



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Education and Skills Committee

Wednesday 29 June 2016

Session 5



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Wednesday 29 June 2016

CONTENTS

	Col.
INTERESTS	1
DECISION ON TAKING BUSINESS IN PRIVATE	1
SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT PRIORITIES	2

EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE

2nd Meeting 2016, Session 5

CONVENER

*James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)

*Jenny Gilruth (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)

*Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green)

*Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)

*Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)

*Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)

*Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD)

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

*Ross Thomson (North East Scotland) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

John Swinney (Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Roz Thomson

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Education and Skills Committee

Wednesday 29 June 2016

[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:00]

Interests

The Convener (James Dornan): Welcome, everyone, to the second meeting of the Education and Skills Committee. I remind everyone to turn off their mobile phones, as they can interfere with the sound system.

Agenda item 1 is a declaration of interests. I ask members who were not present for the first committee meeting to declare any interests that are relevant to the work of the committee.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I am a member of the General Teaching Council for Scotland and a member of the board of governors of two schools: George Watson's college and St Mary's school in Melrose.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): I have no interests to declare.

Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD): I have no relevant interests other than that I am the parent of children at various stages of their education—which seems to me to be very relevant.

The Convener: Who could argue with that? Thank you very much.

Decision on Taking Business in Private

10:00

The Convener: Agenda item 2 is consideration of whether to take item 4 in private. Do we agree to take that item in private?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Scottish Government Priorities

10:01

The Convener: Agenda item 3 is an evidence-taking session on the Scottish Government's priorities. I welcome John Swinney, who is attending in his capacity as the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills. I also welcome Paul Johnston, the director general for learning and justice in the Scottish Government, and Dr Bill Maxwell, the chief executive of Education Scotland.

Cabinet secretary, thank you for your letter of 22 June, which members have received with their papers. I understand that you would like to make an opening statement.

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): Yes, thank you, convener. I welcome the opportunity to attend the committee and discuss issues that are relevant to my portfolio, and I look forward to doing that over the course of this parliamentary session.

As the First Minister has made clear, education is the defining mission of the Government. There can be no greater responsibility than working to improve the life chances of our children. The Government's commitment to education underpins our three top priorities of delivering sustainable economic growth, reforming the public sector and addressing the inequality that exists in our society. The primary challenge that we are faced with in our education system is the attainment gap—the gap between the attainment of young people from the most and least disadvantaged areas. I am determined to ensure that every child in Scotland has the same opportunity to succeed.

My priorities will range across three particular areas. First, I want to ensure that our children and young people get the best start in life. I will focus on transforming early learning and childcare with a doubling of provision, the deployment of flexibility to help parents—particularly mothers—to return to work and an insistence on educational input to close the attainment gap before it begins to have a profound impact. Secondly, we will empower teachers, parents and communities; reduce workload; ensure that funding reaches schools to meet the needs of local areas; and focus on what works in the process of strengthening our school system. We will be relentless in our efforts to close the attainment gap and raise standards for all. That underpins the pursuit of equity and excellence for all in our society. Thirdly, by widening opportunities to access higher, further and vocational education, the Government will work to ensure that every child has the same

chance to progress through breaking down the barriers that prevent young people from deprived backgrounds from progressing to the levels that their more affluent peers reach.

Yesterday, I announced to Parliament the delivery plan, which sets out a range of tangible steps to make significant progress in closing the attainment gap, in tackling the issue of workload in the education system and in undertaking the reform measures that the Government has set out. There is already a range of strong performance in our education system. We have seen that assessed and validated by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development in its report on Scottish education. We also see, from the statistical analysis, improvements in the attainment and performance of young people. The most recent statistics relating to the detail of positive destinations indicated that more than six in 10 young people had achieved a qualification at higher level or above, reflecting the hard work, commitment and dedication of young people and of the teachers and others who supported them through school.

Those are the priorities that the Government will focus on, and we will ensure that they are addressed as part of our work on education.

The Convener: Thank you, cabinet secretary. We have questions on a number of themes. I will start with questions arising from last Thursday's European Union referendum result. Since the vote, universities throughout Scotland have expressed concern about EU research funding and the mobility of staff and students. Has the Scottish Government had time to quantify the effects of Brexit on higher education institutions in Scotland? How will the Scottish Government ensure that the sector's interests are promoted during the Brexit negotiations?

