



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

EDUCATION AND CULTURE COMMITTEE

Tuesday 23 February 2016

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EDUCATION AND CULTURE COMMITTEE
6th Meeting 2016, 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:

Angela Constance (Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning)

Councillor Malcolm Cuning (Glasgow City Council)

Councillor Paul Godzik (City of Edinburgh Council)

Robert Nicol (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities)

Councillor Stephanie Primrose (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities)

Ian Robertson (Glasgow City Council)

Councillor Gary Robinson (Shetland Islands Council)

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con) (Committee Substitute)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Terry Shevlin

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Education and Culture Committee

Tuesday 23 February 2016

[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:05]

School Spending and Educational Attainment

The Convener (Stewart Maxwell): Good morning, everybody, and welcome to the sixth meeting in 2016 of the Education and Culture Committee. I remind all present to ensure that all electronic devices are switched off.

Agenda item 1 is evidence on school spending and the educational attainment gap. Over the past year or so, we have taken a considerable amount of evidence on those overlapping topics. Obviously, we understand that much more information is now in the public domain, which we hope will help to stimulate an open and transparent discussion.

Our previous two reports on Scottish Government draft budgets have focused on school spending. We have been told about some of the challenges facing local authorities and schools, and we have been told that there is not always a clear link between spending on education and outcomes. An outcome that I trust all those who have an interest in education share is significant narrowing of the attainment gap between the least-disadvantaged and most-disadvantaged pupils. I hope that this morning's discussion will help us to understand how we can best make progress on that shared aim.

With that in mind, I welcome to the committee Councillor Stephanie Primrose and Robert Nicol from the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, Councillor Paul Godzik from the City of Edinburgh Council, Councillor Gary Robinson from Shetland Islands Council, and Ian Robertson and Councillor Malcolm Cuning from Glasgow City Council. Thank you for agreeing to come along to discuss this important subject with us. I will go straight to questions from members.

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): There is no doubt that there has been pressure on local authority budgets over recent years. However, in terms of educational attainment, there has been a 6.3 per cent increase since 2010-11 in the number of pupils achieving five or more awards at Scottish Qualifications Authority level 6, and an increase of 4 per cent in the number of young people entering positive

destinations on leaving school, which is hitting 93 per cent. How do we balance pressure on the education budget with still achieving good educational outcomes?

Councillor Stephanie Primrose (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities): You are absolutely correct to cite the 93 per cent of pupils who are entering positive destinations. I would like to raise one point about that—there are a number of other points that I probably want to return to, as well. There are positive destinations, but we need to break that down a bit further and look at sustainable destinations. In my local authority area, 97 per cent of pupils go on to positive destinations, but I would like to see whether they are still there after six months.

Councillor Paul Godzik (City of Edinburgh Council): That is a good point about positive destinations and it is something that we are looking to improve constantly. Edinburgh was bottom of the league table just a few years ago. We put in specific resources for the Edinburgh guarantee and we got a commitment right across the city to buy into that. We are now, thankfully, at the Scottish average, but there needs to be a sustained focus on that. The Edinburgh guarantee and things like it are helping to improve the situation.

Councillor Gary Robinson (Shetland Islands Council): I echo Stephanie Primrose's point. In recent times, Shetland has topped the table for positive destinations, which has been due in part to the high level of well-paid employment that there has been in the islands lately—in particular, to do with the construction phase of the Shetland gas plant. However, as well as seeing those positive destinations, we also saw a drop in people going into higher and further education. I believe that a number of people have taken gaps year to make themselves some money rather than get into student loan debt, but we have yet to see whether that actually comes through in the next set of figures. There is certainly not the same amount of work available as there was two or three years ago, so—like Stephanie Primrose—I think that that is something to watch. I am not sure whether that can be sustained.

Councillor Malcolm Cuning (Glasgow City Council): In Glasgow, we knocked around at the bottom of the table for a number of years, but in recent years we have both improved year on year and closed the gap in comparison with other local authorities, which is a positive outcome for Glasgow and especially for Glasgow students. We still have roughly 90 per cent of pupils going into positive destinations and most of the other figures compare reasonably well. The one on which we stand out slightly is that we still have a higher proportion of school students in Glasgow going

straight from school into unemployment. The Scottish average is about 5 per cent and our figure is roughly 7.5 per cent. That is a particular concern.

What we have achieved has been achieved by changes in working practice by many teachers. There are good examples from schools that have successfully turned themselves round in respect of their achievements both in exams success and outcomes, and teachers have taken those achievements out across our entire provision in the city.

Ian Robertson (Glasgow City Council): I arrived in Glasgow in 2008 and there has since then been—not just because I arrived but because of the collective political and officer-led leadership—a step change in Glasgow's progress. I am a very practical person. When I arrived in Glasgow I saw quite a patchwork in respect of the quality of teaching, so one of the first leadership challenges was to say that mediocrity would not be tolerated and that people must be the best they could be. There was a big drive to make sure that that happened. The quality of leadership in our schools is also crucial. Again, that was quite mixed, but I would say that we now have some outstanding headteachers. Those two things—the quality of leadership and the quality of teaching in the classroom—are the things that will make the most profound difference.

Gordon MacDonald: I agree that the quality of leadership is important. The Wester Hailes education centre in my constituency turned around its exam results through attitude and quality leadership.

What impact has investment in the school estate had in terms of an increase in what pupils achieve and positive destinations? More than 600 schools have been rebuilt over the past eight years and the number of schools in bad condition has dropped from 134 in 2008 to 11 in 2015. Is it, on the other hand, purely leadership that has pushed up achievement?

Robert Nicol (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities): I can help with that first, then colleagues can jump in. On the school estate, it is quite hard to say that refurbishing or rebuilding X schools will give you Y return in attainment. The evidence on that is not there. Clearly, improved educational environment contributes to the outcomes that we are trying to achieve for children, but I would not say that it is the clinching factor. I am sure that colleagues would agree. A range of things are involved, including the quality of teaching practice and leadership in schools, and the performance system that the authorities and Education Scotland bring. There is a range of levers that are probably stronger than simply renovating the school estate.

The first question was about the link between how much is spent and attainment. Clearly, there is a link at some level, but it is not a direct link such that if a certain amount is spent, that gives a specific return. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development has picked up on evidence that suggests that the important thing is what the money is spent on, rather than the quantity overall. Councils need the flexibility to target resources where they feel they are necessary to get the best return, in respect of local outcomes.

Councillor Godzik: The school estate is one of many ingredients but, to be honest, and as Robert Nicol said, it is not the main one. Teachers and leadership are the main ingredients for raising attainment, but clearly improving the school estate through the kinds of facilities that we are delivering now, and the learning environment and opportunities that those bring for pupils to learn in different and innovative ways, are parts of the big picture.

Councillor Primrose: I also have a point about the school estate. We are talking about attainment, but there a number of schools in which achievement is not necessarily about getting five highers. In one of our state-of-the-art special-needs schools there is, for example, a hydrotherapy pool. Such facilities make a huge difference to young people who have severe learning difficulties and physical disabilities. They may not come out of school with five highers, but they come out with a better feeling of welfare.

I would also like to make the point, which Robert Nicol touched on, that our teaching profession has changed: now a far more focused view is taken of our pupils. The curriculum for excellence is about individuals, and our staff and headteachers know our individuals. Through curriculum for excellence those individuals have been targeted and encouraged, and they are going into subjects that they want to go into. We are moving from understanding success only as being about English, maths and so on, to embracing the wider context. For example, we have people in hospitality; we are opening a school that has a barista in it who is going to mixology—although I am not quite sure what that is.

We are now catering for individuals, which is a huge leap. It was a while ago, but when I was at the school that was not the case: we sat down and copied from the board. We now have teachers who are looking at how individuals learn, at learning styles and at how lessons are delivered, which is key to raising attainment.

10:15

John Pentland (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab): Over the past couple of months, we have seen a fierce reaction to the local government settlement, especially in relation to its likely impact on education. Perhaps much of the protest has come from Labour-controlled authorities. COSLA's submission accepts that the process of setting budgets has still to be finalised. It states:

"A cash cut will mean real pain for education ... The most vulnerable could be hardest hit ... There will be a human cost to Government's decision".

Can you give specific examples of how the change in total resource for councils might impact on school services?

Councillor Cunning: I will kick off, as I am from one of the Labour-controlled councils. Clearly, we have not settled our budget entirely and will not settle it until 10 March, but over a two-year period we are looking at savings of £133 million out of Glasgow City Council's entire budget. That is bound to have an effect on education, even though we clearly have a commitment to stick to the guidelines on teacher numbers and have a political commitment to maintaining services—in particular, as far as it is possible, social work and education. However, in the budget process we have to look at costs within education—for specific music and art provision or for staff support in respect of additional support for learning. Decisions have not been made on that—we may well find that there are fewer support staff in schools and that teachers will therefore be standing at the photocopier rather than in the classroom.

There is no way that a local authority can save £133 million over two years without that having some impact on education provision. There is clearly a commitment to try to ensure that it impacts as little as possible on the learning experience of individual pupils in our schools—primary, secondary or nursery—but that will be very difficult to achieve.

Councillor Robinson: I am an independent councillor who leads an independent council, but we have experienced exactly the same thing and have said many of the things that Labour councils have said. It will be extremely difficult.

I am a bit annoyed by having recently heard ministers talk about a 1 per cent cut to local government. I am sorry, but I do not know that council and I do not recognise that figure. I will put on the table figures from my council. We have this year seen the biggest percentage cut in local government expenditure, of 5.1 per cent cash. Our budget is just over £100 million. Our grant in the current financial year was £87 million and our grant in the next financial year will be £82 million.

We are getting about a £1 million share of health and social care integration money. You do the maths. I cannot get the figure anywhere near to the 1 per cent cut that has been cited; the amount is far more significant than that.

Shetland Islands Council has been at pains to protect education spending up to now, but I doubt very much that we can continue that into the future: something has to give. It is becoming extremely difficult to maintain the level of education expenditure when we are maintaining teacher numbers and when it is extremely difficult to close or amalgamate schools. Local government is being given a very difficult proposition and it is difficult to see, if there are future cuts, how those could be dealt with.

