



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

EDUCATION AND CULTURE COMMITTEE

Tuesday 24 November 2015

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EDUCATION AND CULTURE COMMITTEE

28th Meeting 2015, Session 4

CONVENER

*Stewart Maxwell (West Scotland) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*George Adam (Paisley) (SNP)
*Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
*Chic Brodie (South Scotland) (SNP)
*Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
*Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD)
*John Pentland (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)
*Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Angus Allan (Colleges Scotland)
Larry Flanagan (Educational Institute of Scotland)
Robert Foster (Who Cares? Scotland)
Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab) (Committee Substitute)
Jane Peckham (National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers)
Vonnie Sandlan (National Union of Students Scotland)
Seamus Searson (Scottish Secondary Teachers Association)
Mary Senior (University and College Union Scotland)
Alastair Sim (Universities Scotland)
Andy Smith (School Leaders Scotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Terry Shevlin

LOCATION

The Mary Fairfax Somerville Room (CR2)

Scottish Parliament

Education and Culture Committee

Tuesday 24 November 2015

[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:00]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Stewart Maxwell): Good morning and welcome to the 28th meeting in 2015 of the Education and Culture Committee. I remind everyone present to ensure that their electronic devices are switched off at all times. We have received apologies from Mark Griffin. I welcome Iain Gray who is substituting for Mark.

Agenda item 1 is a decision on taking business in private. Do members agree to take item 4 in private?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Student Support

10:00

The Convener: Agenda item 2 is an evidence-taking session on student support. The committee is keen to hear evidence from a range of stakeholders this morning. I welcome to the meeting Angus Allan from Colleges Scotland; Robert Foster from Who Cares? Scotland; Vonnice Sandlan from the National Union of Students Scotland; Mary Senior from University and College Union Scotland; and Alastair Sim from Universities Scotland.

I understand that some of you need to leave shortly after 11 am so we will try to be succinct with our questions and I would appreciate succinct answers as well. I believe that you have a meeting in Glasgow about the Higher Education Governance (Scotland) Bill.

We will go straight to questions, beginning with Liam McArthur.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): It is not my turn.

The Convener: Apologies—I might have the wrong paper. I am sorry—we start with Mary Scanlon.

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): That is quite alright—your apology is accepted. *[Laughter.]*

The Convener: That is very good of you, Mary.

Mary Scanlon: I am feeling generous today.

My background is in further education but I taught on degree courses as well as higher national diplomas and so on. I had not appreciated that there is so much more uncertainty in further education with discretionary bursaries and all of that. Whereas students at university know exactly how much money they are going to get and when they will get it, further education students really do not know what they will get. I wonder whether one of the panel members will spell that out. I am looking at Angus Allan—I presume that he is David Alexander for the day.

Angus Allan (Colleges Scotland): I do not know whether I am David Alexander for the day, but I am certainly Angus Allan.

Mary Scanlon: Well, I had the name David Alexander, but I wonder whether you can help us to understand how much more uncertainty there is in FE.

Angus Allan: If you walk down a corridor at an FE college, you will pass students in all sorts of different classrooms, workshops, laboratories and so on. Those students may be funded through

education maintenance allowances, Skills Development Scotland training allowances, Scottish Funding Council bursaries or Student Awards Agency for Scotland awards. The awards from those different agencies may be different; two students who are the same age with the same household income and the same sort of background may end up with different levels of award because of how they are funded.

Mary Scanlon: I am looking at the recent review of student support that you have come forward with. You made various recommendations and you are now asking for a conversation about it. I am aware that FE colleges run out of their discretionary funds by about Christmas—the NUSS has given us a very good report on that. In view of your review, what are you recommending not just to simplify funding in FE but to ensure that FE students have the certainty of income that university students have?

Angus Allan: Certainty varies depending on how the student is funded. A student on a training allowance has the certainty of an income of £55 per week—that is an entitlement. SAAS awards and EMAs are also entitlements, but there is an eligibility element on bursary-funded courses—those are discretionary awards. Colleges are given a pot of money to manage on behalf of the SFC for students on bursary-funded courses. The students are eligible to apply to that pot of money, but they are not necessarily entitled to an award from it.

Mary Scanlon: What courses would be funded by bursaries? I seem to remember that it was under-18s who got bursaries. Could you explain that to me?

Angus Allan: Further education provision is funded by bursaries.

Mary Scanlon: Is that right up to HND and degree level?

Angus Allan: Higher national certificates and diplomas are classed as higher education, so students on those courses would be funded through SAAS awards. As far as I know, there is no age limit on bursaries. The household income of students under 25 years of age is taken into consideration for a bursary or an EMA, but not for an SDS award.

Mary Scanlon: For students who depend on bursaries, the level of bursary available has decreased over the years, with the loan component increasing. Could you explain how much that decrease is, and how it has affected students in further education?

Angus Allan: The total amount of money allocated for bursaries has risen over the years, but colleges have been encouraged to have more

full-time students. Therefore, the number of students accessing those funds has also increased. A bursary is an eligibility award, not an entitlement. If there is sufficient money in the funds to pay students, they will get a bursary, but colleges often rely on EMAs to top up bursary funds where there are insufficient funds available.

Mary Scanlon: Okay. I will move on to Who Cares? Scotland—

The Convener: Just—

Mary Scanlon: It is my final question.

The Convener: I want to bring in the rest of the panel. I think that some other witnesses wish to answer some of the questions that you have already put.

Vonnie Sandlan (National Union of Students Scotland): To be clear, students who are studying FE-level courses do not get loans; that would only be for HE-level students.

Mary Scanlon: Yes—I realise that.

Vonnie Sandlan: Within colleges, that would be HNC or HND students, and perhaps also those doing diplomas.

On the situation with FE student funding, although NUS Scotland is very supportive of the Scottish Government's continued protection of FE student support, we believe that the current system is unfit for purpose. It leaves far too much uncertainty for students.

The current student support system has three fundamental issues that we would like to be addressed. The first is that the budget is cash limited, and the total supply of funding does not take into account the total student demand. As you mentioned, Mrs Scanlon, around this time of year colleges say that they have run out of money for bursary support. One of their options is to go to the Scottish funding council and ask for more money. I think that £11.2 million was requested last year, which was met with £7 million from the Scottish funding council. That left a substantial shortfall.

Secondly, as Angus Allan mentioned, FE bursaries are discretionary, meaning that there is no guarantee that students will receive funding, even if they meet all the necessary criteria. There is also leeway in the system. Colleges can pay up to 80 per cent of the guidance rate of bursaries. Two students could be studying the same course at two colleges five miles apart, but they could be receiving bursaries that are 20 per cent different.

Finally, we are concerned about the number of students aged up to 18 years and 11 months who are being paid the £30 a week EMA allowance because that is what is available to them.

Mary Scanlon: Who decides on the bursary limit for each college?

Vonnie Sandlan: Do you mean how much each student is entitled to?

Mary Scanlon: How much each college gets.

Vonnie Sandlan: I believe that is set by the SFC, although I would like to double-check that.

Mary Scanlon: Does it have a formula for doing that?

Vonnie Sandlan: I believe so. It is then up to the college to determine how much of that it pays to each student. It can pay between 80 per cent and 100 per cent of the fund that is allocated. That can mean that college students on the same course for the same level of qualification are paid vastly different sums depending which college they are studying at.

Mary Scanlon: I wish to ask about the Who Cares? submission. I could not believe it when I read that, because they did not come from a family background, a care leaver had to give this information—and I will quote this, as it beggars belief. Because that student could not

“provide information on their household income ... students were asked to supply salary information of everyone who worked in the residential children’s home they currently live in.”

How humiliating is that? Do we really have further education colleges that are asking for that kind of information in 2015?

Robert Foster (Who Cares? Scotland): I spoke to the young person we mentioned in our written submission. They were extremely embarrassed and anxious about having to go and speak to the people who were paid to care for them.

Mary Scanlon: No wonder. How could the salaries of the people in the care home—

Robert Foster: Make a difference? It would not make any difference. It is a means-tested bursary system, and the person in the student funding office obviously did not know what to do with that student, as they did not tick a box and did not fit the norm. They therefore asked them to get the household income at their residential unit, which is staffed by a lot of staff. They sent the person back to ask those staff for their salaries, which is an absolutely ridiculous thing to do. In terms of—

The Convener: Sorry to interrupt, but could I clarify whether that is the policy or a mistake on the part of an individual?

Robert Foster: I would imagine that it would be a mistake on the part of the college. I do not think that any college is going to have a policy on—

The Convener: Exactly. It was an error.

Robert Foster: Yes—it was an error.

Mary Scanlon: I would hope so.

Robert Foster: It was because of a lack of understanding in the system on the issues that some students face.

The Convener: It is important that we point that out.

Robert Foster: Yes—my apologies.

Returning to the question, a good place to start is by asking why student funding is important. It is not an add-on or additional extra; it is not a bonus for starting college. For the students I represent who have been looked after in Scotland, that funding is a lifeline—it is what they need to live. A lot of them have been put in tenancies by their local authorities at the age of 16, because they have timed out of care. They will have rent to pay, food to buy and other stuff pay for. I reiterate: it is not an add-on.

It is important to remember that student support is essential and that there should be a right to FE bursary support funding, just as there is a right to SAAS funding. It should not be discretionary or a postcode lottery for anyone.

The Convener: Iain Gray has a supplementary question.

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): Thank you for your forbearance, convener. I have a point of clarification for Vonnie Sandlan. You talked about EMA being a lower level of support than bursary support. It is not that long since, I am sure with the best of intentions, the Scottish Government extended the entitlement to EMA to more students. Are you implying that that means that some students will receive less support than they would have previously?

Vonnie Sandlan: My understanding is that, when EMA was introduced, it was supposed to support secondary school pupils to stay in education. There is no other element of the education system in which someone is entitled to student support. EMA is determined by someone’s age and not the level of study that they are on. We are hearing that some FE level students up to the age of 18 years and 11 months, which is the cut-off age, are being paid the EMA at £30 a week instead of their bursary, which is nearer £100 a week.

If I could just take a moment to clarify that I misspoke when I referred to the budget that the colleges were looking for last year. In fact, the SFC responded with £3.5 million of additional funding. Colleges had said that they needed £14.7 million, which left £11.2 million of unmet demand.

John Pentland (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab): Bursary support for FE comes from a cash-

limited pot, which can create problems and, indeed, a postcode lottery. I think that it was Angus Allan who said that there are situations that are similar but in which colleges pay different amounts of bursary.

The Colleges Scotland submission says that the

“discretionary and variable nature of the awards, can often act as a major discouragement for students wishing to participate in full time further education – particularly students from low income households.”

That brings me to my question. Given that students from low-income households are also less likely to go university, there will be more potential FE students in areas of high deprivation so there could be more pressure on the limited bursary support pot. Do small bursaries in poorer areas mean that potential students are put off applying to higher education or further education?

Angus Allan: That links in to Vonnice Sandlan’s earlier evidence. If a college is cash-limited in its bursary funds, it has to manage those funds and then rely on additional funding coming into the pot later. At the beginning of the year, colleges are faced with the dilemma of having to decide whether to pay all their students all the bursary funds, or pay all students a proportion. If a college has 200 students, does it pay 150 of them their full bursary entitlement, or does it pay 200 students 80 per cent of their bursary entitlement?

The problem with both approaches is that they disadvantage students. If the college pays 80 per cent of the bursary at the beginning of the year, there is a risk of early drop-outs, which disadvantages students from poorer backgrounds. If the college pays 150 students instead of the 200, it disadvantages the 50. I understand that most colleges take the view that they should spread the funds thinly and, when an in-year distribution comes in, top them up later in the year.

You can imagine it yourselves: if someone says that they will pay you 60 per cent or 80 per cent of your salary and top it up later in the year if they get the funds, it is not entirely satisfactory.

John Pentland: Do you have figures to show how many students get 100 per cent first call?

Angus Allan: I do not have those figures here, but I can supply additional written evidence if you would like that.

John Pentland: Could you also advise how many students who do not get the 100 per cent have to fall back on hardship funding?

Angus Allan: Yes. The other linked point is that colleges also rely on EMAs. Some students will get an EMA. If they are 18 years and 11 months, about half the colleges in Scotland will pay them an EMA and the other half will pay them a full

bursary. There is therefore variability, which is the point that Vonnice Sandlan made.

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): The current household income threshold for the maximum bursary is about £17,000. The Scottish Government has said that it will increase that threshold to £19,000. Will that help students when it comes in in 2016-17?

Vonnice Sandlan: Yes. It will make a quite substantial difference.