John Swinney: There is a significant amount of uncertainty about the final outcome that will emerge. The important point is that we concentrate on reinforcing the messages about stability in the system. Take undergraduate admissions to university, for example. Students from EU countries will be planning to come to Scotland in just a few months' time. We are working with Universities Scotland—the universities are doing a significant amount of the work themselves, but the Government is working with them to reinforce the message—to send a message that absolutely nothing will change for the young people who are proposing to come to Scottish universities in autumn. It is important that we issue those messages of stability and continuity, which reflect the reality. There will be no impact on individuals who make such decisions.

In a longer-term context, your question about research funding is important. Academics in Scotland are involved in transnational projects. Those academics have tremendous expertise and their European counterparts will be anxious to build that expertise into transnational projects. As part of this Government's input into the discussions that, for example, the First Minister is having in Brussels today and will have with the United Kingdom Government and other devolved Administrations, we must reinforce the point that the important perspectives of the higher education sector, on recruitment of students and participation in transnational research programmes, must be fully and adequately borne in mind in designing the relationships that the United Kingdom will have with the European Union as a consequence of the referendum result.

The Convener: If there are material changes, will you make the committee aware of them?

John Swinney: I certainly will do. I intend to advise the committee of all the developments that I think are relevant across the portfolio on an on-going basis and as assiduously as I can. I recognise the significance of the issue. I was with the vice-chancellor of the University of Edinburgh last night and we discussed the issue, which is significant for that university, as it is for all our universities. We will be involved in active dialogue with the university community on the matter.

The Convener: What EU funding do skills programmes in Scotland receive? How will Brexit affect the challenge of developing an agile and skilled workforce?

John Swinney: The main channel for skills funding from the European Union is through European social fund programmes. There is a wide application of programmes in the sector and a range of providers are involved. I do not have in front of me a quantification of the current position in that respect, but I will be happy to write to the committee with that. My answer to your first question reflected the fact that we are not clear about what shape the arrangements will take. It is important that we reflect that in the analysis that we undertake in due course.

The Convener: Thank you. We will move on to other themes.

Liz Smith: On 24 May, in response to a question that I asked about the criteria that you will use to measure improvement in attainment, you said:

"We will gather and analyse a range of data and evidence".—[*Written Answers*, 24 May 2016; S5W-00070.]

Can I tease that out a little bit? How will you determine whether improvement is being made in attainment? That is very much about the definition

of the gap to which we all refer very regularly. Can you set out your views on that? How do you define the gap and how will you measure whether there has been an improvement?

John Swinney: First, it is important to say that the Government wants to assess and address the gap in attainment at various stages in the educational journey of a young person. To put that point into context, in a radio interview a couple of weeks ago about the issue of widening access to higher education, I was asked whether that was the gap that I was worried about. My answer was that if we left it to that point, we were missing a massive opportunity to remedy the issues that might confront young people.

The gap that exists must be assessed at various stages in young people's educational journey. For example, the vocabulary gap among children entering primary 1 can be quite significant—it is assessed to be as much as 13 months. If we do not endeavour to close that gap at the age of five, when young people enter primary education, we will essentially be setting those young people off on a journey during which it will be ever more difficult to close that gap. I do not view the attainment gap as one moment in time; I view it as a gap that has to be assessed at various stages in a young person's life.

On the point about the data, we will be publishing a report consistent with the national improvement framework, which will be drawing together the available data that we have just now. I think that Liz Smith is conversant enough with all the detail to know that we do not believe that data to be sufficiently clear and firm for us to be able, at this stage, to be definitive about what we will do.

We will gather the information to the best of our ability to define what we consider the gaps to be but at this stage we do not believe that the data that would enable us to do that conclusively is available. That is why we believe that we have to move to the position of having standardised assessment, which will inform teacher judgment about the performance of young people.

The report that we produce in the autumn will essentially be the best utilisation of the available data that we have just now in advance of the information emerging from the use of standardised assessment.

Liz Smith: In the previous parliamentary session, the Education and Culture Committee was told by the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland that it felt that the data was largely available but was perhaps not presented in a way that was easy enough to interpret and that parents could readily understand. Is the Scottish Government looking for more data or is it looking

to have a better interpretation of the data that already exists?