Councillor Godzik: I will gladly agree with those last two contributions. We set a budget very early this year. The Edinburgh council administration is a Scottish National Party-Labour coalition, but we set the budget with great difficulty.

Over the budget framework for 2016 to 2020, we expect to take £140 million out of the local government budget in Edinburgh. For 2016-17, we are looking at £11 million-worth of savings in the communities and families directorate. That covers education, children, social work and community learning and development—CLD.

To return to the contributions that colleagues have made, at every turn we are trying to protect direct education spending. We have given a commitment regarding the devolved school management budget, which goes directly to headteachers. Round the edges, there is a real impact. That might affect music tuition or pupil support: we are having to consider those things because of the scale of the budget reductions.

Councillor Primrose: I agree with my colleagues. We will have to consider what one might consider peripheral things. We are talking here about music teaching and school transport—which has, as you are aware, a statutory element to it.

One of the things that really concern me—I do not apologise for raising this again—is that, although our most vulnerable children require services from social work, educational psychologists, family workers, case workers and so on, those are the services that we will have to consider cutting, because we have to protect our core. You really need to take that into consideration. If we want our young children to achieve what they want to achieve and what they can achieve, they need to be safe and healthy, and they need to be able to cope emotionally with education.

Ian Robertson: Although the focus is on the difficulties that local authorities are currently having in setting the 2016-17 budget, we cannot ignore the compound effect over the past eight years. Glasgow figures will be broadly in line with those of other local authorities. Since 2008, the education service has had to reduce its budget by £70 million, which is about 13 per cent. As the low-hanging fruit—to use that well-worn phrase—has already gone, we are now cutting into core services.

Having been in this game for 30-odd years, my concern now is about some of the really good work that we have done around early intervention right across Scotland. That is where we were going to make the generational change and make a generational impact. Those are the services that will be vulnerable.

To tie this into teacher numbers and how we are funded, we must also consider the context of what is being supported nationally and local decisions about priorities. Glasgow has a very large Nurture Group Network programme. In its papers, the committee has all the context around how effective nurture programmes are. That is early intervention. Glasgow City Council spends about £4 million a year on its nurture programme, which has a massive impact on and makes improvements to children's outcomes, although it is not funded in the settlement. That is a local decision, but we will still be held to account for it in relation to our teacher numbers, which means that we are being held to account nationally for something that has not been funded nationally.

John Pentland: I thank the witnesses for giving us specific answers and for referring to peripheral services. Will the cutback in the budget have an impact on the attainment gap? In particular, we have to keep up teacher numbers, but will the budget reduction have an impact on the support that those teachers need?

Councillor Primrose: Yes. Teachers have a job to do and, if we cut back on classroom assistants and on other support that we have, teachers will have to deal more and more with that type of thing—they will have to deal with all the emotional baggage that children have. Teachers are not social workers or counsellors. As we cut such services, teachers will be under increasing strain in dealing with complex issues.

I do not even have things on my radar for some of the children I have come across, given their complexities, their backgrounds and their poverty. Indeed, if we are talking about poverty in our society, we need to make changes to address that, too.

Robert Nicol: It goes without saying that the budget reduction that local government faces will

not make closing the attainment gap any easier. As we have often said, when we look at the evidence, we find that it is not any one thing that closes the gap. One element is what happens in schools, which comes down to leadership in schools and the actions of individual teachers, but we cannot isolate what happens in schools from the wider services that councils and the voluntary sector deliver. All of that goes into tackling the attainment gap.

We cannot isolate elements such as teacher numbers. As we have often said, when we look at the variation in Scotland over the years, there is no evidence to suggest that changes in teacher numbers make a material difference to attainment. There is no single solution but, when councils are constrained in overall funding and when their flexibility to redirect funding locally is reduced, that must have an impact on what they can do locally to tackle things such as the attainment gap.

Councillor Godzik: Convener—

The Convener: Unless you have something radically different to say, we will move on, if you do not mind. Time is against us this morning. It is a big panel and having six people saying the same thing does not really get us anywhere.

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): I apologise if I sneeze or sniff all the way through this, but I have man flu at its worst.

I will carry on from some of the questions that John Pentland asked. The Scottish Government has had devastating cuts from the Westminster Government, but we will not debate that now, as we are dealing with the future and with education. As a former councillor, I believe that, even though we are living in challenging times and the local government settlement is difficult, it is fair. In my experience as a councillor, it has always been that way.

Where are the big ideas and solutions? I am a great believer in the idea that there is no such thing as a problem and that there are only solutions—I think that that is mainly because my mother brought me up on a diet of John Lennon records. Where are the big ideas and solutions from local government to make this challenging situation better? All that we have heard has been about the difficulties that you have with the budget, but where are the big ideas? I know that they are out there and that local government is always at the forefront when it comes to innovative ideas.

Councillor Cunning: There are lots of ideas in local authorities. Some have been developed in a local authority and others have been developed across the teaching profession and the education establishment. For example, Glasgow has the improvement challenge across the secondary estate and the nurture programme, which Ian

Robertson described. There is an absolute acceptance of the idea that, if we can get in earlier and start improving educational attainment, that will have an outcome 13 or 14 years down the line. For those who come from the most impoverished parts of our inner cities—Glasgow has more of them than anywhere else—the gap in educational attainment can be around a year at the age of five. We have to do something about that.

Loads of work in education is going on in my local authority area and in others, but that cannot be done or maintained without significant financial investment to free up time for teachers to do that imaginative and innovative work. The pressure that we have described on teachers' time as a result of cuts in other support areas will make that exceedingly difficult.

Ian Robertson: I agree—

The Convener: I am sorry, but I want to bring in Paul Godzik.

Ian Robertson: Sorry.

Councillor Godzik: There are ideas out there and there is fantastic practice in schools across Edinburgh and the country. However, to add to the point that has just been made, if flexibility is constrained through more Scottish Government directions on how we use our resources, the innovation and ideas will not come to fruition.

Councillor Primrose: We have some good things that show really good practice and sharing of practice. I will mention two extremely well thought out things that are working well. One is the developing the young workforce programme, which brings together the private sector and the third sector and provides a huge amount of expertise. That involves experts helping our young people through business.

Early years work is also critical, and I cite the work of the early years collaborative. It does not matter that I co-chair both those things; I think that they are both good examples of how we can work together and do something big.

10:30

Councillor Robinson: As others have said, the ideas are out there. My council started work on the Shetland learning partnership before the ink was even dry on Sir Ian Wood's report, and that excellent initiative has been hailed by Skills Development Scotland as one of the best that it has seen. We are bringing young folk on and getting them involved in work and vocational education at an early stage, while they are still at school. It is hugely helpful that the pilot scheme that we started last year was focused on social care and engineering, because the council and

local employers have difficulty in recruiting in those two areas.

The young folk involved will leave school with a vocational qualification as well as their academic qualifications, so they will be well suited to entering the labour market. All the young folk who are involved in the programme will also have a summer placement, so they will learn skills in a workplace that they can take into their careers.

The ideas are very much out there, but I echo what others have said: local government needs to be given the flexibility to bring such programmes forward.

Ian Robertson: I agree that challenge brings opportunity. Some ideas that might have been unthinkable 10 years ago are now on the table. We have mentioned the early years, but the senior phase is a massive area for quite radical reform. Some of that work is in train; some of it is yet to come.

The senior phase is an expensive component of education, and it can be an inefficient part of the curriculum. We have to sit down with secondary headteachers and tell them that, if their *raison d'être* is to optimise choice for young people, schools cannot be islands, which is how they have been working for years. They try to be all things to all people and, invariably, I get complaints from people who want to know why their daughter cannot study three sciences because the school cannot offer them.

The issue is about the city context as much as anything else, and far more radical models are coming forward. For example, we are looking at advanced higher hubs whereby youngsters can be moved about the city at any point during the day so that we can get a decent cohort of youngsters doing the same subject. We will also move some higher and advanced higher programmes, including minority higher, into twilight activity.

There will be soft benefits from that approach, because the young people need to start thinking about how they will mature and move on to the next stage of their learning. They need to be far more self-sufficient and resilient to deal with that movement. That is quite doable in a city context, where people are never more than a mile away from another local authority school.

I think that we will be forced down the route of greater use of technology as part of the learning experience, which has been around since the beginning of the Open University. If a school cannot get a physics teacher for love nor money, why can it not have a virtual one? We will be pushed down that route to address certain practical challenges that we face.

Nevertheless, some of the most radical reform that we will have seen in the education service in many a year will come in the senior phase.

George Adam: Now you are talking. I am loving the positivity from everybody here.

If we need flexibility, can we create that flexibility in local government? When I was a councillor, the holy grail was always joint services and working together. It was about not reinventing the wheel and restructuring local authorities, but working together more cleverly—I mean more cleverly, even if I cannot say it. *[Laughter.]* That is possibly the way forward for us all. I know that we have discussed this when some of you have been here before, but surely we can use back-of-house services to work together or find some other ways to work together in education to create the flexibility that you all need if you are to deliver the service that we all want.

Councillor Primrose: You are right in saying that we need greater flexibility. That goes back to the point that we need to bring our colleges in and share our education with them if we can.

One thing that I would say about shared services is that we are very lean. A lot of the cuts across councils have come in the management structures, so I am concerned about the workload on our managers. We have gone from having seven heads of service to one. If that was pan-Ayrshire, there would be a huge job, and I do not know that we would be any better off for it. What we currently do is very good. Do we need to change that?

The Convener: Surely we are not necessarily talking about one manager running pan-Ayrshire services. That was George Adam's point. There could be a single payroll system or a single finance department across Ayrshire, for example. Do you have that now?

Councillor Primrose: I do not think so. I am not a great expert on information and communication technology, and I would need to go back for information on that. Robert Nicol will come in on the matter.

Robert Nicol: It is clear that there is an appetite in councils to share services where they can be shared. We have given examples before of pan-Tayside authorities that have looked to share language learning services.