I have some statistics here that I wanted to refer to. They are particularly for HE level students. The phrase “debt averse” is thrown around without an awful lot of looking into the actual statistics. I have the higher education student support in Scotland statistics for 2014-15. The number of students with a total household income of up to £16,999 was 24,700. Of those, only 19,665 took a student loan, which leaves a fifth of students from the poorest background who have a household income of up to £17,000—which could mean any variation below that—taking no student loan at all. That is a fairly stark statistic.

10:15

George Adam: The United Kingdom Government has announced that it will move away from a model similar to ours, which involves loans and bursary, to a loan-only model. That will obviously have a devastating effect on FE down south. Could you say more about that, just to compare the different ideals of the Governments?

Vonnice Sandlan: NUS Scotland has made it clear, as have our counterparts at NUS UK, that the Westminster approach to funding students is nothing short of a disgrace. In Scotland, we are seeing a very different approach, particularly to widening access, which starts at FE-level study, where some of our most vulnerable learners return to the education system to begin their studies before going on either into the workplace or into further study. Quite a substantial number of students are articulating through from FE-level study into HE-level study, either at college or at university, before proceeding to employment and out into the wider world. Our concern is that, with any further attack on grants, there would be an impact on the number of students taking up those opportunities to go on to college or university.

Iain Gray: I want to move on to higher education, rather than further education, and explore the balance between grants and loans, particularly for students from low-income families. That balance is obviously important in allowing them to participate in higher education.

There is a common theme in a number of the pieces of evidence that we have received, but

Universities Scotland's submission has a paragraph that I think sums up the issue particularly well. It states:

"In August 2013, means-tested grants in Scotland were substantially reduced, with an overall reduction of around 40%. A loan replaced the lost grant. Due to the new loan/grant ratio of the current system in Scotland, entrants from the most deprived backgrounds will graduate with the largest financial burden as they will require to borrow the largest amounts to support living costs."

That says not so much that the system is out of balance but that it is completely perverse. Could Universities Scotland comment on that?

Alastair Sim (Universities Scotland): As we further prioritise widening access, we will need to take an empirical look at what is actually happening in terms of student behaviour. As Vonnie Sandlan says, there is a problem of debt aversion, particularly among people coming from the most economically challenged households, and it will take careful monitoring, as we step up our emphasis on widening access, to ensure that the student support system is actually supporting people to come in from the most challenged backgrounds. We are in a better place than the FE sector is in terms of people knowing their entitlement, but we are certainly not in a completely unproblematic place in terms of debt aversion.

Iain Gray: Let me explore that issue of debt aversion. The written evidence that we received from Lucy Hunter Blackburn, the former head of HE in the Scottish Government, states that many of the poorer students who receive a bursary, which has been reduced, do not take out their whole loan entitlement, perhaps because of the debt aversion that has been referred to. In spite of that, she says, poorer students take on a disproportionate share of the £0.5 billion of loans each year in Scotland. Is the situation that those students are either taking out a loan they cannot afford or that they are living without accessing the means of support provided because they are debt averse, so that they are caught either way? Is that what you mean by debt aversion?

Alastair Sim: My principal concern is that debt aversion is making people choose not to go into higher education. Given that loan repayments are spread over the largest proportion of a person's working life and are income-contingent, the burden is probably not insupportable to almost everyone. However, if debt aversion is putting people off at the point of entry, it needs to be better explained that, although the burden might seem substantial at the time, it would be repayable over a very long period in increments that, it is to be hoped, would not hold them back from realising their future prospects.

Iain Gray: However, you say in your own evidence:

"Those who enter relatively low paying careers post-graduation will also pay more overall due to the length of repayment and interest."

That is yet another perverse disincentive for those coming from low-income families.

Alastair Sim: I think that that comment was made to provide a comparison with England. As I understand it, there are repayment periods of 25 and 35 years. One might debate what the right repayment period would be; in one sense, you are balancing a higher level of annual repayments against a shorter repayment period. I do not have a definitive answer to that, but—

Iain Gray: Your own written evidence is, I think, pretty clear.

Alastair Sim: The issue needs to be explored, but what I am asking for from now on is an empirical study of whether we are continuing to improve access to higher education for people from challenged backgrounds and whether debt aversion is proving to be one of the barriers that we are either successfully or unsuccessfully overcoming.

Iain Gray: My next question is for Vonnie Sandlan. In 2013, when the change took place, means-tested grants were reduced and the amount by which they were reduced was replaced by loans, NUS was quoted as being quite supportive of the package. It seems to me perverse that students from the lowest-income families have to borrow the most. Does NUS think that that is a disincentive to students from low-income families who are seeking to enter higher education?

Vonnie Sandlan: I make it absolutely clear that NUS Scotland and students worked incredibly hard for an increase in student support. Although increases in grants would have been absolutely preferable to loans, no increase at all would have been unacceptable. At least students are now guaranteed a minimum loan. That said, the balance between loans and grants needs to be redressed, with grants increased for the poorest students in particular.

Going back to Alastair Sim's comment about how students repay their debt over their lives, I have to say that that is an incredibly gendered way of looking at the issue. Over the course of their working lives, women tend to earn less, might take career breaks and will end up paying more than men for similar levels of debt.

If it is okay, I want to share with the committee some fairly stark statistics from a survey of students that we carried out in Scotland earlier this year. According to the survey, 51 per cent of

respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed that they felt able to concentrate on their studies without worrying about their finances; 67 per cent either strongly agreed or agreed that they sometimes felt overwhelmed by their finances; 79 per cent either strongly agreed or agreed that, in general, they worried about their financial situation; and 64 per cent either agreed or strongly agreed that they regularly worried about not having enough money to meet their basic living expenses. Moreover, 49 per cent stated that they had seriously considered leaving their course; for 62 per cent of those who had considered dropping out, the biggest single reason was financial difficulty.

Iain Gray: Do you think that that describes an HE student support system that is fit for purpose?

Vonnie Sandlan: We have continually made it clear that we want the balance between loans and grants to be redressed. We are seeing a lot more students taking out unmanageable levels of commercial debt.

Moreover, the Cubie-recommended limit for part-time work for students was 10 hours a week but we know of students who work significantly more hours than that around their course, even up to full time, in order to fund their studies. Indeed, 61 per cent of our student respondents have told us that work has had a negative impact on their studies.

The Convener: Just to play devil's advocate for a minute, I suggest that, if you asked the general population—or even the people in this room—the questions that you asked in your survey about what was worrying them, quite a large percentage would say that they were worried about their finances and their income and were concerned about their financial situation. It is quite a normal thing for people to do. Is the situation worse or about the same for students?

Vonnie Sandlan: I do not want to say that it has become a joke, although I suppose that it has, but the stereotype is that students are cool with living in mouldy houses and eating cold beans out of a tin. The reality is very different. I do not think that students are any different from any other member of society in that regard.

There are not that many good-quality jobs for students who are dependent on having the hours every single week. Zero-hours contracts are more prevalent, and they obviously have an impact on how much a student is paid, whether they get any paid leave so that they can take time off to do their exams, for example, and whether their job is flexible with regard to their studies. We hear of students having to decide between going to their lecture or picking up an extra shift so that they can pay their bills at the end of the week. I make that

point not to demean any of those financial concerns, because I completely understand them. Sometimes we get caught up in the belief that students are not troubled by such situations, when actually the figures are very stark.

The Convener: I was not suggesting for a moment that students are not troubled; I was making a wider point about people in general being worried about finances—that is certainly the case at the moment, given the economic climate.

Vonnie Sandlan: Of course.

Liam McArthur: To follow on from Iain Gray's question, we have heard about the implications of the removal of £35 million, I believe, of student support from the HE sector in 2013, and about the shift away from grants to loans at that stage.

I understand what Alastair Sim says about the need for empirical evidence of the impact that that is having, but, on a point of principle, is it right that students from poorer backgrounds have the highest average borrowing? Typically after four years of study, they face a debt of just under £25,000, while those from better-off backgrounds are taking out significantly less by way of loans, if, indeed, they take out loans at all. Is that a principle that we should be decrying and swearing to do something significant about?

Alastair Sim: I do not think that anyone intuitively is going to say that that is the outcome that they want. It is really for the Scottish Government to answer that.

Our submission is very much based on what the people who manage admissions and retention are saying. As Vonnie Sandlan says, we are seeing students under financial stress. That is genuinely the case, and it is genuinely one of the reasons that people quote when they drop out.

On the other hand, we are also seeing a significant improvement in the retention rates for people who come from the most challenged backgrounds. Those rates are now increasing and are heading towards the rates for people who come from privileged backgrounds, and they are increasing much faster than the rates for people from more privileged backgrounds. Therefore, we are doing some things right. People are under financial stress, but the effort that is being put into retention is helping to address that effect, at least partially.

We are also seeing a progressive improvement in the proportion of students who come from the most socioeconomically challenged backgrounds, so although there are obvious barriers, more and more people are overcoming them.

The question is really for the Scottish Government. If we have a limited resource, how can we best spend it? Can we look again at

redressing the balance between bursaries and loans, if we have the resource?

Liam McArthur: The First Minister told us in 2006 that a debt of £11,000 for a student who was emerging from university was a significant disincentive and would actually put them on the back foot as they entered the world of work. Is it not the case that, for those from the poorest backgrounds who remain in the system—and who shoulder more student debt—the long-term implications are really only going to play out over the next five, 10 or 15 years?

Alastair Sim: Vonnie Sandlan may want to come in on that. In principle, obviously you want people to come out of university with as reasonable a level of debt as possible, and you want that level to be fair.

We have not yet answered in Scotland the question whether the levels of debt that people are coming out with are proving to be a restraint on what they can do in their lives and careers in the long term. The levels of debt in Scotland are much lower than the levels that we are seeing in England. There is an open question about how debt will affect people's behaviour over the course of their careers. The issue needs continued attention.

10:30

However, the evidence of improved retention rates and progression into higher education of people from challenged socioeconomic backgrounds seems to indicate that while there is an issue, it is not fundamentally preventing progress on widening access, to which we are all hugely committed.

Liam McArthur: I will invite Vonnie Sandlan to respond to that in a minute.

You mentioned the longer repayment period for students south of the border—35 years compared to 25 years. You also mentioned the difference in the repayment threshold, which is £21,000 south of the border and around £17,000 in Scotland, although it is due to rise here. If we were to move in the direction of stretching out that repayment period and lifting the repayment threshold, would that have a direct and positive benefit for students from poorer backgrounds?

Alastair Sim: The Scottish Government has to answer for affordability, but raising the repayment threshold would have a beneficial effect on students. A bit of economics would need to be done around the repayment period. If it is longer, although someone may have lower annual payments, they would pay more interest over that period. Some economics would need to be done

to work out what would be in the best interests of the graduate.

Liam McArthur: I am thinking specifically of poorer students.

The Convener: I am sorry, but Mary Senior has been waiting to come in.

Mary Senior (University and College Union Scotland): I support some of the points that Alastair Sim has been making around widening access. Universities are doing a tremendous amount to increase participation, particularly of people from socially deprived backgrounds. That requires public funding, but it is part of the pastoral work to link schools and colleges and it demands a lot of work from staff in institutions.

Our debate today emphasises the need for more public funding for post-16 education in Scotland. I draw the committee's attention to a report that the UCU published last week, "Mind the gap: Comparing public funding in higher and further education", which compares public funding across the UK nations. I will leave a copy for the committee. The report shows that Scotland does well, because approximately 80 per cent of the total cost per student in Scotland comes from the public purse, which compares to 63 per cent in England, 70 per cent in Wales and 68 per cent in Northern Ireland.

It is when we look at the distribution of public funding for student support and for support for higher education through the funding councils that we find issues in Scotland. For example, in England, 68 per cent of the public funding goes to student support and only 32 per cent goes directly to institutions through the funding council, whereas in Scotland, only 37 per cent goes to student support and 63 per cent goes via the funding council. That is where the dilemma lies. To the UCU, the answer is to give more public funding to higher education. We need a serious debate about how we increase funding by looking at taxation.

Liam McArthur: Everyone comes before the committee and asks for more funding. I am sure that there will be more of that as we move towards the budget. The issue here is how we best target the resources at those most in need and whether there are things that we should be doing that specifically benefit the students who, as we have all agreed, are now shouldering more of the debt burden as a result of the changes that were made in 2013. I have posited the idea of extending the repayment period and lifting the thresholds, but are there ways of channelling the additional public funding so that it goes with the grain of the efforts on widening access? Those efforts are showing results, but we need to quicken their pace and broaden their reach.