John Swinney: First, I do not share the view that you heard from ADES about the quality of the data. For example, we do not have comparable data on an authority by authority basis. We have data within authorities but I do not consider it to be directly comparable between authorities, which is why I answered the first question that Liz Smith asked me by saying that we will endeavour as well as we can to use the data that is currently available to provide that comparative picture but that we do not believe that it is sufficiently authoritative to enable us to do that, which is why we need to move to standardised assessment.

Liz Smith: Can I just finish my question?

John Swinney: Can I add one additional point? It is relevant because of the signal that might be interpreted from how I am answering the question. Where data is being collected but is not comparable, I want to replace it with comparable data. I am not attempting to create another cottage industry of bureaucracy and data; I am attempting to get the data that will enable us to undertake the type of analysis that will, first, assess the scale of the gap and then measure the effectiveness of the interventions that are deployed to try to close that gap over time.

10:15

Liz Smith: You have identified several measures at different stages of the child's progression. At the end of, say, four years, when you have to make a judgment about whether attainment has improved or not, will you be looking for any key indicators to say that Scotland is beginning to narrow the gap?

John Swinney: Essentially, the journey will be assessed by the performance of young people in reaching the levels that are identified within curriculum for excellence. That will be the measure. However, at each of those levels, we will have a size of gap identified at year 1, and we will be able to revisit the situation at year 2 to determine what the performance has been. It will not be a case of just leaving it all for a four-year period. We will be looking at the data on a regular basis to determine the effect of the measures that we are taking to try and close the attainment gap on an on-going basis.

Jenny Gilruth (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP): Liz Smith alluded to this issue in her question. First, I am interested specifically in what type of data we are talking about at the moment—although I appreciate that you might not be able to quantify it at this stage. Secondly, will teaching staff be trained on how to interpret the data, so that they can use it to effect improvements to

learning and teaching that allow them to contribute to closing the attainment gap?

John Swinney: Yes, that will be the case. The ultimate product of the information that fuels the national improvement framework relies on teacher judgment being informed by standardised assessment. Ultimately, it will be teacher judgment that is the measure of performance, but that will be informed by standardised assessments.

It will be essential to ensure that the teaching profession is adequately equipped and supported to handle that particular task, that we have a comparative presentation and a comparative understanding of the information, and that we are using measures such as the national improvement hub to share good practice within the teaching profession so that teachers can identify where there is a gap in attainment and can access the necessary resources to address the issues and improve performance.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): I have a supplementary question on that. On 26 May you stated that you had met the chief examiner of Scotland, following on from the report on the work of the assessment working group, and that she had stated that a further reduction in the burden from assessment would not be possible without compromising quality and standards. I recognise that there is a real tension between collecting the data and the will to reduce teacher workload. Has there been any sort of development or change in your assessment? What is your response to that issue?

John Swinney: In my view, those are two different topics within the general issue of standardised assessment and the attainment gap.

Let me deal first with the specific point that Mr Johnson asks me about—the workload in the senior phase of education, which was the subject of my discussions with the chief examiner. As a matter of interest to the committee, my second meeting with the chief examiner, to assess progress, is this afternoon. The point that I accepted in the comments to which Mr Johnson refers is the argument—which was the view of the chief examiner and was accepted and marshalled for me by the assessment of qualifications working group—that, if there was to be a change to the unit assessments in 2016-17, it would be difficult according to the model to certificate qualifications. On that basis, I judged that to make a change would be a risk that I could not contemplate.

Does that mean that that is the case for all time? No, it does not. I think that there are measures that can be taken to reduce the assessment workload not just on teachers—I have to say that the assessment burden on young people is also a

matter of some concern to me. That was my view for 2016-17, but it is not my view for all time.

Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab): You spoke at the beginning of the meeting about the improvements in attainment in general, which are a credit to children and their families and to school staff. However, have you looked at attainment improvements within the most deprived communities? In health, for example, we know that the health of the nation has improved but that health has remained stubbornly problematic for particular groups.