Councils have done a variety of things to produce efficiencies for a great number of years by integrating services within councils and working with health boards and the like. We are moving into the next phase of integrating services in health and social care. The idea that there is not integrated thinking in and across councils is completely wrong.

The issue comes down to the savings that shared services could deliver. We have not seen a convincing case made that the things that members are talking about could deliver the significant savings that they want. They certainly would not be helpful in meeting the challenges that we face. As we have said before, shared services are not a panacea for the challenges that local government faces.

It is interesting that the Scottish Government has not suggested in its responses anything like what has been brought up. If it thought that there was a case to be made for that, it would have made that case more strongly in responding.

The Convener: We will see what happens in the future, but many such questions finally have to be faced now. Nobody has suggested that shared services are a panacea, but discussions now have to take place about how we operate as efficiently as possible. That is a perfectly reasonable issue to raise.

Chic Brodie (South Scotland) (SNP): Good morning. With regard to the commentary about shared services, I should point out that that issue is particularly important in Ayrshire, in that a very successful tourism team across the three Ayrshires has just been split up into three separate units.

I am not saying that not a lot has been done, but I agree with George Adam about the can-do attitude to optimising services, such as ICT services, across neighbouring councils. We have also talked about leadership skills and how they are applied to deliver the best results. The Improvement Service's "National Benchmarking Overview Report 2014/15" shows individual variations in per pupil spend across the country. The differences in that spend have just been alluded to, but the report says:

"This variation provides opportunities to explore how some services are designed and delivered"—

and maybe shared—

"in ways that achieve greater efficiencies in expenditure."

Can you share with us the reasons for the variations between different local authorities and what action has been taken to address that? Glasgow's nurture programme has been talked about, and there are other successes, but can you tell us how, if a council has delivered a programme that has had a clear impact on attainment, those beneficial outcomes are shared across Scotland via the councils?

Ian Robertson: One vehicle that is used is the professional body. The Association of Directors of Education in Scotland has what it describes as a series of networks, including an early years network and a curriculum and teaching network.

That is an initial vehicle for local authorities to showcase and share some of the innovative and high-performing services that have been designed.

I think that, as a society, we are still a bit kailyaird. If we have a good idea, we quite like to keep it to ourselves. It is all about how we compare in a league table, and if we share our good ideas, somebody might catch up with us—

Chic Brodie: Does that not validate what we have just been discussing? If you have a good idea, you like to keep it in your own kailyaird.

Ian Robertson: Absolutely. We are getting better, but we need to be far more open. It is just human nature, is it not? We do not like to brag, even when we are doing something well.

Chic Brodie: I think that it goes beyond that and has more to do with turf wars and personalities. How do we encourage the sharing of knowledge across Scotland?

Councillor Godzik: To give credit where it is due, I think that the Scottish Government's attainment challenge will do just that. The range of innovative practice that has been introduced both in my city—Edinburgh—and right across Scotland will help us, because we can look at what works and promote it across the country.

I am not dismissing the concerns that have been expressed. However, although the investment is limited, it will help, and it will help us to share good practice.

Councillor Robinson: The question about variations in spend is a good one. However, my local authority has the highest costs per pupil in Scotland, and there is little that we can do about that. Part of the reason is transport costs. Some of our children have to be brought to school by aircraft; they are flown to the secondary school and put up in accommodation during the week.

Another issue is the number of schools that we have—31, six of which are secondary schools. The Western Isles has a landmass that is twice the size of Shetland's, and it has—I think—24 schools, three of which are secondary schools. Our costs can be seen right there. Pupil teacher ratios have a significant impact on costs, as do the number of schools.

Councillor Godzik: Audit Scotland's 2014 report on education included a useful analysis of urban and rural authorities, and it is obvious that rural authorities have distinct challenges that we in Edinburgh do not have to meet.

When we compare the cost per pupil and attainment, we in Edinburgh are round about the bottom of the league table for cost per pupil, but our outcomes are good. Our attainment is

continually rising, and has been over the past number of years.

Chic Brodie: I want to return briefly to leadership skills. I know of a school in Ayr whose headmaster shows inordinate leadership skills, and that is reflected in the pupils' attainment. How do we find those who have the skills to lead schools, share knowledge and develop the ICT capabilities and virtual classrooms that Ian Robertson has rightly mentioned? After all, we cannot, in my view, train people to be leaders.

Councillor Cunning: I trained as a teacher, but that was many years ago and I was not a teacher for very long. That said, I believe that we can train people and support leadership skills, and the training centres in Glasgow, Edinburgh and Aberdeen can contribute to that. Beyond that, work is being done through the professional organisations, the trade unions and so on, and that involves the sharing of experience, skills and individuals' ideas.

I will not name them, but there are schools in Glasgow where individual headteachers have clearly made a significant difference. They have turned those schools around, and they have been used as an exemplar for senior staff in other schools. That is happening across the board.

10:45

This is not simply about local authorities; the college sector and teacher training have something to do with it. We can build on individuals' examples. What we will never be able to do is replicate time after time the outstanding individual who from time to time comes along in every local authority and about whom you would say, "That person has a certain something." We might not be able to train people to replicate their example, but we can train people in some of the leadership skills and approaches, which are important.

Chic Brodie: I appreciate that and I understand that a lot of management skills training goes on, but I am talking about people with an innovative and strategic outlook.

The Convener: Ian Robertson wants to make a comment.

Ian Robertson: It is a general comment, convener. The Scottish Government has quite rightly seen school leadership as a key priority, which is why we will work with the Scottish College for Educational Leadership on looking at delivering leaders for the future. Such an approach has huge potential.

In parallel with that, Glasgow has what is called its aspiring heads programme, which is accessible to principal teachers and upwards. People are

recruited on to the programme by interview and assessment, and they are invested in over a three-year period. Part of that involves not textbook learning but being mentored by people who are already good headteachers.

I would struggle to determine the exact formula for good leadership, given that it comes in so many different forms. Two high-performing schools can have different types of leadership and, even though the personalities can be quite different, the leadership can be equally successful.

The evaluation that is coming back tells us that for aspiring headteachers who are currently principal teachers or deputies, formal linkage with a headteacher mentor has paid the biggest dividends. Sometimes leadership is not about vision but about practical day-to-day things such as dealing with crises or parental concerns. Moreover, how someone engages with the community can be important; indeed, the most effective schools are those that look out towards their community.

Councillor Primrose: A lot of what I was going to say has already been covered, but I would add one thing that might give a broader context to the discussion. If we want to bring good leaders through the system, we need to start at an early age. Things such as the Duke of Edinburgh award and the leadership qualifications that young people can get in secondary schools do not just help them but at some point filter through into the system.

The point that I was going to make about SCEL has already been made.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): The Scottish attainment challenge, which Paul Godzik mentioned, clearly has much to commend it, but a concern has been expressed about it. Against the backdrop of the aim of completely closing the attainment gap, the exclusion of 11 local authorities, including Gary Robinson's and mine, makes it difficult to understand how, without the resource, we will be able to address the attainment challenges that exist in Shetland, Orkney and local authorities across the country. How do witnesses see that being addressed? I do not expect you to answer for the Government, but the partial set-up for delivering the outcome of completely closing the attainment gap seems to be something of an anomaly.

Councillor Godzik: I have a view on that. I know that COSLA has expressed concerns about how the attainment challenge is being rolled out, but I am quite excited about the plans that are coming forward for Edinburgh, as they will have a benefit. With that, I will hand over to Robert Nicol, given COSLA's concerns about how the programme is being rolled out across the country.

Robert Nicol: We have already made a few points about the attainment challenge. At one level, any money is welcome, but there are a couple of issues, one of which is the scale of the challenge. Although the £100 million over five years is not to be sniffed at, it is small when you compare it to what is spent locally on education.

It is very much a schools-based programme. We have been talking a lot about the other services that go into improvement, but not all of them happen in schools, and we are concerned that if resources are directed specifically at a number of local authorities and at a number of schools the wider services that could also do with investment will be neglected.

We have also raised concerns about how the programme came about, specifically the fact that it had no local government involvement at all. That came as something of a surprise, given that it directly concerns local government. You can hear from others how the money is going to be spent; indeed, I suspect that Glasgow will want to say something about that as well.

Councillor Godzik: Across Edinburgh's primary schools, we devote about £3 million a year to what we call positive action funding, which tackles poverty and inequality in our schools. The Scottish attainment challenge provides around £300,000. That gives you an idea of the scale and the context of what we are talking about. That is not to say that the funding that has been provided will not be put to good use—it will be, and it will undoubtedly help children in those situations—but it is not a huge amount of funding.

Councillor Robinson: The point that has been made is a good one. My concern is that, by not consistently funding all 32 local authorities, we might close the attainment gap but not in a positive way; in other words, we could close the gap by doing less well. My fear is that, if our funding is consistently cut, that is what will happen. Although my local authority has experienced real-terms funding reductions of more than 25 per cent since 2010, we have managed to increase the percentage of our remaining budget that we spend on education. We are trying, but the situation is getting increasingly more difficult, and my fear is that our high levels of attainment will come down.

Liam McArthur: I want to take you back to the agreement about pupil teacher ratios, which came up in the context of the pressures that are coming down the track around the budget reductions for next year and, presumably, subsequent years. George Adam invited a can-do, solutions-oriented approach to the issue. Presumably, you would argue that one of the ways of increasing the likelihood of that would involve greater flexibility around the way in which teacher numbers and

pupil teacher ratios are managed. If that is the case, how do you envisage that working?

Ian Robertson: Everybody thinks that teachers are the predominant part of the education service but, in fact, they represent only about 50 per cent of the workforce in our core education service from early years to additional support for learning. It is not only teachers who make a difference. If you were to ask headteachers whether they would want simply to resolutely protect teacher numbers at all costs, I suggest that the vast majority would say no and that they would say that they need a blended workforce.