Vonnie Sandlan: I totally agree with Mary Senior about public funding; I also agree with you about the repayment threshold. In Scotland, the repayment threshold for student loans is £17,335 before tax, which is not a large salary by any stretch of the imagination. In comparison, for post-2012 students in England, the repayment threshold is £21,000. My colleagues in NUS UK are challenging that threshold and campaigning for it to be extended because they believe that it is still too low. Low-earning graduates still have to pay their student loan debt despite not seeing any financial benefit from their education, so we support a review of the repayment threshold.

We also want more public money to be invested in grants for the poorest students. We have said repeatedly, and will continue to say, that that is the most important point, especially when we look at retention rates. We want students to be able to focus on their studies rather than being so concerned about the costs that are associated with being a person, never mind being a student, that they are not able to do that.

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): You have spoken about students from poorer backgrounds and the mix between bursaries and loans. Student Loan Company figures from 18 June 2015 show that Scottish students are in debt to the tune of £9,440 on average; in England, the figure is £21,180. Does the fact that Scots students graduate with a substantially lower level of debt indicate that very few people from poorer backgrounds in England and Wales apply for university? How does the £7,625 minimum income guarantee in Scotland compare with the situation in the rest of the UK?

Vonnie Sandlan: In England, the institutions that charge the £9,000-a-year fees have to set out an outcome agreement with the Office for Fair Access. I am not sure exactly what those agreements are called, but they are similar to the outcome agreements to which our institutions sign up in Scotland. To be able to charge the higher fee levels, they have to put significant funding into bursaries for students who come from the poorest backgrounds, which at the institutional level offsets quite substantially some of the costs that those students might face. In Scotland, discretionary funding is available from universities, but the arrangement is not as formal as the arrangement that the institutions down south have.

I am afraid that I cannot speak to the income guarantee off the top of my head—I do not have the figures in front of me. However, I am more than happy to submit written evidence to the committee, if that would be okay.

Gordon MacDonald: Yes.

The Convener: I will clarify a couple of points that Vonnie Sandlan made. You mentioned the threshold of just over £17,000, which is, of course, going up to £19,000 for the coming academic year. That is correct, is it not?

Vonnie Sandlan: I believe so, yes.

The Convener: It has been announced, as far as I am aware.

Vonnie Sandlan: Yes, but it is still £2,000 a year less than the threshold for our counterparts in England.

The Convener: However, it is going up by a substantial amount, from £17,000 to £19,000.

We have discussed student debt figures. Do you accept that, although we are all concerned about student debt levels in Scotland, they are the lowest in any country in the UK?

Vonnie Sandlan: I do not have the figures in front of me. To be honest, my main concern is with the disparity in debt levels between the students who come from the least-deprived areas and those who come from the most-deprived areas, and how that disparity perpetuates the circumstances that students have worked incredibly hard to remove themselves from.

Iain Gray: Gordon MacDonald used a figure of £9,000 for the average debt, but in the Who Cares? Scotland submission, the figure is £26,000 of debt on completion of a four-year degree. There is therefore some confusion about how much debt students leave university with.

Robert Foster: We took the full loan amount and added it up over four plus one years: four years of a degree course and one year of an HNC in college.

On the debt aversion that everyone is talking about, the young people I work with through our advocacy service tell us that their corporate parents—the local authority—actively encourage them not to get into debt. They are told not to get into debt because they will get into trouble. However, they have no choice.

One of the young people with whom I work was put into a flat by the local authority when she was 16. She got herself into council tax arrears and rent arrears and had county court judgments for debt. She is now a second year student at university and is terrified about paying off her student loan debt because she has all that baggage in her life through no fault of her own.

There is debt aversion and young people's corporate parents actively encourage them not to get into debt in the first place, but they have no choice but to get into a lot of personal debt when they are at university, as they do not have parents to go back to at the weekends. If they do not

budget correctly one week or one month, they cannot just pick up the phone and get a loan of £20, say, to see them through—they have to get into personal debt, because they have no one at the end of the phone.

We were clear in our submission that we would like to see an end to loans for looked-after young people in Scotland. That does not involve a large number of people—there are 1,000 looked-after people at college and university just now, whereas there are 15,500 young people in care. We do not think that it would be too big an ask for a corporate parent such as the Scottish Government to look after Scotland's children.

The Convener: Just to clarify, the figure that you use in your submission is the maximum possible amount that somebody could have.

Robert Foster: Yes.

The Convener: It is not the average.

Robert Foster: It is not an average. It is the maximum possible amount that someone could have, and the barriers—

The Convener: That is fine—I understand now. I just wanted to clarify that.

Robert Foster: Yes—no worries.

Chic Brodie (South Scotland) (SNP): Good morning. The convener alluded to the changes that have been made recently with the increase in the amount of bursary payable to students from households with a lower income. As he pointed out, the income threshold for repayment has been raised from £17,000 to £19,000, which Vonnie Sandlan welcomed in May, saying:

“This is great news for Scottish students”.

Clearly, we would all like there to be a different scenario, given different financial circumstances. I am not surprised that some students are confused about the situation—I am confused. On the subject of widening access, the UCU highlighted the research that it conducted, which

“showed that Scotland had the lowest percentage of university entrants from the poorest backgrounds (26.2%)”.

In its written submission, the Scottish Trades Union Congress provided a graph that it says

“shows that Scottish Universities have made modest progress with regard to widening access”

and Universities Scotland sought to point out that “significant” progress on widening access to students has been made by HE institutions in recent years.

What I am struggling to understand is whether, against the background that I have just enunciated, the current system of student support in FE and HE is creating a barrier to efforts to

widen access to higher education. I ask Mary Senior to answer first, please.

Mary Senior: I will do my best, convener. I think that all the statistics that you have indicated are right. Scotland has traditionally had a very poor record on widening access. Although some improvement has been made recently, as Universities Scotland highlights in its submission, there is a range of complex reasons why people do not go to university. Poverty, expectations and aspirations are all related.

You need a whole range of levers to address the issue of widening access. Indeed, the commission for widening access is considering those. Part of that involves addressing the underlying issues relating to poverty; it is also about encouraging people. That is why school education and pre-school education are important in this regard. Of course, student support is one of the levers that can be used to improve people's access to post-16 education.

Alastair Sim: I will give you a little contextual information on widening access, and we can perhaps then come on to the widening access commission's report, which charts a way forward.

This has been an area of substantial effort and significant progress over recent years. The statistics from 2013-14 show that the number of people coming from the most challenged postcode areas went up by 10 per cent compared with the previous year, which represents continued incremental progress on widening access—a progress that is now accelerating.

If we consider who is applying to university, the chances of someone coming from one of the most challenged postcode areas having a successful application to university, if they do apply, are as good as they are for someone who applies from one of the most privileged areas. However, that is work in progress.

The widening access commission report says that a lot of good work is going on, but it is not necessarily as joined up, systematic or evaluated as it could be. All the connections right through school, college and university for encouraging aspiration and attainment from the early years onwards, which could help people to realise their full potential whatever background they come from, have not necessarily been built yet. There are some crucial things in here about better joined-up work and about making sure that we are consistent about contextual admissions and recognising people's potential when it might not be fully demonstrated by the exam results that they have achieved.

The report does not identify student support as crucial to promoting wide access but, to come back my earlier comments, as we progress with

widening access, we need to take a good evidence-based view of whether there are things that we can do to tweak the student support system and make sure that it is not proving to be a significant barrier to people realising their full potential.

10:45

Chic Brodie: I would like to follow up on that, and perhaps all the witnesses might answer. We heard earlier that some students are not applying for particular loans for which they might reasonably apply. We already have communication, information and support services, but are they efficient? Are students fully aware of all the funding opportunities that are available to them? If not, what more should we do? It is important that students should understand fully what is available to them? Is that happening and, if not, why not?

Vonnie Sandlan: The written evidence and the evidence that you are hearing from all of us show that this is an incredibly complex and large area. There are connections between all the different facets of funding, whether it be FE funding, SDS funding or HE funding. Anecdotally, I can tell you that a summer holiday fund is available to students who have been looked after and, if I remember rightly, it has been claimed a total of nine times in five years. Social work practitioners do not know that such a fund exists and they are the corporate parents who are informing their students.

Chic Brodie: Who owns that responsibility?

Vonnie Sandlan: The Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 places a corporate parenting responsibility on a number of different organisations and we hope that that will definitely change in the future.

Chic Brodie: Is that not the problem? You say that several organisations are involved, but we should be able to point to a group or individual or whoever, notwithstanding the complexity of funding—somebody should look at how that can be rationalised—who can say to a student, “Here is everything that is available for you.”

Angus Allan: I can help with that question. Colleges generally deal with a different cohort of learners from those who go to universities. Statistics published by the Scottish Qualifications Authority this month broke that down by five different quintiles, from the most deprived postcodes to the least deprived. The proportion of students from the least deprived postcode areas who achieved HN certification from colleges was 22.6 per cent. When we are talking about widening access, colleges are in the business of providing students who come from the most deprived and disadvantaged background with second chances

and best chances. That is with the support of the funding council and the Scottish Government.

Today, you are hearing that many positive things have been done to improve student support but, as with everything, things could be better and there are better ways of doing things. The people who are around this table might not be in a position to pull the levers and make decisions about who manages the funds and makes them less complex. Government agencies manage those funds; we simply administer them on behalf of those agencies.

Chic Brodie: Are the Government agencies doing what they are supposed to be doing?

Angus Allan: Like everyone else, they are dealing with limited budgets and are trying to do the best they can. That is my view rather than an analysis.

Chic Brodie: Yes, but it does not matter whether it is £10 or £10 million—somebody must be able to communicate what is available to the students. We have just heard about a vacation fund.

Angus Allan: In colleges, teams of people communicate that clearly to students, but the course and how the student is funded will decide how the funds are released. If someone is on an SDS training programme, we have advisers who will advise the student what funds they can access through that. If someone is on a Scottish funding council bursary programme, we have advisers who will advise them how to access those funds. Colleges and universities employ people to advise students how they can access funds.

Robert Foster: I will give a practical example of that. SAAS has changed its policy in relation to people with experience of care who apply to SAAS. If people tick the box saying that they are a care experienced student, they go on to a completely separate page that has tailored questions for them. They are not asked about household income or their previous address for the past five years and so on.

Simple things can be done to make that sort of thing happen. In our advocacy work, we advocate for young people across Scotland. We have a problem advising our advocates on what to do because every college does things differently. Just last week, a woman was applying to a college and she was asked to give her addresses for the past five years; she had 14 of them. She could barely remember which town they were in, never mind which postcode or street number and so on.

There are other things to consider. The group of people I am here to represent are highly unlikely to have a driver's licence or a passport. No one has been supporting them to take driving lessons; no

one has been there to take them on holiday. The risk assessment to go to the park is long enough, never mind to go for a week in Spain.

There is a lot more that colleges, universities and other organisations can do, but SAAS is leading the way on this. It is already changing its processes and doing simple things to change its policies to improve accessibility and to make the funds available to the people who need them the most.

Gordon MacDonald: I want to ask about the UCU Scotland report that was referred to that says that Scotland has the lowest percentage of university entrants from the poorest backgrounds. Can you give me some basis for those figures?

Mary Senior: I guess that that has been covered already in the discussion about Scotland's poor record on widening access. I think that that is why the Scottish Government set up the commission on widening access to try to address that. As we have mentioned already, there is a range of historical reasons why that might be the case. We have been asking why it is not happening in the same way in England, where there are £9,000 fees. Vonnie Sandlan explained that in part with reference to the bursaries that universities that charge £9,000 are able to give out to students from poorer backgrounds.

However, one of the issues that England has not grasped is access for part-time students and older learners. Scotland's record on access for them is much better.

Gordon MacDonald: That was the point that I was going to make. The commission on widening access's interim report, which was published this month, says:

"Scotland, traditionally, has a high rate of participation in higher education relative to other UK nations. In 2013/14, the Scottish HE Initial Participation Rate for those aged between 16 and 30 was 55%, compared to the English rate of 47% ... In 2013/14 the participation rate for those from the most deprived areas in Scotland was 42% – up from 35% in 2006/07."

That ties in with Universities Scotland's submission, which states:

"Application rates from students from deprived backgrounds to Scottish HEIs increased by 50% since 2006".

There is also a reference from a company based in Leeds called Imactivate, which worked with the End Child Poverty campaign group. Looking at the period between 2004 and 2014, Imactivate found that

"the chances of pupils from Scotland's more deprived areas going to university have more than doubled in the past 10 years."

It went on to say:

"Scotland's inequality of access does seem to be the highest of any UK nation, but over the past decade it has come down the most ... This looks like success, not failure, to me."

Alastair Sim: There is a problem with the cross-border comparability of statistics. That has been a frustration that I have tried to address again and again. There is a cross-border group on institutional statistics that I hope will come up with an answer.