It seems to me that there is a danger with data. It describes a picture and then says what teachers need to do for individual young people, but does it give you the information to target resources and policy developments to address the inequalities within the system? If there are patterns, the issue is not just about the individual child's ability to progress but that there are barriers for particular groups of young people. For example, are children with disabilities or special needs progressing, or are the attainment levels different? I am interested to know whether you have looked at that.

John Swinney: The answer to your overall question is yes—and I suppose this follows on from my answer to Liz Smith's question. It is very important that we look at not just the age stage of attainment but the detail within age stages based on socioeconomic background and other factors, such as disability issues or additional support needs.

Ultimately—to take a step back to answer Johann Lamont's question—what drives this agenda must be the fulfilment of the Government's commitment to get it right for every child. If that is genuinely the driver of educational policy, which for me is the case, we have to make sure that we fulfil that in terms of young people's achievements.

The data will be available for the different stages that will allow us to examine, for example, what level of qualifications are achieved by individuals from different socioeconomic backgrounds. That will give us a picture of the achievement that emerges at the later stages of the educational journey. However, the more general point that I expressed in my answer to Liz Smith is about identifying the pattern of the attainment gap in the earlier stages of education, and that is less clear for us at this stage. The qualifications achieved at the later stage are a measure of the closing of the gap, but we need to look at the issue more deeply across the educational journey.

Johann Lamont: With respect, I am making a slightly different point. When we say that attainment in general has improved in terms of more qualifications, does that tell us whether the level of improvement is the same across different

groups or different? Simply improving the lot of everyone does not necessarily mean that we are closing the gap.

We will talk about this later when we discuss standardised testing and so on, but there is an important discussion to be had about whether children coming from the same general backgrounds achieve differently in different schools. We saw in Glasgow that amazing interventions were made to make sure that the general drive was not about individual schools. That is part of the issue but, if there is something else there, I do not think that data on assessing individual tests really deals with it.

It is not a question of whether the teacher understands properly what level a child has reached; it is about something quite different and putting education in a broader context. I wonder whether there are figures that show whether there is the same pattern in education as in health, where overall health has improved but health inequalities remain stubbornly problematic for us.

John Swinney: Essentially, I agree with Johann Lamont's analysis. That is what I am trying to bring to this area of policy, and what Johann Lamont has said illustrates the nature of the challenge that we have to address and overcome.

Perhaps I can give you some data. The gap between our 20 per cent most and least deprived pupils achieving at least Scottish credit and qualifications framework level 5 has reduced from 36.8 percentage points in 2007-08 to 20.9 percentage points. In direct response to Johann Lamont's point, I can say that there has been an improvement over time.

That is one illustration of the gap. Another is that school leavers from our 10 per cent least deprived communities are around twice as likely as those from the 10 per cent most deprived communities to achieve at least one qualification at higher level or above. However, that is a significant improvement on the position in 2007-08, when they were four times as likely to do so. At higher level, the gap has again narrowed.

There has been improvement. Perhaps I can express it this way: for me, it will not be acceptable just to improve attainment in general in Scotland, because that might entrench the existing gap. As a result, we must improve attainment and narrow the gap at the same time. That is why the strapline of the plan that I was talking about yesterday refers to "excellence and equity". Excellence is about improving attainment in general, while equity is about closing the gap. I want to continually bring the system back to remembering the dual challenges that lie at the heart of this agenda.

The Convener: I believe that Fulton MacGregor has a short supplementary.

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): I have a follow up to the question that I asked in the chamber yesterday—to which I appreciated your response, cabinet secretary—and a supplementary to Johann Lamont's question. What are the cabinet secretary's plans for closing the attainment gap for looked-after and accommodated young people? Specifically, how will he work with the various voluntary agencies, such as Who Cares? Scotland and Barnardo's, that support these groups of people?

John Swinney: The general point is that, although much of the conversation is around education, many of the measures for addressing the challenges that Mr MacGregor has highlighted will come from a much wider set of interventions. Schools and the teaching profession have a lot to contribute, but so do the institutional structures in the rest of society, youth organisations and so on.

One of my early discussions that I had as education secretary—indeed, it was on the first day of my appointment—was with a collection of organisations from the youth work sector. One of the participants in the discussion was also a high school headteacher, who was there to illustrate to me the ways in which the school acted as, I suppose, a host for a range of different services in the youth work environment to enable young people to get a wider intervention to support their needs. That is, of course, particularly relevant to looked-after children, because we need a broad approach to resolve some of the challenges that they face. I therefore acknowledge the need for multidisciplinary work to ensure that young people's needs are properly addressed.