In the context of devolved school management, because our hands are tied in terms of protecting teacher numbers, some headteachers are coming up with really weird posts, such as principal teachers of employability and skills, because that involves aligning the school with the DYW agenda. However, they might be better employing someone with a completely different background, such as a background with Skills Development Scotland, to fill that role. To be crass about it, that would not only be cheaper than employing a teacher, but it could deliver a better outcome and have more of an impact.

Teachers will be absolutely critical to closing the attainment gap, but there needs to be a focus on that blended workforce. A lot of headteachers in primary schools will tell you that they need more additional support for learning workers who can work directly with young people on the interventions that need to be made, because that will have a better impact than resolutely protecting teacher numbers.

Liam McArthur: In an earlier session with some of your colleagues, we were told that the agreement is resulting in a reduction in the numbers of classroom assistants and additional support for learning assistants. They appeared to be talking about a situation that was already in play rather than one that was likely to emerge with the impending cuts. Can you provide any detail about what the impact has been with regard to classroom assistants and additional support for learning assistants?

Robert Nicol: The Improvement Service benchmarking report, which draws on Government statistics, says that, since 2010, there has been a reduction in support staff of 3.2 per cent in primary schools and 8.4 per cent in secondary schools, including a 2.1 per cent reduction in additional support needs staff. It goes on to say that there has been a rise in the number of classroom assistants. There will be reasons why those statistics are in there, but it is information that is already in the public domain.

Liam McArthur: Can you talk us through the implications in relation to sanctions around teacher numbers? One concern that we have heard is that the failure to hit the teacher numbers might be the result not of a lack of willingness or, indeed, a lack of attempts to recruit teachers, but simply of an inability to recruit in specific subjects or across the piece. It would be helpful to get a better understanding of the implications for specific local authorities in that respect.

Ian Robertson: For Glasgow, it is quite frustrating because there is a count on a census day but we might get a different number the day after. We were short by 45 teachers. The evidence base could show that we were resolutely trying to overrecruit, because of the attainment fund. We were trying to be ahead of the game by recruiting additional teachers. However, we were short by 45 on the census day, which resulted in a £900,000 penalty that we have had to fund from this year's budget. There have been consequences from our having to do that.

From our point of view, the difficulty has just been an inability to recruit teachers at the time. We cannot get science, technology, engineering and mathematics—STEM—teachers for love nor money. We are also struggling in the denominational sector in primary schools. However, if we had been asked two weeks on from the September census how many teachers we had, we could have shown that we were up by another 35 by that point.

The census date in September is very difficult for all local authorities because, although we think that we have our schools fully staffed at the end of June, there is a churn over the summer as staff get promoted posts, take offers from other authorities or whatever. At the beginning of August, we therefore have only two or three weeks in which to try to increase our teacher numbers.

Liam McArthur: What the point-in-time assessment captures does not show that you have moved away from the required numbers or the ratio. The implications of falling on the wrong side of the line are significant, but a point-in-time assessment is too blunt an instrument. You need something that captures the situation over the course of a year.

Ian Robertson: I can understand the commitment to maintain teacher numbers, but the raw tool of a census day is the wrong tool. We should be looking at what local authorities are doing over the year. We had a large financial penalty this year, but the agreement for 2016-17 and beyond means that the financial penalties could be quite horrendous.

Councillor Godzik: We are talking about an arbitrary figure on a given day, which is not the

way to deliver the outcomes that we all want to see.

The Convener: In what way are the figures arbitrary?

Councillor Godzik: I do not know how the Scottish Government chose the ratio figure. I do not know whether there is any research basis that states that that is the optimum number of staff to deliver the best education for children in Scotland.

Councillor Robinson: Our ratio is 10:1. Are we really going to be penalised if Scotland does not make the 13.6:1 target overall? I would take serious issue with the Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Constitution and Economy if he came back to me and said that he was going to penalise my council for maintaining its ratio of 10:1. That reflects the point about arbitrariness.

Councillor Cunning: There are two problems, the first of which is that there is no consensus that the pupil teacher ratios have any impact on educational attainment. There are arguments and discussions over that, and different educational experts take different positions.

Secondly, there is the arbitrary date. Whatever our opinion of pupil teacher ratios, we could improve what the Scottish Government is attempting to do by finding some way of measuring over a greater period of time. We could take into account the year average rather than the figure on a fixed date or use another method that took into account, as Ian Robertson suggested, the fact that on census day we might be 45 short but three weeks later we could be plus two. That is not accounted for, but there could be some way of solving that problem. However, that does not address the argument that would be made by many local authorities that pupil teacher ratios should take account of far wider issues and, in that respect, are also arbitrary.

The Convener: We need to move on. We have time for two quick supplementary questions—one from Gordon MacDonald and one from Liz Smith.

11:00

Gordon MacDonald: I want to ask about the pupil teacher ratio. Ian Robertson said that Glasgow was short by 45 teachers, and I think that North Lanarkshire was short by 58 teachers. However, throughout Scotland, the number of full-time teachers was down by three between 2014 and 2015. The number of primary school pupils is projected to increase by 30,000 between 2011 and 2016. There has been a dip in the number of secondary school pupils, but that is expected to rise because of the primary school pupils coming

through. What responsibility do councils have for workforce planning?

Ian Robertson: Glasgow mirrors that example. It had 40 years of pupil decline but, in the past five or six years, the primary roll has been growing. It has increased by 3,000 over the past four years and, over the next decade, it will increase by between 13 and 18 per cent. Of course, that will flow through into secondary rolls, which are still dropping. At the moment we need more primary school teachers but fewer secondary school teachers.

The situation is difficult. If we think about how the budget is settled, it is a cash grant. In my view, it does not acknowledge demographic change, so councils have difficult decisions to make. Next year, I will need the money for 50 extra teachers just to stand still; that is not to improve the service but just to maintain current class sizes and pupil teacher ratios. It is a difficult circle to square given the type of finances that we are dealing with at the moment. That is fairly symptomatic of the situation throughout Scotland, with respect to the demographics that we are facing.

Councillor Primrose: I take Mr MacDonald's point. We have some chronic workforce issues—you know that. We struggle to get denominational teachers and there are shortages in STEM subjects such as maths. Home economics teachers are as rare as hen's teeth. I cannot necessarily recruit the teachers I need within my local authority, so we need to stop and look at what we are getting in nationally. Even the number of probationary teachers who are going into English and maths is falling. I do not think that the solution to workforce planning in future will necessarily be local. We need to have a joined-up approach to ensure that the people who we are getting through our colleges and universities are what we need.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): On that point and in relation to what Mr Robertson said, the General Teaching Council for Scotland has acknowledged that there are problems, just as you have identified. What can we do to remove some of the inflexibility in the workforce so that we can have more teachers in the correct subjects?

Robert Nicol: The question is less about flexibility and more about getting prospective teachers through the system. Workforce planning is difficult. You have to anticipate what you need several years in advance, which is not easy. No one who is involved in national workforce planning on anything would say that it is perfect.

Like ADES, we are working with the Government on how we can factor in the vacancies that are already in the system earlier in the evaluation of workforce planning so that it is

based on need rather than a more general calculation. Clearly, we will need more teachers through the system. On the issue of whether that is generated by having more flexibility, the GTC might argue that that would dilute the teaching qualification. There are arguments there that you would have to take on board. It is more about whether we have the right system in place. Are we encouraging people to become teachers? Can authorities recruit teachers in time for the pupil teacher census? Those are the issues that we need to look at, rather than flexibility.

Councillor Robinson: I welcomed the recent announcement that North Sea oil workers could be retrained as teachers. That is inspired, for the simple reason that those people, who are losing jobs at the moment, probably bring with them exactly the kind of skills that we are looking for in schools, in the STEM subjects. If that project can bear fruit, that will be positive and will bode well for our ability to recruit to posts that have been difficult to recruit to.

The Convener: If Ian Robertson wants to speak, he will have to be very brief.

Ian Robertson: I will pass, then.

The Convener: I am looking at the time, so thank you for that. Mark Griffin is next.

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): I have a few questions about efforts to tackle the attainment gap. Do members of the panel think that the efforts of local and national Government should be targeted at a particular stage in a pupil's education or at a particular subject area, whether that be literacy, numeracy or something more detailed?

The Convener: It would appear that none of the witnesses wants to comment, Mark.

Robert Nicol: We are not educationists, so it is hard to answer that in a detailed way. What I would say is that you really need to look at the whole child and what each child needs, and to make a professional judgment as to what would help that young person do better in the areas where they may be weaker. That might not necessarily be in a subject area; it might be more to do with skills and being ready to learn if they are coming from a chaotic background.

If you are asking where the evidence points and where you would get the biggest return for your investment, it has to be in the early years. There are a number of studies looking at the investment that the public sector puts into early education, which has a sustained return not just in terms of attainment but with wider outcomes around health and wellbeing. It is a question of looking at the whole child and ensuring that professional

judgment is brought to bear on what that individual needs.

Councillor Godzik: We have a dialogue with the Scottish Government about what the attainment gap actually is. It is not defined in only one way, and everybody will have a different understanding of what it is and how we fix it. I agree with Robert Nicol that the biggest gains can be made in the early years, and that is where our focus needs to be.

Councillor Primrose: We are talking about children, and we cannot remove a child from the circumstances that he or she is in. When it comes to health and wellbeing and the cross-cutting themes of literacy and numeracy, if a child is coming in from an innumerate and illiterate background the family have to be tackled as well. We need to maintain services to ensure that children are benefiting from health and wellbeing through the literacy and numeracy cross-cutting themes.

Robert Nicol: The OECD report looked at the situation in Scotland and showed that there are multiple gaps. We cannot focus only on attainment and neglect the fact that there is a wider set of outcomes around each individual child that might need to be improved. It is hard to improve attainment if someone is not able to access learning in the same way as their peers.

That brings us back to the issue of integrated services and getting it right for every child. We have talked about that for a reason, because we must ensure that the services for individual children are the right ones to allow them to continue to develop as individuals and not just in terms of attainment.

Mark Griffin: The Parliament recently passed the Education (Scotland) Bill, which sets challenges for local government, particularly on reducing the attainment gap. Is it possible for local government to meet the targets that it has been set? Will local government be able to reduce the attainment gap, given the cuts in funding that are coming down the line? Is it feasible to ask local government to deliver that at the same time as cutting budgets?