There is not a satisfactory, like-for-like cross-border comparison that we can make. There should be, and we should be able to say—particularly if we take people in different household income brackets—what people's chances are of getting to university. The figures that you quote on progress represent a significant step change. However, it frustrates me that there is not yet a statistically sound cross-border comparison of whether people have a less good chance of going to university if they come from a challenged background.

Gordon MacDonald: That was the point that I was going to raise next. The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service itself says that people who study higher education at further education colleges are not included in UCAS figures, and they could be up to one third of young full-time undergraduates.

Alastair Sim: That makes the comparison extremely difficult. I would much rather have the ability to work on accurate and disaggregated figures.

Vonnie Sandlan: I could give you a very long and extended series of issues—

The Convener: No, you cannot.

Vonnie Sandlan: —but I know that I would probably get thrown out.

It has become clear from the evidence that this is an incredibly complex area, as I think I have said already. We would certainly welcome it if the committee continued to look into the issue. I want to make it clear that in no way are we saying that Scotland has anything less than a world-class education system. We are very proud of it. However, the issue is how we make student support fair and equitable. Gordon MacDonald talked about 55 per cent interaction with higher education but 42 per cent participation among those from the most deprived backgrounds, which is a difference of 13 per cent. We want to address that and to make the situation fairer. We believe that student support is key to fairness.

Liam McArthur: I have a brief question on the figure that Gordon MacDonald referred to of 42 per cent participation among those from the most deprived backgrounds. My understanding is that

the figure for participation at universities is just under 16 per cent rather than 42 per cent and that the commission on widening access was charged with looking at participation rates in university. Is that a sensible distinction to make when we are talking about articulation, different pathways and routes into higher education, or should we try to keep the two things distinct in order to avoid some of the problems that arise not just for cross-border comparisons but in simply considering how well we are doing within Scotland?

Alastair Sim: HE participation means people doing higher national awards, predominantly at college, and people doing qualifications at university. When you mention 16 per cent of people going to university, do you mean that that is among people from socioeconomically deprived backgrounds? That is very low.

Liam McArthur: It is from MD20—the 20 per cent most deprived areas. The figure that I am looking at is 15.9 per cent.

Alastair Sim: Okay—if it is from MD20, that is probably about right.

College and university learners are very often the same learners at different stages in their journeys. Personally, I think—Vonnice Sandlan probably has the same view—that it makes sense to think across the system about how we support people to access the opportunities that will help them to realise their full potential. For many people, that will be an opportunity to go to college and progress through an articulation agreement to university at a later stage. That is certainly a pathway that we want to continue to grow, because it provides an important opportunity.

Vonnice Sandlan: I echo that. NUS Scotland is very supportive of articulation and we would like it to be more and more embedded in normal practice in education.

I want to highlight another figure. We know that financial hardship puts a strain on students' ability to complete their studies, but that is particularly apparent in further education courses, where almost 30 per cent of students fail to complete their course successfully. We have talked about articulation, and Alastair Sim has mentioned that many university learners have come from colleges. However, 30 per cent of students who start at college do not finish their qualification, because of the FE student support system which, as I have said and will continue to say, is unfit for purpose. That has to be addressed urgently.

The Convener: Just to clarify, you appeared to say that 30 per cent of students at FE college fail to complete their course because of their financial situation.

Vonnice Sandlan: It is not solely because of their financial situation, but we know that financial hardship is putting a strain on students' ability and—

The Convener: Just to be absolutely clear, you are not saying that it is because of financial hardship.

Vonnice Sandlan: It is not only because of financial hardship, but that is a significant concern. Some of the statistics that I referenced earlier demonstrate how concerning finance is as an issue for students.

The Convener: So some of the issues might be to do with financial hardship, but there may be other issues.

Vonnice Sandlan: There may be other issues.

The Convener: Thank you.

11:00

Mary Scanlon: I am disappointed to hear what the witnesses are saying on articulation. I understood that, 20 or 30 years ago, people could do an HNC at college and then go into second year at university, or they could do an HNC and then an HND and then go into third year. I think that I am right in saying that students are funded only for four years of higher education. Of the students who do a two-year HND, some can get into second year but most go into first year. That is six years of higher education. It seems from what I am reading that there are no supplementary grants or bursaries, so they have to pay for some of those years themselves.

That says to me that articulation is not working. Students can finish their degree in an FE college, where they would not have that additional financial burden, but they have to be pretty rich to go to university, because they get no money for one or two years. Articulation was supposed to be the answer to widening access that we have all talked about. I am disappointed that universities and colleges are not aligning their courses to allow students to move automatically and easily between FE and HE. Am I right in thinking that that is the case?

Angus Allan: Perhaps I can correct that misconception.

Mary Scanlon: I am here to learn. I am reading your evidence.

Angus Allan: There has been a huge amount of work over past years on widening access, and universities and colleges have been working together on very clear progression pathways. The funding council has allocated funding specifically for that. You will find in all colleges that students who are starting on an HNC programme will have

an exit route that is either into work or into second year in a university. In other words, there is an articulation arrangement in place that allows that student to jump from an HNC to university.

Mary Scanlon: So they have to do two years of further education before they get into their second year of higher education.

Angus Allan: No, they can do one year of an HNC and go into second year at university. Some students choose to do an HND, which is a two-year programme, and that would grant access to third year in a university. The arrangements vary a wee bit from college to college and university to university, but there are—

Mary Scanlon: That is the problem that I am picking up here.

Angus Allan: There are arrangements in place.

Mary Scanlon: Some students can go into first year and some can go into second year.

Angus Allan: Correct.

Mary Scanlon: Students really do not know, so the best thing would be to stay in further education and finish their degree. At least that way they would not have that additional year of study.

Angus Allan: That depends—

Mary Scanlon: Which is maybe not what every student wants.

The Convener: Let Mr Allan answer.

Angus Allan: That depends on the entry requirements at the higher education institution. I have been working in FE for 30 years, and when I look back over that period my perception is that articulation arrangements are better now, not worse.

Mary Scanlon: However, the arrangements vary among colleges and universities across Scotland. That is what I am reading from the University of Strathclyde.

Angus Allan: Yes. It varies from university to university and college to college.

Mary Scanlon: But maybe—

The Convener: Mary, it was a supplementary. Come on.

Colin Beattie has a question.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): I am thinking about the various funds and grants such as disabled students allowance and the discretionary funds that are available for specific groups, and about the issues around them, including the cost of childcare. What specific measures do we need in order to remove the barriers to participation,

retention and positive outcomes for disabled students, lone parents, part-time learners and so on?

Vonnie Sandlan: The blunt answer is that there needs to be more money in the pot. The statistics that I quoted about unmet demand and the in-year review being short every year in November and December paint a very stark picture.

I do not want to keep reinforcing the point with statistics, but in the survey that we did earlier this year, 57 per cent of FE students stated that they were not clear about how much financial support would be available to them. It is a massive barrier to a parent not to know whether you can afford to pay for a breakfast club or for the childminder who is looking after your kids so that you can do your placement or go to your classes. That is especially the case for people who go into courses having been out of education for a few years and at home with their family: there are confidence issues in that.

I will reiterate what Angus Allan said earlier: widening access is something that colleges do incredibly well; it really is their bread and butter.

Childcare fund awards to students increased by 22 per cent between 2012-13 and 2013-14, which is quite a significant amount. I do not have figures to hand for disabled students allowance, but I know that that money helps a lot of students to get on and do the work that they need to do with the resources and equipment that they need to succeed. I do not want to sound flippant in any way, but the answer is that we need more money in the pot.

Colin Beattie: Do the other panel members also believe that this is all about money?

Robert Foster: I do not believe that it is completely about money, but I find the idea of a looked-after child who has been brought up by the state joining a queue for student support a little bit absurd: it is the state's job to look after those children. I know for a fact that when my now five-year-old boy goes to college or university, I will not sit him down and say, "Let's have a chat about how I can support you as a student." I am more likely to say, "Let's have a chat about how, as your parent, I can support you through your education." It is important to remember that in this discussion.

This is not all about funding. We talked earlier about the four-plus-one funding model and so on, but people have to be mindful of the fact that a lot of things outwith their education could be happening in a looked-after or care-experienced young person's life.

I have brought with me a young man called Connor Chalmers, who has had a couple of cracks at getting into college. He has had to drop out both

times because of external factors, one of which was that he was struggling with his workload. He was diagnosed as having global learning difficulties when he was a child, but no one told him, his teachers or the college. There was a real lack of communication between the local authority and others. That shows that it is not all about funding.

A joined-up approach is needed in our education system. The 80 per cent of care-experienced people who are leaving school at 16 with just a Scottish credit and qualifications framework level 4 qualification are not going to walk through the door of a university the next year; they are going to have to come back into education later in life and go to college to get the qualification that they need to get into university in the first place. Alastair Sim is right: we need a much more joined-up approach, and getting that approach is everyone's duty—not just the universities'.

Colin Beattie: Taking into account what you have said, what specific steps do we need to take to support care leavers in entering and participating in further and higher education?

Robert Foster: This year has seen partial implementation of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014, as a result of which colleges and universities have, from 1 April, become corporate parents. Like the Scottish Government, they now have duties and responsibilities to look after children who are brought up in care. Part of that is the duty to assess need, so they should be assessing the need of anyone who identifies themselves as being looked after and who has additional support needs. In that respect, those individuals are also protected under earlier legislation, and they should be having those conversations with the local authority and other corporate parents even before they are in the door.

The 2014 act also puts real emphasis on collaboration between corporate parents, so it is the responsibility of a college or university to work with the local authority, the education department and the social work department to ensure that college is as accessible as possible to looked-after people. It is not just a case of giving people an extra bit of bursary funding to see them through to the end of their course; there are other factors that can make them leave education early. In order to improve the retention figures of that cohort of students, we need a joined-up and holistic system of support.

Alastair Sim: The pastoral support that people get at university is incredibly important. We are conscious that this is one of the areas in which we have to invest in people. If we are getting people from care backgrounds or from the most

challenged backgrounds, we have to put extra effort into ensuring that we address their different expectations. In particular, we need to look for early indications of retention difficulty. Is the individual starting to drift out of classes? Are they not turning up? Are they not getting assignments in on time? A lot of work is now being done on developing quite sophisticated systems that enable earliest detection of the people who appear to be starting to drift out of the experience, and which allow people to go in, to ask them questions and to offer the support that they need to continue with their studies.

Mary Senior: That sort of work is really resource intensive at a time when lecturers, librarians, student-support staff and others are being asked to do more. The emphasis in the funding levers is on research excellence, but what retains people, helps to widen access and ensures that those harder-to-reach students stay in institutions is, as Alastair Sim has indicated, the one-to-one time that is spent with students—the tutorials, the pastoral support and so on.

Vonnie Sandlan: The new corporate parenting legislation in the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 puts a responsibility on every post-16 education body, in effect, to be a parent to any young person who is care experienced. It is really important that we remember that we will have, because of the extension to the age of leaving care for those young people, not care leavers in further and higher education but, rather, young people who are still in care. It is important that there is, as Mary Senior said, a joined-up approach to ensure that there is a holistic perspective on those students and their successes. The UCAS tick-box approach has been working incredibly well, although we know anecdotally that a substantial number of care leavers still do not trust it and are not quite sure what they get out of ticking the box to say that they are a care leaver. As Robert Foster mentioned, the first question on the SAAS application form is now

"Are you or have you ever been in care?"

As Robert Foster said, those tweaks are having a massive impact on ensuring that access to education is much less stressful than it might otherwise be.

Colin Beattie: How can the funding system be improved to support better those who choose to take a longer route through higher education—for example, those who use articulation, who obviously take longer to complete their studies as a result?

Vonnie Sandlan: It is important to be clear that articulation does not necessarily mean that the path is longer. We have pockets of really good

practice with the two-plus-two model, in which people do two years at college to do their HNC and HND and then articulate straight into third year, then fourth year at university.

As was mentioned earlier, FE student funding is a cash sum and is not allocated per student. If there was a way for the funding to follow the student, that could be a solution to the question that you pose.

The Convener: There is one final question, but I know that Alastair Sim and Mary Senior are keen to leave, so I am happy for them to go at this point. I apologise to Liam McArthur if his question is for either of them, but they have to go to another meeting.

Liam McArthur: I know where they live.

The Convener: I am sure that that is helpful.

Liam McArthur: This question is not so much for Robert Foster, because his answer is fairly predictable. We have heard of the changes that have been brought in through the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 in relation to care leavers or those who are going through the care system. We know that the Scottish Government has placed the highest priority on closing the attainment gap either completely or measurably. Who Cares? Scotland has said that 7 per cent of looked-after school leavers progress from school to university whereas the percentage generally is 39 per cent. Budgets are all about priorities. Should addressing the discrepancy between those two figures be a priority in the budget, whether it is through additional support, pastoral care or whatever?

