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De Clare,

Further to my letter dated 20 December, I thought it would be helpful to provide some additional information in response to the Committee's question regarding the reasons for the underspends in Pupil Equity Funding (PEF) in 2017-18. My earlier response set out the various methods by which the use of PEF is being evaluated and monitored, and these, along with regular discussions with local authorities and schools help us to understand some of the reasons behind the level of underspend in the first year of the funding.

The most important point was that PEF was introduced at the start of a new financial year, two thirds of the way through the school year. As a new funding stream, it is understandable that schools exercised a degree of caution in the first year, spending time to ensure they would invest PEF in activities which would make the biggest impact on children affected by poverty. Schools were expected to consult with staff, parents and pupils to develop their improvement plans, and in many cases the biggest planned investment was in staff, who they often could not start employing before August.

I recognise that the recruitment of staff in the first year of PEF was a challenge, particularly in some areas of the country. However, last month's teacher census statistics showed an increase since last year of nearly 296 FTE teaching posts funded by the Attainment Scotland Fund, of which the majority were funded through PEF. We will continue to monitor PEF spending each year at local authority and school level, and would expect a smaller carry-over of funding in the coming year. Importantly, we have made it clear to schools and authorities that any PEF that has not been spent at individual school level in the previous financial year can be carried forward and remains available for the head teacher to spend on tackling the poverty related attainment gap.

I hope you find this information helpful.

JOHN SWINNEY

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