Councillor Robinson: Again, it comes back to flexibility. It could be done, but local government needs more flexibility if it is to deliver. It is challenging but possible. I make a plea for more flexibility in order to deliver.

Councillor Cunning: It is possible but less likely given the financial circumstances. Everybody is committed to trying to achieve it but, in the circumstances, it may prove to be far more difficult, certainly within the timescale.

Councillor Godzik: The timescale is the thing. With a lot of the actions that we are taking in the early years, we will not see the results for many years to come. It is very much a long-term project. We need a joint commitment on the overall aims from all parties across the political divide. As my colleagues have said, it will be extremely difficult to reduce the attainment gap given the current financial circumstances.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): I am interested in the variation in attainment among schools and local authorities. Local authority benchmarking shows that average attainment varies between local authorities and schools and that that is not all due to deprivation levels. In fact, deprivation levels seem to account only for approximately 35 to 40 per cent of the gap. We have a high level of variation between councils. Why are some schools and local authorities making better progress than others? Why does that variation exist?

Ian Robertson: To come back to the fundamentals, it is about the quality of leadership and of what goes on in classrooms. Our role as local authorities is to ensure that we achieve high performance. We need to ensure that schools that are not performing as well as they should be, by any measure, are challenged to improve, and we need to ensure that, if they do not, changes are made. We need to be clear about that. My test is always whether, as a parent, I would want a certain teacher educating my child; if not, they should not be there.

Councillor Primrose: So much of the issue comes down to what goes on in the classroom. A good friend of mine says, "If it's not happening in the classroom, it's not working." That goes back to the quality of teaching and learning, which has to be as high as it can be. All the things that are happening, such as the GTCS professional update and HGIOS4—the fourth edition of "How good is our school?"—will make a difference on that.

Councillor Godzik: I will reverse the point: to get more equality, there needs to be challenge and support in each local authority. As education authorities, we need to provide support to schools, and Education Scotland also needs to provide support. An Audit Scotland report in 2014 said that, at that point, the number of quality improvement officers employed in local authorities had gone down by 22 per cent. The budgets that are available to local authorities are directly affecting the support that we can provide to schools to even out the performance, which as you rightly identify is uneven.

Colin Beattie: I hear what you are saying about leadership and the quality of teaching in classrooms, but to what extent is the situation being analysed? Are we confident that that is the

reason for the balance of the variation? Do we have anything that would underpin that, or is it just anecdotal?

Ian Robertson: Obviously, when you are at the bottom of the league tables, you look at all the ways to present data to make you look better. With some schools that are perceived at face value to be very high performing schools in quite affluent areas, if we use average tariff scores and compare them with schools in less affluent areas, the scores are closer.

There is a question that is asked all the time: what added value is a school is offering? Sometimes, the data can be used to have a good conversation with a headteacher to say that their school appears to be performing well but it is not performing as well as it could or should be relative to the demographic. We have to use different measures, so that we can have conversations and challenge people by saying, "You seem to be doing very well, but you could be doing better."

Councillor Godzik: There is also the infrastructure of the insight tool.

Ian Robertson: Absolutely. Insight as a tool that we all now use is providing much richer data than we have ever had before, which allows us to get beyond the blunt instrument of exam results success.

11:15

Colin Beattie: Let us go back to the issue of variation. From the outside, there does not seem to be a pattern. There are councils with high levels of overall deprivation that are performing above average; in councils with low levels of overall deprivation, pupils from deprived backgrounds are performing above average. We are not really being given any data to work on. There is no consistency.

Councillor Robinson: It partly goes back to the Scottish index of multiple deprivation data, which is at the bottom of all this. I come from a rural authority, and I find SIMD data worse than useless for determining poverty. It may be fine—or maybe not, in Ian Robertson's case—in Glasgow, where we can identify a large area that suffers from deprivation, but in rural areas some of the poorest and most deprived people stay next door to some of the wealthiest people. In rural areas, it is absolutely impossible to use SIMD data to identify areas of deprivation. It is a question of getting the right data in the first place.

The Convener: I am sorry to interrupt, but is that not the point that Colin Beattie just made? We have pupils in areas that are relatively well off who would fall into the category of most deprived but who are doing better than average—better than

pupils like themselves in other authorities. Why is that?

Councillor Cunning: It is because of factors that have already been described. Glasgow is large enough to have a fair spread of attainment among the various schools, whether primary or secondary, and it is not enough to look at raw statistical analysis. For example, in Govanhill we have a hugely significant Roma community, which has a knock-on effect on the cost and process of delivering education in two or three local primary schools, but those figures never come into the SIMD—they are just not taken account of. We need to know such additional things.

It is not only in education that that happens. Until recently, I was responsible for social work in Glasgow City Council and we used all sorts of comparators, as we always do in comparing between local authorities. For example, the number of elderly people in residential care is very high in Glasgow, as it is, I think, in Shetland, but there is no direct connection with poverty. There are other issues going on, which are not always easily determined.

Councillor Robinson: The other issue is our definition of poverty. Work that Highlands and Islands Enterprise recently did on the minimum income standard looked at the basic cost of living across the Highlands and Islands. It suggested that, on the island of Unst in Shetland, the basic cost of living could be 40 per cent higher than the cost of living in the central belt. Given that the thresholds for benefits are the same in Shetland as they are in Glasgow and the levels of benefits at the same, we can start to see why there is such a huge disparity. Somebody in Baltasound who needs 40 per cent more to maintain the same standard of living is going to be deprived before someone in Glasgow, but they are not going to be picked up because they are on an island that has barely 250 people on it.

Colin Beattie: The frustration is possibly that some councils are getting it right, on average, in their areas but we do not have enough data to understand and transfer that success to other areas—it is just not there.

Robert Nicol: To respond honestly, that is indeed the case. I know the people and there is no one in a local authority who is not working their hardest to get a result. The information is in part being put into the public domain to beg the questions that you are asking—that is a perfectly legitimate thing to do.

Even though we have been reasonably sceptical about elements of the national improvement framework, when it is brought to bear it will provide more information about how councils are able to tackle the issues that we are discussing. That is all

fine but, clearly, we will then need to decide what to do with the information.

As we have discussed before, the capacity must be in the councils for them to be able to tackle the issues. The OECD picked up that issue, too. It looked at the variation among councils, and it said that capacity is needed at the middle level in the system to be able to tackle attainment, to have the ability to look at the areas that need to be looked at, and to invest the time and effort in order to do that.

There is no simple solution. As I have said, having such information is in part to allow the questions to be asked and for the policy then to be developed to tackle the issues.

The Convener: I am not sure that I agree with Colin Beattie. I think that we have quite a lot of data, even down to the level of individual schools. Sorry, Ian—did you want to come in?

Ian Robertson: I wanted to explain the insight tool, although I am a bit rusty in terms of my involvement in it.

Right across Scotland, each secondary school, based on its socioeconomic circumstances, is linked with four or five comparator schools. The comparison is about how they are performing relative to schools with similar characteristics across the country. The headteachers work co-operatively to understand why, for example, one school's physics results are so good compared with those at another school. They get into granular level conversations about what makes an impact.

This keeps coming back to the quality of what is going on in the classroom. Sometimes, it is about teaching methodologies and so on, but quality is the bottom line.

The issue is about how we use the data and the difficulty in aggregating it up. At a localised level, schools and headteachers are far more aware of how they are performing relative to their peers. That may not be a school within their locality—a Glasgow school may be being compared with a school in Aberdeenshire—but it is good and healthy.

The Convener: It is. That was the point that I was trying to get to—that we have some of the information. I am not trying to be critical, because everyone is working hard—Robert Nicol made a good point in that regard—but we must recognise that there is still a variation, and we must work to understand it and then, we hope, eliminate it.

That is a good point to end on. I know that we could have got through an awful lot more, but time is against us. I thank the witnesses once again for coming along this morning and giving their time to the committee.

11:22

Meeting suspended.

11:30

On resuming—

The Convener: Our next item is to take evidence on school spending and the educational attainment gap from the Scottish Government. I welcome Angela Constance, Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, and her supporting officials. I invite the cabinet secretary to make some opening remarks.

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Angela Constance): Thank you, convener, and good morning to the committee. I very much welcome this opportunity to join the committee again to discuss the Government's on-going work to address the attainment gap in our schools. The Government has been absolutely clear about the priority that we place on education, which is at the heart of our programme for government, with our commitment to drive up attainment in all schools and to close the attainment gap so as to ensure that children in all parts of Scotland, whether in our least affluent or most affluent areas, have a fair chance to succeed.

We are working closely with all our key delivery partners to raise standards everywhere, and to do so most quickly in the areas where that is most needed. That is why we have established the attainment Scotland fund, which provides £100 million of targeted support to schools and local authorities in the most deprived areas. That is in addition to the package of universal support that is in place to support schools and authorities across the country, and it includes the recruitment of attainment advisers to work with schools and our raising attainment for all programme, which has encouraged more than 200 schools across the country to try out and share ideas.

This is a significant programme of work, which is underpinned by the national improvement framework for Scottish education. It will provide clear and consistent information for parents, teachers and, of course, local and national Government about performance in education—both the progress of individual young people and the performance of the system as a whole.

The changes that we are making through our investment are having an impact, and we are making good progress. The OECD study of Scottish education, which was published just before Christmas, concluded that academic achievement in our schools is “above international averages”, that attainment is improving, that “Scottish schools are inclusive” and that our young people have “positive attitudes towards school.”

As we know, young people in Scotland gained a record number of passes at higher and advanced higher last summer. School leaver destinations are now the best on record.

Much of our funding for education is directed through our funding package for local government. Within the local government settlement, education is a priority, and we remain committed to teacher numbers. The settlement includes £88 million specifically to support delivery of the commitment to maintain the pupil teacher ratio and to provide a place on the teacher induction scheme to every probationary teacher who needs one.

Teacher quality is the most important in-school factor in a child's attainment. I do not believe that cutting the number of teachers will improve attainment or close the equity gap.