Vonnie Sandlan: To be clear, it is absolutely critical to acknowledge that these are our children—Scotland's children—and we have a responsibility to parent those children in the way that you or I would parent our own children. The answer to that is absolutely yes. Those children have to get the fair crack of the whip that they have not had up until this point. The statistic that tells us that a care leaver is more likely to see the inside of a prison than the inside of a university is a national disgrace. I would absolutely support co-ordinated work to address that.

The Convener: I thank all the witnesses, including the two who have already left us, for coming. We are most grateful to you for giving us your time.

I suspend the meeting briefly to change panels.

11:13

Meeting suspended.

11:17

On resuming—

Draft Budget Scrutiny 2016-17 (Education)

The Convener: Our next item is to take evidence on the Scottish Government's draft budget for 2016-17. We will focus on education spending. I welcome to the committee Larry Flanagan from the Educational Institute of Scotland; Jane Peckham from the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers; Seamus Searson from the Scottish Secondary Teachers Association; and Andy Smith from School Leaders Scotland. I will go straight to questions, beginning—correctly this time—with Liam McArthur.

Liam McArthur: I am ready for you this time, convener.

I start with the issue of the pupil teacher ratio. Obviously, agreement has been reached on that. In some of our discussions with local authorities, concerns were raised about the implications of the ratio, particularly with regard to a lack of flexibility in local authorities' ability to respond to local demands.

What are the panel's views on the appropriateness of the Scottish Government imposing a financial penalty on local authorities that do not adhere to the agreement on the pupil teacher ratio?

Larry Flanagan (Educational Institute of Scotland): Lying behind the pupil teacher ratio is the headline figure on teacher numbers, which is clearly a key element in arriving at that ratio. We certainly welcomed the Scottish Government's commitment around this time last year to maintain teacher numbers, because if we are to improve Scottish education and look at closing the attainment gap, it is absolutely essential that we have sufficient numbers of teachers in our schools.

At this point last year, we were happy to move into tripartite discussions with the Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities around COSLA's concern that a headline figure was insufficiently nuanced to deal with local circumstances. A group was set up to look at that, and frankly it was COSLA that failed to put anything on the table in those discussions. When COSLA and the Scottish Government could not reach an agreement, we welcomed the fact that the Scottish Government acted to establish bilateral agreements with every local authority. I do not want to comment too much on COSLA's position, but how it conducted itself in those

discussions was a little bit like turkeys voting for Christmas.

We are clear that the Scottish Government has to ensure compliance with the headline figures in each local authority; otherwise we will see further detriment to the education service. I understand that the mechanism is that £41 million has been made available through the general grant to local authorities and around £10 million is payable as additional payment to local authorities that reach their targets.

The Scottish Government was clear that it would monitor the figures quarterly rather than waiting for the census in December. Our view last year was that the penalties that were available should have been imposed. Politically, the Scottish Government thought that imposing penalties would be too difficult. However, we think that local authorities have a responsibility to deliver the agreement on teacher numbers that they signed up to this time last year, otherwise we will continue to see a decrease in the headline figure for teachers.

That has been the pattern for the past five years. Year on year, we see fewer teachers in our schools. Ultimately, that will impact on the pupil teacher ratio and the service that is delivered. We will not close the attainment gap with fewer teachers in our schools.

Liam McArthur: Does anybody have anything to add, rather than simply agreeing?

Jane Peckham (National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers): I agree with what Larry Flanagan said, but it is massively important that we recognise that, even with the commitment, the number of teachers is still falling. The penalties are absolutely appropriate—in the same way that money is given to create and produce an agreement, if the agreement is not upheld, there should be a penalty.

Liam McArthur: It was suggested in our informal discussions with a number of local authorities that the implications of the agreement were that other elements of the staffing complement in schools were taking a hit. We were told that catering, cleaning and janitorial staff were laid off in order not to fall foul of the agreement on the pupil teacher ratio. Is that your experience across the country?

Jane Peckham: Yes, I agree that that is the experience, but that does not make it right to reduce the number of teachers who are there to deliver education. More should be done to maintain the number of essential staff right across education. The number of additional support teachers has been reduced, the number of

classroom support staff has been reduced and so on—including cleaners, as you say.

Liam McArthur: When we are dealing with a budget that is under pressure—we will see this in every area—choices have to be made. If the pupil teacher ratio, which has financial penalties if it is not adhered to, is essentially ring fenced, local authorities will have to make savings in other areas, such as the posts that I identified and the additional support posts that you mentioned.

Larry Flanagan: You need to remember that the first time that we started to talk about maintaining teacher numbers was in 2011, when there was a tripartite agreement through the Scottish Negotiating Committee for Teachers. There was a £60 million cut to education services, so there was a hit in relation to the service generally. At that point, more than 3,000 teachers left the system.

From 2011, there has been a commitment from the Scottish Government to maintain teacher numbers as part of the tripartite agreement. Each year since then, COSLA has failed to deliver on the agreement. In some years, it has been a relatively small variation, but last year, when COSLA again failed to deliver, the Scottish Government clearly took a decision that if it was going to be blamed for teacher numbers, it was going to have some more direct control over them, so it came up with a mechanism. Every council has signed the agreement. The target for this year for the councils that fell short last year was based on their complement last year, so the difficulties in the north-east, for example, were taken into account when the targets were set. I understand that it was made clear that the additional funding—it is not really about penalties—would be paid to councils that were compliant. I also understand that the majority of teachers are on target with their teacher numbers; I hope that that turns out to be the case.

Ring fencing one area of the budget creates difficulties for councils: if they are still seeking cuts in expenditure, ring fencing reduces the areas to which cuts can be applied. Our view is that we do not fight local authority cuts by surrendering our own ground; instead, we stand our ground and get others to stand theirs.

Should we accept a cut in teacher numbers to spread the pain across council services? To be frank, as trade unions that represent teachers, our job is to defend our members, and the teacher numbers guarantee is a key issue for us.

Seamus Searson (Scottish Secondary Teachers Association): We must remember that the teacher is the most important resource for our young people. Reducing teacher numbers will

affect youngsters and what we hope to achieve with them.

It is unfair for people to play off one service against another. That is not what this is about. We have seen that teachers are feeling the effects of the cutbacks through their workloads and what is expected of them. Many teachers are doing over and above what they should be doing because they are trying to do the best by the system. That is continuing, year on year. The number of authorities that seem to be slow to replace teachers or to get in supply teachers when vacancies come up is getting quite high. Our members say that regularly. In light of the cuts, their working conditions are being undermined. That cannot continue.

My concern is that we have to protect the teacher, but we also have to allow teachers time to do their job. To a degree, local authorities are failing in their responsibility to make that arrangement happens.

I have a good example of a school in Glasgow that contacted us last week. Two of our members at the school are on maternity leave and there is nobody to cover for them. Instead, the work is being done by other teachers on the staff. That concerns me because it seems to be the underlying trend.

It is important to understand that we do not want to be played off against each other. It is more important that we deal with the situation positively, and local authorities could be doing a lot more together to make a difference.

Liam McArthur: During our discussions, the parallel was drawn with police officer numbers. There is a specific number below which Police Scotland cannot fall. As a result, we are seeing significant cuts in civilian staffing and police officers having to engage in non-policing activity. What you have just described appears to be a situation in which additional stress, responsibilities and workload are laid on staff, some of which goes beyond their contractual remit. There is an apparent lack of flexibility that seems to play against the interests of some staff in the system.

Larry Flanagan: The teacher side of the SNCT has made it clear that we should consider a national minimum staffing standard, although there would be a big debate about where the line should be drawn. We have been prepared to go into discussions about a way of taking account of local circumstances that is more flexible than using a headline count of teacher numbers. For example, pupil rolls are increasing in the primary sector, so we should be employing more teachers there rather than just maintaining current numbers. That increase will obviously feed through to the secondary sector.

As I said, we have been quite willing to go into those discussions. The Association of Directors of Education in Scotland has recently come round and is willing to consider them, too. The difficulty that we had with the group that was set up was that COSLA did not want to discuss flexibility because at that point it was smarting from the Scottish Government's decision on maintaining teacher numbers.

It is also worth pointing out that the shortfall in teacher numbers last year and the year before amounted to a saving for local authorities of £20 million. It is therefore not true to say that there has not been a reduction in teacher numbers; there have been year-on-year reductions in teacher numbers, both before and since the 2011 agreement. The reductions were not proportionate because some local authorities met their targets, but there was a cumulative saving of £20 million last year and the year before through local authorities failing to reach their teacher number targets.

11:30

Liam McArthur: You talked about the changing school rolls in the primary sector feeding into the secondary sector. Is there enough flexibility in the agreement that has been reached to match demand with supply? In the secondary sector, there will be ebbs and flows in the demand for particular subject teachers. Is the agreement able to accommodate those different demands in different regions across the country over a period?

Larry Flanagan: You almost touch on another subject. There is a huge pressure on workforce planning to anticipate where demand will be. We are moving towards a challenging situation—I was going to say “crisis”—when it comes to meeting schools' demands in relation to teacher numbers. The problems in the north-east have a particular context because of the history in the region but those problems are becoming more widespread. There are certain subject areas, such as maths and home economics, in which there are real pressures at the moment. You cannot get a home economics teacher in the west of Scotland for love nor money, so there are difficulties.

The challenge is striking a balance in the workforce planning mechanism that does not take us back to the situation that we had only five or six years ago, in which there were unemployed teachers—there was a surplus of teachers who were unable to find work—and which ensures that sufficient numbers come through. One concern that teachers have raised is that we do not have a system for tracking where students who go through the induction scheme end up. If they end up in teaching or come back into it, we can track them through the General Teaching Council for

Scotland, but we seem to lose around 20 to 25 per cent of our trainees every year. They simply do not go into the profession and we have no account of them. Workforce planning is based on 100 per cent take-up, more or less, of the teacher places, so that discrepancy is beginning to create a problem.

The introduction to Liam McArthur's question related to nuance. We are open to having a more nuanced approach because we do not want difficulties to be built into the system, but we need COSLA to come on board for that discussion and, to date, it has not been willing to do so.

Chic Brodie: Good morning. I will probably duplicate some of the questions that we have covered. I was looking back at my notes from 8 September, when we met and had workshops with teachers. In the workshop that I chaired, teachers demanded a greater pupil teacher ratio—I am sure that that was fed back in the following session. We want more teachers, but will you explain to me again why the target for the pupil teacher ratio—I hate targets; I prefer outcomes—has an effect on improving attainment? If teachers believe that it restricts their efforts to achieve what we are trying to do, why do we have the straitjacket of pupil teacher ratios? Should we not have more flexibility?

Larry Flanagan: I would be interested to meet the teachers who argued for a greater teacher pupil ratio, because everyone whom I have met argues for a smaller—

Chic Brodie: No, they did not say “greater”; the teachers said that they wanted more flexibility in the pupil teacher ratio. It might be greater or lesser.

Larry Flanagan: In essence, the teacher pupil ratio translates into class size in classroom practice. We have a clear view that smaller class sizes are an efficient way to improve attainment, but they are not the only way. The EIS is committed to professional learning because we accept the adage that the system can only be as good as its teachers. There should be investment in professional learning. Upskilling teachers throughout their career is also an essential ingredient in improving attainment.

When I get off the train and walk out of Queen Street station, I see an advert for a Glasgow private school that makes a virtue of smaller class sizes. Smaller class sizes equate to more teacher pupil interaction. The focus on teacher pupil ratios is about reducing class sizes.

There is a big debate going on about the national improvement framework and closing the attainment gap. One of the points that I have thrown into the mix in a few discussions is that although there were a lot of faults in the five-to-14

levels and the way that we did the national tests back then, there was a period when we reduced the size of maths classes in secondary 1 and 2 across Scotland to an average of 20. The Lib Dem-Labour Scottish Executive introduced that and—lo and behold—we had the highest number of level E passes ever in the history of the five-to-14 levels.

Smaller classes work in improving attainment. That is why the teacher pupil ratio remains important.

Andy Smith (School Leaders Scotland): I have a slightly different opinion. We are always keen to look at the research base, and John Hattie did a significant piece of research that some of you might be aware of, which listed the factors involved in raising attainment. Larry Flanagan is right that we need to continue to improve our teachers' professional skills, but in that piece of research, which looked at attainment across the world, class size was way down the list. The Sutton Trust has recently done research that also suggested that class size is not a significant factor in raising attainment. However, smaller class sizes can make a teacher's job a bit easier, particularly when there are pupils with additional support needs for whom significant differentiation is required in the class. I can see both sides of the argument.

