to reach consensus. Possibly the best way forward would be to adopt the Labour Party's original proposal; proper scrutiny would take place and we would have the cabinet secretary back to discuss the matter. We should do that as soon as we can fit it into the work programme. I hope that that will mean that there is something for everybody.

Neil Bibby: My preference is for an inquiry with further evidence sessions, including one with the cabinet secretary on his relationship with colleges and the wider colleges regionalisation agenda.

Neil Findlay: I support Neil Bibby's proposal.

Liz Smith: I am fine with that.

The Convener: Which proposal do you support?

Liz Smith: I support what Liam McArthur and the two Neils said.

The Convener: Thank you.

Joan McAlpine: I back the Labour Party's original proposal. We will have an opportunity to question the cabinet secretary during our discussions on college regionalisation as part of bill scrutiny.

The Convener: Okay. I will come back to that.

Clare Adamson: I have to go along with doing the work within our scrutiny of the bill. What has been asked for is an inquiry into the cabinet secretary's relationship with the colleges and the regionalisation model. The regionalisation model is covered in the work programme, and I certainly do not think that the committee's time should be tied up in looking at what is, in effect, a management-style issue.

The Convener: Thank you. Just for clarity, and to be fair, the original email from Mr Findlay talked about taking evidence during our sessions on the colleges and regionalisation agenda. We had not set a timescale for them, although I think that we were probably anticipating that they would be at some point later in 2013. I have to say that, under the circumstances, I do not think that it would be reasonable to wait until then, and I presume that that would not be acceptable to Labour Party members, either. I accept that things have moved on from the original discussion.

Neil Findlay: Yes—things have moved on quite significantly from that first email, and that is why the subsequent letter followed.

The Convener: That is what I am saying; I accept that. It is obvious that there is not going to be agreement round the table about the two proposals that were submitted—one by Neil Findlay on behalf of the Labour Party, and then the letter to which he was joint signatory. That is not surprising.

If I interpret the situation correctly, we have two proposals. One is to have a separate inquiry, as proposed by the Opposition members, and the other is roughly outlined by what Colin Beattie said, backed up by Clare Adamson, which is to look at the matter as per the Labour Party's original suggestion. I hope that members agree that the matter could not be put back as far as was originally envisaged. I think that it was George Adam who originally said that it could be considered with the bill at stage 1. Is that correct?

Neil Bibby: Yes.

The Convener: Those are the two positions. I would prefer that we did not vote on this, but if it is what members prefer, we can have a vote. It looks like four members support the position that was originally outlined by Liam McArthur. The other position is supported by the four Scottish National Party members.

All these matters can be discussed and questions can be asked, as per Colin Beattie's suggestion about supporting the Labour Party proposal to take consider the episode during evidence on the colleges and regionalisation agenda. That would take place as part of our scrutiny of the bill, starting in January.

Are members content with that? I know that it is not the unanimous position, but it is the majority position in the committee at the moment.

Neil Findlay: Just move to a vote.

The Convener: We do not have to have a vote. Will we have a vote?

Neil Findlay: Yes.

The Convener: Is everyone clear about the two proposals? I describe them as the letter from the Opposition members and the original Labour Party proposal. I know that that is not exactly right but it is just for clarity, so that people know what we are talking about.

Who is in favour of the proposal that has been submitted by the four Opposition members in the form of the letter?

For

Bibby, Neil (West Scotland) (Lab)
Findlay, Neil (Lothian) (Lab)
McArthur, Liam (Orkney Islands) (LD)
Smith, Liz (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

The Convener: Who is in favour of the original Labour Party proposal—albeit that it would take place in the context of the post-16 education reform bill?

For

Adam, George (Paisley) (SNP)
Adamson, Clare (Central Scotland) (SNP)
Beattie, Colin (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
Maxwell, Stewart (West Scotland) (SNP)
McAlpine, Joan (South Scotland) (SNP)

The Convener: Four members supported the call for an immediate inquiry and five members supported the proposal that the evidence be taken as part of the bill on post-16 education and training.

Members have no other points about the work programme, so I close the meeting.

Meeting closed at 12:08.

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