We are investing in our schools. We have rebuilt or refurbished 607 schools. As a result of that, the number of pupils in poor or bad-condition schools has more than halved since 2007. We are continuing our major investment in Scotland's school estate through the £1.8 billion Scotland's schools for the future programme, under which national Government and local government will work in partnership to deliver more than 100 new or refurbished schools. That is expected to benefit 15,000 pupils.

Closing the attainment gap is a fundamental part of the on-going work to improve Scottish education and to ensure excellence and equity across Scotland. That is why we will continue to invest in our schools and our teachers and, most important, in our children and young people.

The Convener: Thank you. We move straight to questions.

George Adam: Good morning, cabinet secretary. Representatives of local authorities gave evidence just before you. It is interesting to hear you say that you do not believe that cutting teacher numbers would help to bridge the attainment gap, because one of the things that the representatives of local authorities kept saying was that they felt that they were losing a bit of flexibility and that teacher numbers were part of that problem. What would be your counter-argument to that? They said that the Government's position on teacher numbers and some of its other policies have made it more difficult for local authorities to be as flexible.

Angela Constance: I think that we all recognise—I know that members across the parliamentary chamber do and I hope that our partners in local Government do too—that one of the most important factors in raising attainment is the quality of teaching. That is why the Government has invested heavily in leadership and the quality of teaching in Scotland. To put it

simply, I fail to see how reducing the number of high-quality teachers in our schools would help us at a time when we are galvanising efforts the length and breadth of Scotland to tackle the attainment gap and to address the issue of equity. Good-quality teachers are imperative and I fail to see how reducing the number of good-quality teachers in an education system would benefit anyone.

George Adam: It is interesting that, when I asked the witnesses where the innovation and the new ideas are in local government for education delivery, they became very positive and started talking about work that they are doing in their own authorities, but what came across was that they tend to be like students who cover up their exam papers. In effect, local authorities say, "It's my ball," and do not share good practice and good schemes. I think that one of the witnesses from Glasgow said, "Yes, sometimes you hold on to good stuff that is working well in your area, because you want to be the innovator." Surely, in these challenging times, local authorities should be sharing ideas about making things better so that they can deliver across Scotland.

Angela Constance: It is absolutely clear that collaboration has to be front and centre of curriculum for excellence. Collaboration has to be at the heart of our efforts to close the attainment gap and it is certainly at the heart of our thinking on how we are progressing with the Scottish attainment challenge, because through the efforts of Education Scotland and the national improvement hub we want to spread the knowledge and learning that we gain from the work that we are doing on the attainment challenge.

I visit schools regularly and it is clear to me that we have good schools and that they are doing great things. In that regard, our colleagues in local government are absolutely correct. Although we have more collaboration between schools, clusters and peer-to-peer collaboration than we have ever had before, it is clear that we need to continue in that vein. Much of our attraction to the London challenge, for example, was because of the concept of ownership, which meant that you were not just responsible for the children in front of you and that, collectively, everyone in the system, including teachers, had a responsibility to raise attainment across London. We want everyone in Scotland—whether they are a classroom teacher or have another role in the education system—to galvanise their efforts to share good practice and drive improvement across Scotland and to recognise that we all have a responsibility to do that.

George Adam: The goal is to close the attainment gap. Looking to the future, what

measures will the Scottish Government and Education Scotland take if the gaps in some local authority areas persist while others are doing well? Will Education Scotland find local authorities that are exemplars and try to work something out with them? How will it deal with that situation?

Angela Constance: It is important that the Scottish Government and Education Scotland pull together with our partners in local government and that we work together to overcome our common challenges and the barriers or obstacles.

On specific measures, both Scottish ministers and local authorities have duties to report annually on how we are overcoming the equity gap. Under the Education (Scotland) Bill, we all have duties in relation to inequalities of outcome, and the reporting responsibilities on both Scottish ministers and councils will help with accountability and transparency. The onus will be on local and national Government to report in a way that not only describes what they are doing but evaluates it, explaining what works and identifying future challenges.

With the attainment Scotland fund, our approach is quite different from other initiatives. We have not just calculated a share of funds to go to a particular school or local authority. The funding is tied in with bespoke improvement plans that are evidence led. We will also have opportunities to implement the recommendations in the OECD report in partnership with local government, and we will move forward with local government on the national improvement framework.

There are lots of opportunities for mutual support, mutual challenge and shining a light on both what is working and where we need to redouble our efforts.

Liam McArthur: Good morning, cabinet secretary. You started to describe the central importance of the quality of teaching, and that very much reflected what we heard from the first panel this morning, as that theme and the importance of leadership came up time and again. However, you effortlessly went on to describe the need to maintain the quantity of teachers. I think that the conflation of those two things is rather disingenuous.

We heard earlier this morning that the establishment of the pupil teacher ratio has struck many people in local government as arbitrary and that it is not necessarily backed by evidence. The arbitrary nature of that, linked with the arbitrary nature of a point-in-time census calculation of whether a local authority has hit the teacher number targets, is causing problems. As George Adam said, there is a lack of flexibility. In difficult times, that is even more problematic and it is putting more stress on, for example, classroom

assistants, additional support for learning assistants and others who provide vital support for quality teaching—which, as you rightly say, is important.

There is a concern that the issues of quality and quantity are being merged when, actually, they are distinct propositions. In tight budget circumstances with a lack of flexibility, quality needs to be maintained, but there are questions about the arbitrary quantum that the Government has arrived at.

Angela Constance: I understand the theoretical point that Mr McArthur is trying to make in order to tease out and explore matters fully but, ultimately, quality and quantity are related. We all agree that leadership is important at all levels of education, including among classroom teachers, and that the quality of teachers and other professionals is a linchpin. It is the biggest factor in a child's in-school experience. I fail to see how standing back and allowing those numbers to fall would help us in our collective efforts.

11:45

Liam McArthur: The argument is that there is blended learning. By their own admission, teachers are reliant on classroom assistants and the wider support structure that they get within a school. The quality of the learning and teaching is not dependent on the number of teachers alone. Presumably, below a certain point the whole thing becomes unmanageable, but the quantity that has been arrived at for the pupil teacher ratios seems arbitrary to local authorities. It does not allow them to reflect local circumstances in particular areas or schools. At the current time a far better proposition would be to allow greater flexibility and to focus on the quality of teaching and the learning experience, rather than on arbitrary numbers of teachers or pupil teacher ratios.

Angela Constance: I will come to the point about the pupil teacher ratio but, before I do, I will make the point that the Government has a lead responsibility in workforce planning and ensuring that there are enough teachers in the system. We work closely with our partners in their attempts to ensure that we have the right number of teachers in the right places. I am very resistant to the notion that the quantity of teachers is separate from the issue of quality—it has to be about both.

This year, we have agreed with local government to have a national agreement on the pupil teacher ratio. For a whole host of reasons, that is preferable to having individual agreements with local authorities, which would indeed limit the flexibility that they have. The point about the census is that there has to be a way of counting teachers in the system. The school census day is

a day in September every year, as it has been since 2003. If people want to come forward with alternative suggestions about how we count the number of teachers in our system at any given time, we are always open to that dialogue.

Liam McArthur: The idea was put forward by the gentleman from Glasgow City Council, that moving away from a single-point-in-time census day and looking at the picture over the course of a school year, or even over a school term, might provide less of an arbitrary picture. He said that Glasgow City Council was 45 teachers short on census day but, over the course of the term, it was probably at the required numbers. Nevertheless, it was fined £900,000. Against the backdrop of cuts that had already been borne by education services in local authorities, that was the last thing that it needed. It was unlikely to allow the council to deliver across a range of different areas in education and children's services. It seems to me that a very blunt instrument is being used to determine whether the Government's objective is being achieved successfully.

Angela Constance: It is widely recognised that the pupil teacher ratio is a meaningful measurement. In making your point about an alternative to a census exercise, you described something that sounded to me on first hearing to be quite unwieldy. I am not convinced that local government information systems could cope with what you described—having a system that counted the number of professionals in the system at various points in time over a term. I would not be at all confident about that.

Liz Smith: Could you tell us what the evidence base was for your decision that the pupil teacher ratio was the best way of making an agreement with councils to deliver better quality of input?

Angela Constance: The pupil teacher ratio is based on where we are at just now. We have arrived at that position for a host of historical reasons. The work of McKinsey in 2007 focused on the importance of the quality of teaching. We know that we have quality teachers in our system and we have invested heavily in that with regard to initial teacher education, probationary years, the support that probationary teachers get, the registration process and, thereafter, the professional update. If we do not protect the pupil teacher ratio nationally, what would that mean for our system? It would mean that we would be liable to reduce the number of high quality teachers in our system. That cannot be a good thing. There is no evidence to show that that would be a good thing.

Liz Smith: To clarify, it is the McKinsey evidence that supports your view.

Angela Constance: It has informed my thinking. I am not saying that the McKinsey evidence specifically says that the pupil teacher ratio should be 14:1 across Scotland. However, in terms of the importance of having quality teachers in our system, it certainly provides solid evidence. If we do not protect the pupil teacher ratio—if we allow it to increase—that will be as a result of a falling number of quality teachers in our system, which cannot be a good thing.

Chic Brodie: I apologise for the fact that I will have to leave at 12:10.

Last week, I had the pleasure of a long conversation with someone who is at the coalface in education: my seven-year-old granddaughter. We talked about the things that she does at school and the testing that she undergoes in order to determine whether she is achieving.

The committee wrote to the Scottish Government noting that attainment tends to be measured in terms of examination results, and I talked to my granddaughter about that and about how it impacts the various members of her class. It seems that, if someone is doing well, that is good; but someone who is not doing well will experience some problems.

Although it is comparatively straightforward to compare the performance of different groups of pupils in tests and examinations nationally, there is still some question about how we can measure achievement. I wonder how pupils, teachers and education stakeholders will know for certain when the attainment gap has been closed and whether closing the attainment gap also means closing the achievement gap. If it does, I wonder whether there is an agreed measure or definition of the achievement gap.