On teachers' skill levels, we might do better to argue that more funding should go into professional development opportunities for teachers, concentrating on strategies that have a high impact.

I will throw in something that I picked up from listening to the radio this morning—it may not have reached your BlackBerrys yet. It was about a recent report from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, in relation to which Andreas Schleicher advocated increasing class sizes. However, I am not saying that I necessarily agree with that opinion. The debate will perhaps go on and on.

Jane Peckham: Andy Smith touched on this, and I will expand on it. The class size figure is always based on the fact that children are mainstreamed at a certain level. With the presumption of mainstreaming and the inclusion agenda, which we fully support, there are more and more children with additional needs who make up the class. Class sizes are being increased, difficulties are created through the reduction in classroom support and teachers have to differentiate the children's various needs. Therefore, the smaller the class, the better the outcome will be. Class size needs to be looked at carefully with regard to the presumption of mainstreaming.

One recent example is a class of 20 in a secondary school, in which nine children—almost 50 per cent—have various additional needs. The class teacher is expected to differentiate and meet the needs of all those children. When ratios are being considered, it must be borne in mind that, with the presumption of mainstreaming, there are more and more children with additional support needs, which must be met.

Chic Brodie: I wonder why the teachers whom we spoke to—I am sure that you can meet them—indicated that they wanted more flexibility around pupil teacher ratios.

Larry Flanagan: In classroom practice, most teachers do not think about the teacher pupil ratio in that sense. Even the figures that we get in the census, which takes on board all the teaching staff in a school, do not really reflect class sizes. The teacher pupil ratio per se is not a burning issue; class sizes are a bigger concern.

Chic Brodie: That is not what they said.

Clearly, we want more teachers. What other, less-costly approaches might be used to improve the quality of school education?

Another issue that came up in that session was connectivity and the use of digital technology. Interestingly, I attended a meeting of a YouthLink group in Ayr at which we talked about kids excluded from school or with additional support needs who get homework that requires access to information technology facilities, which a lot of homes just do not have. With regard to the broad issue of classroom performance, what role do you think connectivity can play in the sharing of teaching practice and knowledge across schools, particularly in rural areas where, as you have pointed out, there are difficulties with hiring teachers?

Larry Flanagan: I think that it is essential. In a book that we recently published on poverty and education, we highlighted the importance of teachers and schools being aware of home circumstances and of not simply assuming that, because most pupils have computers at home, all pupils do. Given that such assumptions entrench these things further for the least advantaged kids, you have to look at how to create access for all pupils.

In that respect, we have talked about poverty proofing our schools, which means working on the basis of the minimum expectation. IT is a good example of that. Because you see lots of kids with mobile phones or games consoles, you assume that IT goes across the board. It is a bit like the assumption that is made about books at home; as far as computers at home are concerned, it is not necessarily the case that all young people live in such an environment.

IT offers many potential advantages, and we certainly want a digital classroom environment. However, that leads to a resource challenge, because to have that sort of environment, you need systems that are reliable. I do not want to start talking about glow, but I will say that in the past we have had some challenges with reliability.

You mentioned rural schools, and a lot of work is being done on digital classrooms and connecting schools not just across the geography of Scotland but internationally. However, I caution the committee against the notion that that reduces the need for teachers. Young people have a lot of space to do independent learning these days, but the fact is that schools and classrooms are about more than knowledge. They are also about growing, and that relies on having relationships. You cannot have a relationship with a computer, and a teacher still plays an important role in facilitating such learning.

Finally, because I did not get to comment earlier, I should point out now that Andreas Schleicher is a statistician, not an educator, so you do not need to listen to what he is saying.

The Convener: I will not comment on that, Larry—I think that I will just leave that there.

Seamus Searson: Obviously, technology is the way forward, but it cannot replace a teacher. However, we need teachers to be trained in the equipment and able to use it, which also comes at a cost.

I agree with Larry Flanagan about giving everyone an equal start. The question is the point at which youngsters get hold of tablets, iPads or whatever, and if you are going to go down that road, you have a responsibility to ensure that everyone can access them at the earliest age. I have heard it argued that if families give iPads or tablets to youngsters at the age of three they should all be in the same place when they get to school. I see some value in that approach, particularly if the iPad or tablet has educational programmes that parents can be encouraged to work with and develop. However, although that sort of thing can play a great part and will replace some of the resources that we use, I cannot argue strongly enough for the importance of having a teacher in a classroom to support individuals, to assess what is going on and to prompt, encourage or do whatever is needed to move things forward.

As I have said, this is a way forward, and it has benefits not only for teaching and learning but for assessments and the other bits of work that we as teachers need to do. However, the difficulty is that the system across Scotland that everyone can use at the same time is just not good enough. Each of the authorities is doing its own thing, and if I am calling for anything, it is for some joined-up

thinking about what we provide across the public services to ensure that they talk to each other and collate information. However, that is a much bigger job for us.

11:45

Chic Brodie: That was helpful. It was instructive when I sat down that afternoon with social workers from YouthLink. They have a bank of about eight computers there, and I found out that the level of attendance among some young people who have been excluded from school is very high. Youth workers will never replace teachers and I agree that we need more teachers, but we seem to be missing a trick in not having consistency across Scotland in the use of technology that allows teachers to do what they have to do and to reduce some of the exercises that are not really part of their prime reason for being there. Thank you.

John Pentland: Over the past eight years, nearly 4,000 teachers have left the system. One of the difficulties that local authorities have in meeting teacher numbers is with recruitment. Larry Flanagan talked about workforce planning and how we track where people go. How can we avoid cycles of oversupply and undersupply?

Larry Flanagan: That is the challenge every year. In the past few academic years, the Scottish Government has increased the number of teacher training places at Aberdeen in the hope that a greater influx of local people will result in more people being happy to stay there. Additional probationers will come through from that system.

I do not want to repeat myself, but the key issue is that we need to know where the people who we have spent a lot of money training actually end up. We need to know what the fallout is from the fact that people's lifestyles have changed. When I trained, people were desperate to get started in a job but, nowadays, a lot of young people get a qualification and then head off, and they might not come back to teaching in Scotland for a decade. That does not seem to be factored into the current arrangements, so we need to look at that.

We need to think through how we are spending money. The Scottish Government has announced £100 million of attainment challenge funding, at £25 million a year. That is excellent and we welcome that money, but I do not know where it came from. When we were at the committee last year talking about budgets, there did not seem to be any money but, somewhere in the course of the year, additional money was found to address the issue.

The money has been allocated across seven local authorities, most of which have come up with schemes that involve employing additional teachers, as that will have the most impact on the

young people who we are seeking to support. However, most of those authorities are now having to revise their thinking on that spending, because the system has not created the additional teachers that are necessary for those additional roles. Another issue is that directors up in the north-east are complaining that some of the teachers who they expected to migrate up to the north-east from the central belt—I am making it sound as if it is really far away—are not doing that, because they are getting jobs in the central belt through the attainment challenge funding.

That additional money is very welcome, but it has thrown a bit of a spanner into the works of teacher planning, because more posts have suddenly become available. For example, Glasgow was seeking to create 90 additional posts through the attainment challenge. That is a lot of teachers to suck out of the system when we already have a very fine balance. The issue is about the degree of planning that we put in. We know that the attainment challenge funding will be there for the next three years at least, so that should result in a corresponding increase in the number of students who are being taken into our colleges. If they are on the one-year postgraduate course, that feeds into the system quite quickly. With the primary and other BEd courses, if we increase numbers now, it takes three or four years before they come into the system.

I am suggesting that there is no easy answer, because nobody wants to have unemployed teachers who are unable to find work. We certainly need to look at expanding student recruitment into the profession, because we are moving towards fewer teachers being available for employment. Given the policy commitments that have been made around the attainment gap, there will be increasing demand for teachers.

A lot of teachers have also retired because the pension changes gave them the opportunity to go. Some of that loss was not anticipated. The pension changes impacted on people's thinking, so that people who might have worked on past 60 have decided to call it a day. In fact, the Scottish Public Pensions Agency had to employ additional staff during the summer so that it could cope with the level of applications for premature retirement. That was another unexpected challenge to workforce planning arrangements.

Seamus Searson: The shortage of teachers of particular subjects in the secondary sector is just as worrying. We need to identify where those shortages are; the curriculum is becoming narrow, because there are not the teachers to deliver the subjects and that is a backwards step. We need to look at what we need for specific subjects and put some effort into meeting those demands. That is equally worrying.

Career development for teachers is not just about recruiting people to come into teaching; it is about maintaining the teachers that we have. I am concerned about the career prospects for some of those teachers. For example, more needs to be done for probationers who are put on a one-year contract and are not sure whether they will have further employment. Equally, as things stand, a teacher reaches the top of the main scale after about six years of teaching. That happens very early on in their careers and career opportunities are hard to come by beyond that. We need to look at that, because we could be storing up another problem for the future.

John Pentland: You said that there are local teacher recruitment difficulties, especially in the north-east. Is it right that local authorities should offer teachers some sort of financial incentive to go there?

Jane Peckham: That is an interesting question. During the party conferences, we had a lot of discussions with various councillors and so on. One of the frustrating problems for those in the north-east was the retention of teachers once they were there. They get teachers going there under the preference waiver scheme.

The people we spoke to were concerned about retaining people, because the north-east is a more expensive area in which to live. Someone might have gone there for their one-year induction and received the £6,000 or £8,000—leaving aside the question of why there is a differential there; that is for another day—but they lose that when they go into their next year of teaching. They are already taking a hit although the extra money was only ever for the one year.

We need to explore ways of mitigating that, perhaps by offering something for more than six months, or by mitigating the loss until the salary catches up. If teachers remained in an area for three to four years, they would build up their social circle and look at staying in the area permanently, which would encourage more recruitment to those areas. At the moment, because of all the cuts and the fact that induction with the preference waiver is for one year, those areas are struggling to find sustainable methods of retaining teachers. Perhaps the detrimental impact of that could be looked at in more depth.

Andy Smith: On the subject of attracting teachers to the profession, perhaps we could take a step back and have a broader look. A particular bugbear of mine is that, from time to time, I see negativity and, looking closer to home, political point scoring in the press about education. In countries that have highly successful education systems, the teaching profession is highly regarded and there is perhaps not the level of

political debate and discussion in the newspapers because that regard is commonly agreed.

We have a strong education system and a strong curriculum that got broad agreement from all parties. From speaking to people, I know that the negativity that is sometimes displayed in the media has an impact on the numbers who go into teaching.

The Convener: Is there an insufficient number of applicants for the courses?

Andy Smith: I cannot give you the detailed numbers.

Larry Flanagan: No, there is still a relatively healthy level of applications.

Andy Smith: Teacher training places in Finland, for example, are nine times oversubscribed. We are nowhere near that in Scotland.

The Convener: That does not sound like a good thing.

Andy Smith: It gives the Finnish the opportunity to pick the finest candidates from a broader pool. The point is that the broader pool provides an opportunity to select from more people.

Larry Flanagan: The key point is that there is still a relatively healthy level of applications but, as I indicated earlier, at the other end, when people have the qualification, they do not all move into Scottish education. There may be a number of people who want to get the qualification in the bank, as it were, and we need to translate those people into teachers in the classroom.

We have a national system of pay negotiation and we are keen not to detract from that, but we would welcome local authorities coming up with local initiatives. The General Teaching Council for Scotland is currently considering reintroducing provisional registration to facilitate the quicker recruitment in the north-east of people who potentially meet the GTCS standard, many of whom are trained in England. We are clear that there should be no dilution of professional standards in Scotland, but we support the creation of slightly more flexible approaches so that people can gain the GTCS standard. There is a project in Moray that would address some of the concerns.

The biggest challenge is housing costs. When I became a teacher, I went to work in Blantyre high school and got a Scottish special house in Cambuslang because I was an incoming worker to Lanarkshire—I thought that I was in Glasgow, but it turned out that I was in Lanarkshire—but we do not have that facility now. If we could address housing costs, we would reduce some of the challenges.

John Pentland: In protecting teacher numbers and pay and conditions, local authorities have to

look elsewhere for budget cuts, which has the adverse effect of adding to teachers' workloads. Will you expand on what that workload is? Is it management, support or something else?

Larry Flanagan: Initiatives have been taken on workload, such as the tackling bureaucracy working group that Alasdair Allan chaired. Teachers have always gone beyond their contractual commitments; the key issue for them is control of their workload. If a teacher chooses to do additional work that he or she considers beneficial to the child, that is part of the vocation of teaching. The bigger concern relates to what is regarded as additional bureaucracy that does not impact on classroom practice.

The tackling bureaucracy working group, which made its recommendations a year and a half or two years ago, identified a raft of practices in schools that had developed on the back of the curriculum for excellence none of which added to children's learning experience. One of the challenges is that, despite the group—which was reconvened only two months ago—having clear messages, those messages have not translated into a change in practice in the majority of schools. We have identified areas in which bureaucracy could be tackled, but it is so entrenched in the system that there is a challenge in getting schools to adopt different working approaches. The messages are right, but we need to get the practice to match it.

In secondary schools, there have been huge workload pressures around the arrangements for the new qualifications. That situation has caused secondary teachers a lot of concern. Much of that additional workload is predicated on SQA procedures, which are about the SQA, not teaching and learning in the schools. There is a challenge to ensure that we address all the additional work that the new qualifications have generated so that we focus on what the CFE senior phase was meant to be about, which was creating opportunities for deeper learning and more time for teachers in the classroom.

12:00

Liam McArthur: You talked about provisional GTCS registration and I accept your point that housing is probably as much an issue as anything else in the north-east. An issue that has been raised with me in Orkney—and it has been suggested that it is a wider problem—is that protection of vulnerable groups scheme checks are dragging out the process. There is no simple way to transfer from a teaching post in one local authority to a post in another, based on the PVG checks that have been done previously. Is that being or does that need to be looked at, in order to streamline the process and speed up transfers so

that teachers can get in post and into the classroom quicker?

Jane Peckham: That is being looked at in the context of the work on supply teachers. There was a lot of discussion about having a lead authority for a cluster of other authorities, so that information on one PVG check could be shared. There were a lot of issues around the fact that the information would be covered by data protection legislation, but if the person signed a consent form for their information to be shared across four authorities or whatever, it could be done simply. There is no reason in my mind why information could not be taken from one authority to another, although it would have to take place within a certain time period. I am not sure whether anyone is looking at that, but it was explored thoroughly in the supply working group.

George Adam: Good morning—actually, it should be “good afternoon” now. When I was a fresh-faced, brown-haired councillor—you can probably tell by looking at me that that was quite a while ago—council officers told me of a mythical place where councils shared services. That was the future; that was going to make the difference. However, it appears from some of the evidence that when councils, COSLA and council officers in particular face challenging circumstances, the first thing that they hit on is teacher numbers. They do not tend to look at sharing services between schools and local authorities. Is such practice happening anywhere? I know that Aberdeenshire Council and a few of the councils around it are talking about working together on teacher numbers and trying to recruit teachers. Is anything happening that is making a difference, or are officers not looking at that? Are they just going for the easy hits of shutting schools and sacking teachers?

Larry Flanagan: There have been a number of attempts to look at shared services. It may be unfair to say that officers are the problem, because it is usually a change in administration that creates the breakdown. For example, the failure of the partnership between Stirling Council and Clackmannanshire Council was due to political considerations.

It is a good question. Clearly, there is an irrefutable case for sharing backroom services and creating savings through scale. We have a national system of pay bargaining and we have national pay scales, so do we need 32 different payroll operations? The challenge for COSLA is to get its act together on that. Otherwise, other political solutions to how we get shared services might emerge in the discussions. That is dangerous territory, so I will leave that there.

The Convener: It is indeed.

Seamus Searson: There need to be incentives for authorities to work together. Larry Flanagan gave the example of payroll. We heard this week that the backdated pay increase is coming in at a different pace in different authorities. Some are getting some money this month and some are getting it in January—it makes no sense at all. That is just one example, and there are lots of them. Rather than punishing authorities for not working together, we might need to put incentives in place, so that authorities can come up with schemes to work with each other. Some of our authorities in Scotland are very small and they cannot deliver the same level of backroom service and support in schools.

George Adam: I am interested in what Larry Flanagan said about how we deal with the situation and what we are looking at. Nobody is talking about another reorganisation of local government, because reorganisation does not seem to make any savings—the last round did not, anyway. However, there must be some way in which local authorities can work together to help with teacher numbers and services and ensure that we share resources and get the right service at the right time to the right pupil.

Larry Flanagan: If only local authorities had an organisation that brought them together and allowed them to work across boundaries. That would be useful.

The Convener: We do not have that any more.

Larry Flanagan: I agree with George Adam. Glasgow, for example, is of sufficient size to get savings from scale in its own right, but there is an imperative for other local authorities to look at where they can share services, which brings us back to Seamus Searson's point. Quality improvement officers have been decimated; indeed, in some local authorities, there is effectively no QIO support for schools, and that is detrimental to the service.

However, you move into political territory when you start to talk about models in which there might be the equivalent of boards to get the scale that is needed. The EIS's view has always been that local authority input into education delivery is an important aspect of democratic control, and we would not want local authorities to lose out on that arrangement. However, there needs to be some dialogue about being more efficient and making savings through—and I think that this is the way you would want to phrase it—partnership working. We have been asked about schools working across school boundaries, but I think that a challenge for local authorities is finding out how to work across their own boundaries.

The Convener: I have a question just for clarification. Regional councils such as Strathclyde

and Lothian used to deal with the education payroll. Was that all split up when the regional councils were replaced?

Larry Flanagan: Yes.

The Convener: So the payroll systems were split up between the local authorities.

Larry Flanagan: Yes. One of the difficulties is that payroll is part of the corporate structure, which means that there is always a tension between a council's corporate identity and the fact that the education service operates under a legislative framework that is different from that for a range of other services. It was therefore quite difficult to explain to some human resources departments that teachers have national conditions of service rather than conditions put in place by the council.

The Convener: I take it that, when the regional councils were in place, payroll and other things were dealt with by a small number of regions across the country. Is it not inconceivable that we could go back to at least that model if not a single national model?

Larry Flanagan: It is not inconceivable, no.

Gordon MacDonald: The vast majority of Scotland's 32 local authorities have either maintained or increased the percentage of their budget spent on schools, but there is no doubt that there are huge difficulties in that respect and pressure on the education budget. Given that background, how do we target the education budget to ensure that it has the most impact on attainment levels? Is there any evidence that the targeting that you might suggest would reduce the attainment gap?

Andy Smith: To come back to the issue of research and finding out what works, John Hattie's research, which I referred to earlier, has picked up a fair bit of traction, and a number of the strategies that the research lists as having a high impact in the classroom are now being picked up and taken forward. I should say, though, that some of them were already being taken forward in Scottish education—there is no doubt about that.

There are two aspects to this. First, we need to look at broader research but, secondly, we need to look at our own research. I hope that the attainment challenge fund will help in that respect and allow us not just to look at other programmes but to try things of our own.

I have already mentioned the use of IT. Although it can be exciting and engaging for young people, there is no significant body of evidence showing that significant expenditure on it leads to a significant increase in attainment or achievement. I am aware that a number of schools across the country have programmes in which whole year groups have iPads to allow young

people in engage in learning, and I would like to think that somebody somewhere is looking at the efficacy of that strategy and whether it is improving attainment or otherwise. Lots of innovations are happening across the country, and we have an opportunity to gather them together and look at the key elements as far as raising attainment is concerned. There are certainly four or five high-impact strategies that there is really no question about, and they are the ones that our schools tend to concentrate on.

Larry Flanagan: It is important, especially if education is going to be centre stage in the run-up to the Scottish elections in May, that we do not create a discourse of failure around our schools. Our schools have never been more successful—we are doing well. When the Scottish survey of literacy and numeracy came out, we had a lot of angst about the drop in reading attainment from 90 to 88 per cent. That completely missed the point that 88 per cent is a very high performance. In England, people were celebrating the fact that performance in the standard assessment tests at the end of primary went from 80 to 82 per cent. We went from 90 to 88 per cent and managed to talk ourselves into a sense of falling standards and failure when, in fact, against the CFE framework, 88 per cent was a very high performance on P7 reading. We need to focus on the fact that we are doing well.

I made the point at another meeting recently that everyone is now focused on closing the attainment gap but, 30 years ago, that was not on the agenda; indeed, we actually organised schools based on the attainment gap rather than on trying to close it. We have a good agenda, but there is no easy solution. As long as we have poverty outside the school gates, it will have an impact in the classrooms. We are seeking to mitigate that impact for the most vulnerable in our society.

The attainment challenge fund has made resource available, and it is incumbent on us to ensure that the money is well spent. We should not have a project approach in which we spend money for three years on a project that impacts on the kids who are involved in it but has no lasting effect. We have to look at how we change the practice in our schools in a sustainable way. That comes back to Andy Smith's point about looking at what works. Some of it might crash and burn and we might have to try things. For example, we know that Hattie's visible learning strategies can work. For them to work, teachers have to do the preparatory work around embracing the principles and then they can get into the practice. That is what we need to do.

It is not a quick gain. In a year's time, people will ask what we have got for our £25 million. Changes that will be long lasting take longer than a year to

have a measurable impact. That is the context that we need to operate in.

Jane Peckham: Larry Flanagan has made the point that I was going to make, but I just want to emphasise the importance of the fact that, whatever the strategy is—that will be decided by the area and the schools within it, depending on their need—it has to be sustainable in the long term and it cannot be a project. We saw that with the original nurture group approach many years ago. Funding was withdrawn from it and, frankly, the impact of that was worse than not having done it in the first place.

Whatever local authorities determine to do and whatever good work schools and teachers develop, it has to be shared. Because people can get very insular and possessive about a strategy, the message has to be that, if something works in a particular way for a particular group of children, that should be shared. The approach also has to be sustainable, because otherwise it will basically be a lot of years of effort for no return.

Gordon MacDonald: Last week, when I was at the cross-party group in the Scottish Parliament on skills, we heard about something that has been tried in America called the Khan Academy. We heard that a lot of young teenagers—it is predominantly boys—become uninterested in a particular subject or, because of peer pressure, do not want to look stupid and so do not ask for fuller understanding of that subject. The Khan Academy is an online approach that allows people, in their own time, to watch videos on particular topics and then sit tests. That has apparently been very successful in America. Are there any such initiatives in Scotland?

12:15

Larry Flanagan: I am not aware of the Khan Academy, but what you describe echoes the issue that has been identified of alienation from school practice, particularly among a lot of white, working-class youths. Part of the CFE senior phase was predicated on addressing the needs of that group in particular and looking at different ways of engaging them. Across Scotland there is a range of things in schools to do that, such as the Prince's Trust. That group of young people is often predominant in such organisations. In terms of the CFE senior phase and the Wood commission report, we are still in the foothills of that development. However, the issue that you raised has been identified and those are some of the ways that we have been looking at it. I would be happy to look at the Khan Academy and see whether we can take it on.

Gordon MacDonald: My final question is on a point that Seamus Searson picked up on earlier.

Primary schools now have more pupils, which may create pressures because of the lack of secondary schools teachers in some subjects. The Scottish Government's youth employment strategy states that

"Employers and schools need to develop strong two way partnerships ... that deliver improvements to teaching and learning and bring real-life context into the classroom, particularly in relation to science, technology, engineering and mathematics".

Has there been any sign of movement in that direction in schools? Also, how do we protect teacher numbers?

Larry Flanagan: That partnership between employers and schools is the Wood commission agenda. Although I mentioned the Wood commission in the context of the senior phase, its agenda is across primary and secondary education, so initiatives are under way. A recent publication about careers education, for example, talks about schools—including primary schools—facilitating exposure to different career paths and motivating young people in those areas. There is a lot of work going on. Andy Smith may know more about specific examples.

Andy Smith: I echo what Larry Flanagan said. Schools are well on their way to involving employers and are engaging with them far more readily in order to give pupils a taste of what it is like to be in the workplace. There is significant movement on that agenda, at the minute.

Iain Gray: I want to follow up on the attainment challenge funding. Jane Peckham and Larry Flanagan have both referred to and expressed concerns about short-termism and the importance of the work that it funds being project-funded and not being time-limited. The EIS and NASUWT both also expressed in their written evidence concerns about the allocation of the challenge funding—I think implicitly in the relevant paragraph in the EIS submission but explicitly in the NASUWT submission.

Yesterday I visited two schools in Johnstone, Renfrewshire—Cochrane Castle primary school and St David's primary school. The two schools are on a single campus with a shared dining room, a shared gym hall, and all the rest of it. One of those schools benefits from the attainment challenge fund and the other one does not, in spite of the fact that they are housed in the same building and draw from the same catchment area.

Can you enlarge a bit more on how effective you think the attainment challenge funding will be in the context of how it is allocated and distributed?

Jane Peckham: In an ideal world, as you know, if everyone had access to additional funding that is going to be rolled out, that would be the way forward, because schools can use it in different

ways. One of the issues that we raised was the fact that the seven areas that were identified for the pilot did not reflect any rural-poverty issues: the pilot was very much urban based. There are in rural areas real difficulties that differ from those in urban areas and which would affect what schools would use the funding for.