Angela Constance: Speaking to seven-year-olds is always instructive. I have regular representations from my eight-year-old about what he would like to see changed in education in Scotland. All his requests have been refused, I hasten to add.

The point that you make is important. The Scottish Government has always been clear that attainment is something beyond exam results or school-leavers' destinations. The OECD report quite helpfully laid out the theoretical difference between attainment and wider achievement, as various academics have also done. It noted that achievement is about the experiences that young people get and the knowledge and skills that they acquire, whereas attainment, traditionally, has been very much focused on exam results. Those elements are different things but, in terms of our work, they are inextricably linked. We improve the attainment of children if we also support their

social and emotional wellbeing and consider their needs in the broadest terms.

I would like to point the committee to the interim framework report that was published just before Christmas. It contains a range of information from the growing up in Scotland survey and the Scottish survey of literacy and numeracy—SSLN—as well as information on school leaver destinations, exams and the programme for international student assessment, or PISA, and a range of information about health and wellbeing. As we move forward, the Scottish standardised assessment will be introduced.

We are working very closely with our partners to get the right measurements. Many stakeholders have been very excited about and interested in the work that we want to do on a dashboard. We do not want to have too few measurements, because that will lead to teaching to targets, nor do we want to have an unwieldy and complex system of measurement.

The OECD set the challenge of identifying the right metrics that reflect the breadth of our curriculum. In that work, which we will progress over the next year or so, we will identify the meaningful milestones that will signpost the way to closing the attainment gap so that we will reach a point when we know that we have closed it. That is inextricably linked to addressing issues around achievement and the broader experience.

Chic Brodie: That is very helpful, but I come back to the issue of being able to measure the attainment gap. Standardised assessments tend to be transmogrified by virtue of the fact that the results of tests on any one day will depend on the emotional circumstances of those at the coalface—in other words, the children who are going through the educational experience.

It is helpful that there is to be a dashboard of criteria for attainment and I am glad that we are not talking about targets any more, but I am still not sure how we measure the achievement gap. If that is an esoteric question, I am happy to leave it and to discuss it further at a later stage, but I am still not sure whether closing the attainment gap means closing the achievement gap, nor am I sure how we measure that.

Angela Constance: It is not an esoteric question.

I make it clear that we are not measuring the attainment gap through assessment or testing. The standardised assessment will be part of a broad range of information that will be gathered and used to evaluate performance. What will be published is information on the curriculum for excellence levels—in other words, the proportion of children in primaries 1, 4 and 7 and secondary 3

who meet the relevant curriculum for excellence level. That is one measurement.

As regards your broader question about how we will know that we have closed the equity gap, we have made it clear that we are using the SIMD. There has been discussion about that, as not everybody is completely in favour of that measurement; some people have concerns about how it picks up rural poverty. We have opted to use the SIMD as a methodology because it captures a range of incomes. The fact that we are not just using a binary definition, whereby children are either advantaged or disadvantaged, means that we can compare the 10 per cent most disadvantaged with the 10 per cent least disadvantaged, or the 20 per cent most disadvantaged with the 20 per cent least disadvantaged, and can see what is happening to children in the middle income deciles.

As Mr Brodie said, there are many different gaps. In the Education (Scotland) Bill, which the Parliament recently endorsed unanimously, the primary focus is on socio-economic disadvantage. The SIMD is therefore important. Other gaps exist, however, and I am on record that I am willing to extend our measures and duties to those through regulation. There is a gender gap, although girls outperform boys, and gaps around additional support needs and looked-after children. There is a willingness to extend our measures, but we also need to galvanise our efforts on the poverty-related gap.

12:00

Liam McArthur: I share Chic Brodie's confusion over what it is that we are talking about when we say that we are closing the attainment gap.

Clearly, there are multiple gaps. The OECD policy review on curriculum for excellence says that

"there is not one gap but many: the language of 'the' gap may misleadingly suggest that it is self-evident which gap should be the main target or that one gap may stand as an adequate proxy for many others."

Given that the Government has committed itself to closing the gap completely, are there risks that gauging the success of that will be nigh on impossible? We do not even accept the existence of those multiple gaps in the commitment that has been made.

Angela Constance: We accept that there are various gaps. They are often interlinked and related.

The national improvement framework has made it very clear what our priorities are. Given the impact and size of the poverty-related gap, we are

right to take that as the starting point and focus in the first instance.

The Government has already indicated that we will quickly look at what more we can do on the education gap around looked-after children. It is important to get the building blocks absolutely right and then to refine and add to the framework.

Liam McArthur: We have started from the position of oversimplifying the problem that we are trying to deal with. That does not seem a sensible way to address what everybody acknowledges to be the most complex of issues, affected by multiple factors, some of which you have acknowledged. Yet, the Government aims to close that attainment gap completely and will be measured on its success in doing that. As a committee member, I have no idea what the measurements along the way to achieving that aim would be.

Angela Constance: The priorities laid out in the national improvement framework focus particularly on literacy and numeracy. As part of the curriculum for excellence, literacy and numeracy have to be embedded in every part of the curriculum. They should not be taught in silos.

We have been very clear that, when we talk about closing the gap, we are talking about closing the gap between the children from the least and those from the most disadvantaged deciles. That is ambitious and harder than a more binary calculation looking at children who are disadvantaged and those who are not. We have set ourselves a high bar.

As I indicated to Mr Brodie, there is a focus on improving children's health and wellbeing and their employability skills. Sustaining positive school leaver destinations is important, too.

However, I go back to the point about using the SIMD, which means that we are not comparing the 50 per cent most disadvantaged with the 50 per cent least disadvantaged. The advantage of the SIMD is that it has 10 deciles and we are looking at the least disadvantaged compared with the most disadvantaged. We will know that the gap has closed when there is no gap between the least and the most disadvantaged.

Liam McArthur: That presupposes that SIMD 20 picks up those who are living in absolute poverty and who are most profoundly affected by poverty. We heard this morning from Gary Robinson from Shetland Islands Council that the SIMD does not particularly pick up rural poverty. He cited the example of Unst, where the cost of living is estimated to be about 40 per cent higher than the national average. When we consider that benefits are the same across the UK, when income is measured and the SIMD is calculated, it does not factor in that additional cost of living.

Anyone living in poverty somewhere like Baltasound will simply not be picked up on.

Angela Constance: Although the SIMD is not perfect, I contend that no single method of measurement is perfect. That is the whole purpose of the national improvement framework—

Liam McArthur: But you just argued that it will pick up those most affected.

Angela Constance: It is the best that is available now. I would never argue that any single measurement was perfect. However, it is preferable to use the SIMD than to look at free school meal entitlement, for example, given that free school meal entitlement is universal in primaries 1, 2 and 3.

Liam McArthur: That is the problem with boiling it down to a single metric. Again, one of the concerns that we heard from witnesses is that if we oversimplify the problem, the risk is that we will apply metrics that are blunt and will miss things. SIMD 20 is a classic example. It will underplay the existence and severity of rural poverty.

Angela Constance: That is why, as I said earlier, we are taking on the OECD report recommendations that we should develop the right metrics that reflect the curriculum and measure accurately and proportionately the outcomes that we are trying to achieve in the curriculum. I appreciate the debate around the SIMD, but the range of information used in the national improvement framework to evidence the size of the current equity gap is broad. I have cited the growing up in Scotland and the SSLN reports and how we have looked at those in terms of the SIMD. Other evidence was also used, including the performance indicators in primary schools—PIPS—as well as the traditional exam and PISA results.

We have started from quite a broad basket of measurements. I accept that, in terms of growing up in Scotland, when we analyse school leavers' destinations we are often looking at them through the prism of the SIMD. I contend that, while it is not a perfect measurement, it is the best one that we have.

Liam McArthur: It is one that you would—

The Convener: Sorry, Liam, but we are short of time and I have a number of other members to get in, so we have to move on.

John Pentland: Cabinet secretary, I am sure that you are aware of Labour's fair start fund, under which, if it were to be implemented, every primary school in the country would receive an extra £1,000 for each pupil from a deprived background. For example, my North Lanarkshire authority would receive an additional £5 million from that fund. I am sure that you are also aware

that, under the Scottish Government's attainment challenge fund, 1,500 schools get no support whatsoever to close the gap between the richest and the rest. Is it right that a pupil from a deprived background misses out on support to improve their life chances because of where they live?

Angela Constance: No. We have embarked on a journey where we are picking up the pace and are determined to ensure that the children who are most in need get access to the resources that they need through the attainment challenge. That is not the only funding, as there are other funding streams. However, the first step in the attainment challenge was to target seven local authorities—the smallest is Clackmannanshire and the largest are Glasgow and North Lanarkshire—which, collectively, have more than half of Scotland's poorest children.

In recognition of the fact that there are children from poor backgrounds in schools in every part of Scotland, the next phase of the attainment challenge was the more specific part, which focused on schools where 70 per cent of the children were in SIMD deciles 1 and 2. The attainment challenge now covers 21 local authorities and 300-plus schools. There is an OECD recommendation that we should look at extending the attainment challenge to secondary schools, which we are indeed doing.

On other funding, we have the innovation fund and the access to education fund. We have a strong universal offer, and we have to focus our efforts on ensuring that, as we build on that, we target in the right and most effective way. The approach that we have taken is to target local authorities and schools.

John Pentland: Do you not think that you are being unfair to schools that are not eligible for any support whatsoever? How are you going to improve things for them in closing the attainment gap? Why are those schools having to wait? You said that you have a universal approach. If that is the case, why are all those schools not included just now?

Angela Constance: All schools are included in the universal approach. For example, we have funded attainment advisers to work with every local authority, and Education Scotland has set up the national improvement hub to ensure that best practice is learned through the Scottish attainment challenge. Learning from the attainment challenge will be crucial in terms of setting the direction and pace as we move forward.

I am not questioning your sincerity, Mr Pentland, about wishing to ensure that the most vulnerable children receive the support that they need; with respect, I am querying whether Scottish Labour's proposals would be effective.