Again, with education, the hidden cost to parents of our free education system is quite telling and it is increasing. We do an annual survey—I apologise, I should have sent in stats as well as our submission—and just the basic cost of clothes can have an impact. Obviously we advocate having a uniform, but uniforms can cost more. My daughter has to wear a physical education T-shirt because if she did not, she would stand out. I have to pay £15 for two PE T-shirts. Why are parents having to do that?

Over and above local authorities looking at how they can poverty proof, individual schools really need to focus on such things. If the school is offering a breakfast club, that is great, but it needs to consider, for example, the children who rely on school transport and who therefore cannot get to school to go to the club, and whether that has an impact on them. They also need to look at what they are offering after school when there is no transport for children, and at such things as whether they give demerits to pupils for not wearing black shoes. Children need shoes to go to school, so why do they need to be so specific?

It is almost a case of paring things right back. Things like the colour of shoes that a child wears do not affect how they achieve in the classroom, so I think that we need to be a wee bit more honest about hidden costs and improving things to ensure that everyone has equal access to what is being offered.

Larry Flanagan: I would not want to look a gift horse in the mouth, so I want to say that the EIS certainly welcomes the Scottish Government's announcement of the attainment challenge funding and think that the money will be well spent and will have an impact. The views that have been expressed about project-type approaches will be shared by ADES, which is also looking for sustainability.

That said, if we are going to commit that amount of money, it will be prudent to take some time to think through how we are going to spend it. It is a little bit like the situation with the national improvement framework, which has been introduced at helter-skelter rate. I know that there are political imperatives with regard to closing the attainment gap, and the First Minister has clearly made a high-stakes commitment in that respect. However, you do not get sustainable development in schools with a quick fix; thought needs to be put into it. The London challenge, for example, built

upon seven or eight years of a similar approach, and it was fixated on leaving a lasting legacy of £45,000 per secondary school per annum.

It is good to see everyone across the political spectrum so keen to see the attainment gap being closed, but we must ensure that the money is spent wisely, which might mean having to take a more considered perspective.

There was no consultation of, for example, the professional associations before the attainment challenge was announced. We would have welcomed that in any circumstance, but had we been consulted, we would have been able to put to the Scottish Government some of the points that I have just made about how we spend the money, how we ensure that it has an impact and how best to distribute it. As soon as the money became available, councils started competing with one another to get some of the first tranche of spending. We have had no complaints from any of the councils that got the money, but we have had significant complaints from those that did not. There is certainly a challenge in that respect.

Of course, we are only in year 1 of the fund. There are three more years to go, and we need to think carefully about how the money is being spent. Incidentally, that does not mean sharing it pro rata, because if that happens, it will just disappear into the mill.

Mary Scanlon: Before I ask about school closures, I note that one or two of you have mentioned cuts. We have figures for the schools revenue budget as a percentage of the total council budget. I appreciate that the figures are raw and do not show the cost per pupil, but I was surprised to see that 25 of the 32 local authorities have increased their percentage share; for example, it is up 7 per cent in Aberdeen and 9 per cent in West Dunbartonshire. The share has fallen in only four authorities, and only by a very marginal amount, and for the other three there is no information. That does not give me a picture of local authorities cutting back on education, so perhaps you can address that point in your answer to the question that I am about to ask.

I want to ask the man who seems to know the most about research—Andy Smith—whether any work is being done to identify teacher shortages in subject areas, as Gordon MacDonald mentioned, and the age profile of teachers. My next question will be about school closures.

Andy Smith: I am broadly aware of workforce planning, but it is not my area of expertise so I will defer to my learned colleagues on my left.

Larry Flanagan: The workforce planning group is looking at subject areas.

Mary Scanlon: What about the age profile?

Larry Flanagan: The group has all the age profile details—anticipated pension exits, and so on. That is all part of it. The difficulty can be that there is so much information out there that it is difficult to find what is having an impact on behaviour.

Mary Scanlon: If that information is fed into teacher recruitment, we should not have shortages of maths, science and IT teachers in the future. If that work is being done right and the information is going into the teacher training colleges, we should not be facing the shortages.

Larry Flanagan: Some of the pressures around particular subjects relate to the available options for alternative careers. For example, you could find a direct correlation between the shortage of home economics teachers and the expansion of the catering and entertainment industries, in which people can have more financially profitable careers. There are also still a lot of alternatives in science, technology, engineering and mathematics that attract high-quality graduates.

Mary Scanlon: I will move on to school closures. I represent the Highlands and Islands, which includes Moray. I am aware that Moray Council put a huge amount of work and consultation into school mergers and so on. To what extent do current legislative requirements on schools prevent local authorities from running their school estate in the most financially effective and high-quality way? Certainly, Moray looked at the quality of education as much as the financial aspects. Is legislation preventing local authorities from managing their school estate properly?

Larry Flanagan: The most immediate answer to that would come from local councillors rather than from the Scottish Government. Any school closure should be based on educational rationale rather than just being to make a saving. I know that in rural areas the school's role as part of the community is a big consideration that goes beyond education. It is a difficult balancing act.

I am not aware of a large number of cases in which the Scottish Government has called in and prevented closures; I am aware of some places where local members have defended their schools. I know that most councils operate a policy whereby the group whip is waived on local matters because such issues can in a number of areas be quite political.

On the question about cuts more generally, it is to the credit of directors of education and local authorities that they see education as a key service. If you look at the proportions, there have been attempts to protect education, but some of the problems have been dictated by teacher-number issues.

One of the challenges is that the costs of running schools have risen disproportionately. A situation might look healthy on paper, but even at school level the areas that end up being available for cuts tend to be in per capita funding—where schools and principal teachers spend their money on resources for the classroom. The discourse around cuts can therefore refer to a narrow area, but that is what gets most publicity because it is about what is available in the classroom.

I take your point about attempts to protect education, but there have been real cuts to resources, even at the classroom level.

Mary Scanlon: My second question is about the benefits and disadvantages to children who are learning in very small schools. My colleagues talk about classes of 20, and so on, but I know one school that has had nine and 11 pupils. We would all love teachers to have about 10 pupils, but in that case it is one teacher teaching from primary 1 to primary 7.

12:30

That is quite common in the Highlands and Islands. Do we have research that shows that children learn better in very small schools in their own community? There is an example in the north of Skye just now, where parents are fighting hard to retain four quite small schools. That is really so that the community is sustainable, because young people will not want to live in a village unless there is a school. I realise that the issue is complex, but what can we use to fight for pupils to be in very small schools, such as the example that I gave of a school with 10 pupils from primaries 1 to 7 and one teacher? Has work been done to say that there is a benefit from that and no disadvantage, or is it the opposite?

The Convener: Does anybody know?

Larry Flanagan: Ten pupils is actually quite a healthy size for a school. Some are a lot smaller than that.

Mary Scanlon: Yes, it is—there is a school on the Out Skerries with one pupil.

Larry Flanagan: Quite a lot of research has been done on rural schools. Essentially, there are advantages and disadvantages. There can be advantages in having a primary school with 10 pupils spread across the different levels, although there are the obvious challenges to do with the social mix and relationships. However, I do not think that we could say that a case has been made one way or the other. It depends on the relationships in the school and how it operates.

In a broader sense—to go back to the teacher numbers issue—a school that has two or three pupils is not an attractive career option for a lot of teachers. Some schools in Moray that have one,

two or three pupils have struggled to fill posts not just because they are rural, but because for someone who is at the start of their career, that is not necessarily the most supportive environment to go into. Someone is required whose personal circumstances chime with the circumstances of the school. That is difficult.

Mary Scanlon: Although Moray Council put a huge amount of time and effort into the school merger proposals with all the consultants and consultation, after a few months it had to pull out and now nothing is happening. Are we now at a stage where, politically as well as legislatively, it is almost impossible to close a rural school or even to merge two schools, regardless of whether there is a benefit or a disadvantage?

The Convener: Does anybody have a view on that?

Larry Flanagan: That is really one for your side of the table.

The Convener: Yes, I know—that is why I asked whether you wanted to answer. Andy Smith put his hand up.

Andy Smith: From what I see and read, it seems to me that that is the case. However, we underestimate at our peril the significance and benefit of education and schools for local communities, and how dearly held they are. That is why it is such an emotive issue, why it hits the front page of the newspapers and why there is such a high level of discussion about it. Personally, I would not like any school to be closed. In some cases, we just have to put the economic argument to one side and do what benefits the community.

Mary Scanlon: Yes—especially when last year in Moray children were sent home. I should say that my granddaughter is at Mosstodloch school in Moray, which is one of the ones that was marked for closure. I feel that I should mention that.

Colin Beattie: I want to ask about education budgets and the implications for other council services. We have already said that for the majority of councils the education budget has increased over the past few years—although obviously it has also had increasing demands placed on it. The debate about poverty and attainment has highlighted that the attainment gap is not only about school education and cannot be tackled only at school level. That raises a question about which other council services are most closely linked to the potential of pupils to make the most of their school education. To what extent could cuts in other council services impact on school attainment?

Larry Flanagan: The area that I think has the most long-term impact on pupil attainment is the

pre-five service: all the evidence and research indicates that what happens to a child in the first five years creates the foundation for future learning. There has been some expansion of pre-five childcare, a lot of which focused on allowing parents to access the workplace rather than on the child. Local authorities need to prioritise the ages of zero to five.

The answer comes down to discussions between COSLA and the Scottish Government. I would not accept the argument that other services should be cut to fund education. If I was a councillor, as I once was, I would argue for increased funding from the Scottish Government to maintain services. That is where the debate needs to be—although the Scottish Government would argue with the UK Government, no doubt.

I am uncomfortable with the notion that we play one service off against another. In Glasgow, 10 per cent of schoolchildren have active social work files. The social work service is absolutely key to the health and wellbeing of young people in Glasgow schools. If we start trying to play one service off against another, things such as getting it right for every child, which is about wraparound support for the child, will start to crumble. People will retreat into their section of the service, rather than look at the child's needs.

It is a difficult area, but if we are looking at how we support young people, we need to look not just in the classroom but beyond the school.

Seamus Searson: The named person legislation is an example of that. We need services to work together for the benefit of youngsters who are at risk. Any cuts to health and social services will have an impact on the school's effectiveness in dealing with those youngsters.

Colin Beattie: To continue that theme, which non-school budgets have the most influence on pupils' prospects in school? Social work services have been mentioned, and other examples include economic development spend, housing and libraries. I am trying to get a grip of what the implications of changes to those services would be for attainment levels.

The Convener: I will add a supplementary to that. If you cut school librarians, not teachers, what effect, if any, would that have on pupil attainment levels?

Larry Flanagan: The impact would be greatest on the people on whom our support is focused. If the school library shuts and that resource is not there, that is to the detriment of the whole school. However, it will have less impact on pupils who come from homes where books are part and parcel of the environment and reading is encouraged than it will on pupil from homes where books are not available. As a former English

principal teacher, I am acutely aware of the importance of school library services to literacy programmes in schools and to active learning. Most school libraries now are resource centres, rather than traditional libraries: they are at the heart of school life and the school ethos.

If the focus of your original question is the most vulnerable pupils, rather than education generally, social work is a key element in support for them. However, there are a range of services around community education. There was a question about youth workers; a lot of youth workers provide adult interaction in an environment beyond the school gates, which helps young people to grow in different ways. The problem becomes really difficult if we isolate services from each other, but pre-five support for parents and children is the bedrock of improving the chances of young people from vulnerable backgrounds.

Andy Smith: School libraries is a subject that is close to my heart. I read last year a bit of research from the Robert Gordon University that suggested that school librarians have a significant impact on young people's learning and literacy. It called for an increase in the number of librarians or the amount of time that librarians have in schools, which probably flies in the face of what we are seeing nationally.

Seamus Searson: We must get to the understanding that schools are the centre of the community. When we talk about rural schools we understand that they are the heart of the community. We need to build all the services around schools. That is important. Libraries, health services, youth workers and so on should be seen as a partnership. Local authorities should be looking for joined-up services, rather than individual services, which is what happens sometimes.

The Convener: Jane—would you like to say anything?

Jane Peckham: I have nothing to add.

The Convener: That concludes the meeting. Thank you all for attending; we appreciate your giving your time to the committee.

It has been quite correctly pointed out to me that I made a mistake when we took evidence from our first panel. Instead of talking about the change from £17,000 to £19,000 in the eligibility threshold for grants, I mistakenly talked about £17,000 to £19,000 as a change in the repayment threshold. That was incorrect. I thank Liam McArthur for pointing out my error and for giving me the chance to correct it on the record.

12:41

Meeting continued in private until 12:42.

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