John Pentland: You said that there are deprived children in every school. Obviously, those kids need help, and schools need help to close the attainment gap. My question to you is this: when will the schools that are not part of everything that you just talked about receive financial help to assist them to close the attainment gap?

Angela Constance: We have a very strong offer for all schools. We have prioritised funding to ensure that we continue to invest in the teaching workforce and protect teacher numbers. That is important for all children, but particularly for those who live with disadvantage. As I said, we fund attainment advisers, and we have the national improvement hub and the raising attainment for all programme, in which more than 200 schools participate.

12:15

Some of this is about what we do with our resource and some of it is about what we do in delivering a universal service. We know that over the past decade attainment has increased and there is already evidence that the attainment gap is closing. There is a body of evidence and measurements that indicates that we are on the right road. Positive school leaver destinations are at a record high and the gap in school leaver destinations is closing. We know that the number of young people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds who achieve one or more highers is improving: it used to be two out of 10 and it is now four out of 10. We are absolutely determined to increase that pace.

The overarching framework is the national improvement framework. It gives us a line of sight from what is happening in our classrooms to the evaluation of policies and approaches at the local and national levels, where Scottish ministers and local government have an obligation to report on and be accountable for the effectiveness of their actions.

John Pentland: Would you therefore concede that Scottish Labour's fair start fund would close the attainment gap quicker than the Scottish Government's attainment challenge fund?

Angela Constance: No, I would not. I remain to be convinced about how you would fund it, if you were ever in the position to implement it. On that point, we will have to disagree.

John Pentland: We have already said how we would fund it.

The Convener: I know that the election is soon, but let us try to stick to the topic.

Mark Griffin: Cabinet secretary, you said in your opening remarks that cutting teacher

numbers will not close the equity or attainment gaps. Similarly, I would say that cutting education budgets will not close those gaps.

Are you concerned by our earlier panellists' comments that the Scottish Government is making it more difficult for local government to close the attainment gap? They said that the budget cuts that the Scottish Government is handing down to them are making their job of cutting the equity and attainment gaps more difficult. Do you not see the Government as being in a strange position when its overriding priority, as stated by you and by the First Minister, is to close the attainment gap, yet the people whom you are asking to deliver on that priority are saying that you are making their job harder?

Angela Constance: Most local authorities have still to set their budget. It is fair to say that for everyone—whether we are talking about the Scottish Government or any one of the 32 local authorities—public finances remain challenging. They have been challenging for some years. As I said in my opening remarks, much of the funding for education is channelled through the local government settlement. I contend that it is a fair settlement, although we would acknowledge that it is not without its challenges. In reality, every local authority has accepted the budget settlement. The reduction is less than 1 per cent, once we include resources for the investment in the integration of health and social care.

The reality is that, despite the challenging financial times that we all face at the local and national levels, attainment has increased and the gap has closed. The challenge for us all is to galvanise our efforts, pick up the pace and recognise that, at the local level, nearly £5 billion is invested in education.

Mark Griffin: So you do not agree with the comments of the local government representatives that the Scottish Government is making it harder for them to reduce the attainment gap.

Angela Constance: No, I do not agree with that. As I hope that I have outlined this morning, there is a range of activity and a range of efforts, as well as a willingness on the part of the Government to work in partnership with everyone at every level in education in Scotland to overcome the barriers in the interests of all children. The financial realities are challenging for local government and national Government. However, the reality is that we have a job to do and we have to crack on with it. Although we all recognise the financial constraints, we need to focus on what we can do with the resources that we have. As I said, despite the challenging financial times that we have all lived through, attainment is increasing and the gap is closing. We need to continue in that vein.

Mark Griffin: You have spoken about the financial situation that we find ourselves in, but some of your cabinet colleagues have been successful in getting protection for particular areas of their budgets—I am thinking in particular about policing and the national health service. Have you pressed the finance secretary for protection for the schools budget?

Angela Constance: I am probably the bane of the finance secretary's life, as I have been in every capacity in which I have ever served this Government. However, I am very proud of this Government's record. With regard to my portfolio, there will be an investment of £2.9 billion to continue our endeavours in the early years, our endeavours to close the attainment gap and the work that we are doing in colleges and in higher education. There is a good budget settlement for education in terms of Scottish Government expenditure in my portfolio. As I said earlier, it has to be recognised that much of the funding for education is channelled through the local government settlement.

Mark Griffin: But would you not prefer the schools budget to be protected on the same basis that other cabinet secretaries have been able to secure for their budgets?

Angela Constance: Earlier, I was challenged by members reiterating some of COSLA's arguments against our protection of the pupil teacher ratio and the investment in that. Are you suggesting that we ring fence other aspects of the education budget?

Mark Griffin: I am suggesting that other cabinet secretaries have protected spending in their areas, which will mean that, over the next five years, non-protected areas of spending will be reduced by something of the order of 16 per cent. If you apply that to local government and education budgets, that represents an £800 million cut to education budgets. Are you not concerned by that, and would you not want to do what other cabinet secretaries have successfully done in their portfolios and seek protection for the schools budget in your portfolio?

Angela Constance: I would question your figures—

Mark Griffin: Those are figures from the Scottish Parliament information centre.

Angela Constance: We have set only a one-year budget, and I think that any projection into future years is a complete work of fiction. With regard to my budget, there has been a modest increase of around 1 per cent in the amount of resource that goes out the door on services and work on improving services and outcomes. Given the financial challenges, I think that that modest increase is to be welcomed.

Gordon MacDonald: We have been talking about cuts to local government budgets, but we must accept that, overall, we are in a difficult financial situation. However, the SPICe briefing says that local government's share of the total Scottish Government budget was 36.2 per cent in 1999, when devolution started; 35.9 per cent in 2007-08; and 36 per cent in 2015-16. The percentage seems to be fairly consistent, which shows that there is some level of protection.

Angela Constance: I would contend that the Government has always been fair to local government. We know that councils' spending on education is set to increase by 3.3 per cent and that, since 2006-07, total revenue spend on schools has gone up by at least £208 million. To go back to one of my original points, we are all living in financially difficult times, but nonetheless attainment is improving and we are closing the gap.

Colin Beattie: The Scottish Government's response to the committee's report on the draft budget states that a large number of Government initiatives are under way to close the attainment gap or improve attainment overall. The response describes 13 separate initiatives, some of which are universal and some of which are in certain areas, and those are on top of any local initiatives. Some participants in the informal discussion that we had on the issue said that there is perhaps a difficulty in having a joined-up policy when there are so many diverse elements. Given the wide range of attainment initiatives and their geographical coverage, how are we evaluating success and achievement in relation to the attainment gap?

Angela Constance: It is imperative that everything hangs together strategically and that we ensure that all the arrows are flying in the same direction. The overarching vision—that is, the vision of equity and excellence—and approach are set out in the national improvement framework for Scotland, which sets out the six proven drivers for improvement, including assessment of pupils' progress, parental engagement and involvement, leadership, professional standards and school improvement. All of that has to fit in with the objectives of curriculum for excellence.

Underlying the national improvement framework are the national improvement hub and attainment advisers, and that is all about working with local authorities to ensure that we share the available research and that the research findings can be implemented in practice. There is also the targeted work through the attainment challenge. As I have said, it is imperative that the learning from the evaluation of the attainment challenge benefits all schools. Of course, the improvement hub and the attainment advisers play an important role in that.

With measures such as the raising attainment for all programme, the early years collaborative and the schools improvement programme, it is crucial that the case studies and exemplars of good practice are collected and evaluated and used to contribute to systems-wide improvement. I am confident that everything hangs together sensibly, logically and strategically.

Evaluation is an important part of the attainment challenge. For example, the raising attainment for all programme is subject to continuous evaluation, using an improvement methodology and the plan, do, study, act approach. Evaluation is an integral part of our approach to education. Of course, Scotland is a world leader on self-evaluation.

Colin Beattie: I presume that part of the evaluation involves identifying successful or effective interventions. Will there be a process whereby good examples can be rolled out across the country?

Angela Constance: Yes. With the attainment challenge, for example, there is a four-year evaluation strategy. There is academic input from Professor Chapman and the Robert Owen centre for educational change. Although the attainment challenge is focused on local authorities and schools in the highest areas of deprivation, there will be important learning and practices that will have to be rolled out across the country.

Colin Beattie: As part of the evaluation process, are existing policies being evaluated to ensure that they contribute to raising attainment? I am thinking about things such as the pupil teacher ratio and class sizes.

12:30

Angela Constance: That forms part of our duties and responsibilities under the annual reporting that we will have to do to meet our duties on inequalities of outcomes and to show that we are meeting the strategic objectives of the national improvement framework. We do not want annual reporting, whether from local or national Government, that simply lists what has been done—it has to evaluate impact and outcome. Where the impact and outcome are unknown, we have to find a means of establishing them.

The Convener: I am curious about one thing. Obviously, we are going to measure the programmes that you have mentioned very closely—I hope—and in great detail. If you found a programme that was effective at raising attainment but not at closing the attainment gap, would that programme be discontinued, or would you roll it out?

Angela Constance: We have always been clear that we will not close the attainment gap by

holding down standards, because that would be the wrong thing to do. Curriculum for excellence is about children as individuals. However, we have to focus on the areas where we need to improve faster. We have—if you like—a twin-track approach. There will be very few initiatives that do one thing in isolation, although there might well be some bespoke examples of that. Obviously, in targeting resources and additional initiatives, we are focusing on addressing the equity gap, on which we want to make faster progress. However, I do not see us throwing out good examples or initiatives that raise attainment but which do not specifically address the equity gap. Of course, if something is making a problem worse, we clearly would not want to be doing that.

The Convener: It was a hypothetical question. I was curious, so I thought that I would ask.

I thank the cabinet secretary and her officials for coming. There are other areas that we just do not have time to get into, not just on the attainment stuff but on the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council and student support. If you do not mind, we will write to you about those. Given the timescale between now and dissolution, we would appreciate it if you could respond before dissolution.

Angela Constance: Absolutely—I give you that guarantee.

The Convener: Thank you very much. With that, I close the meeting.

Meeting closed at 12:32.

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