Fulton MacGregor: With regard to the £100 million that is intended for headteachers, will they have a specific remit that covers this group of young people, or does the funding apply more to the general policy context?

10:30

John Swinney: Ultimately, it will be for headteachers to determine what is appropriate in their circumstances.

A number of members of the committee attended the education summit a couple of weeks ago in Craigmyle high school in Edinburgh. The school acting as the host is very much in my mind. It was a fantastic experience to understand how that school is providing an education to young people but also providing a reference point, an anchor point and a connection point—the school is making connections with employers and youth agencies. Yes, it is delivering a curriculum as well, but it is looking at a much broader range of ways to improve outcomes for young people in an area

of significant economic and social challenge within the city.

That is the model that I think Scottish education is increasingly moving towards and it is welcome. The resources that go directly to headteachers will enable them to make judgments about what is appropriate for the young people in their schools.

Tavish Scott: I will go back to the question that Liz Smith asked right at the start. Your Government has been in power for nine years, so when I read the delivery plan last night I expected there to be a definition of closing the gap—of what the gap is—and there is not. You have set out a couple of examples of that this morning, in answer to Johann Lamont's questions, but how will we be able to judge whether we are closing the gap if it is not clearly defined in the delivery plan, right in the first paragraph?

John Swinney: The data does not exist to enable me to do that today. That is the issue, and that is why standardised assessment is required: so that we can have comparable data that gives us a starting point. We can debate the whys and wherefores of why that data is not there today, but it is not there. We are going to put it there, and it will give us an assessment framework that enables us and others to judge the effectiveness of the Government and its partners in closing the attainment gap.

I readily acknowledge that the information does not exist at this moment, but the Government is putting it in place. In the report that we will publish on the national improvement framework there will be our best effort at creating a starting point in the absence of that comprehensive data.

Tavish Scott: Does comprehensive data mean the standardised testing results from primary 1, primary 4, primary 7 and secondary 3 that you were describing in the chamber yesterday?

John Swinney: Yes.

Tavish Scott: When will those results first be available? On page 20 of the delivery plan it says:

"We will publish performance information on a school-by-school basis",

but it does not say by when.

John Swinney: We put the proposition on standardised assessment out to tender on 20 June. The responses to the invitation to tender are due by 21 July, and we would expect to see the first material available during the school year 2017-18.

Tavish Scott: How does that impact on your point about the performance information that will be available and when the school-by-school based analysis that is in the delivery plan will be available? Will that be in 2017-18?

John Swinney: Yes, in 2017-18.

Tavish Scott: That will be the first time that it will be available.

John Swinney: I also want to say to the committee that we will be producing information in the form of a report on the national improvement framework, which will gather as much data as we possibly can, based on existing information. That will inform the debate so that we are not waiting until 2017-18 before we try to focus the efforts that are required to tackle the issue.

Tavish Scott: I appreciate that. Will you be able to write to the committee to say how you expect that we best judge the gap? Is it a test of P1, P4, P7 and S3, or is it also the point that you made earlier to Johann Lamont about national qualifications? They are by definition easier to assess because we have the figures now.

John Swinney: We do have the figures, and I am very happy to put together some information for the committee. I suspect that quite a bit of it is contained within what we have already said on the national improvement framework.

Tavish Scott: I just think that it is important to define what we are talking about. Otherwise, I do not know how any of us will understand what is going on.

John Swinney: Yes.

Tavish Scott: You also said to Liz Smith that there is no comparable data—or that there is some comparable data but not for all 32 local authorities. How are you going to make sure that there will not be a greater requirement on teachers to produce more data?

John Swinney: There will not be a greater requirement, because we will be replacing measurement activities that teachers are undertaking. That is in relation to national standardised assessment.

In relation to the rest of the delivery plan, yesterday I set out a variety of measures to reduce teacher workload by what I hope to be a significant amount. I have been stunned—that is the only word that I can use to describe it—by the level of bureaucracy, assessment and transactional activity required of teachers right across the system. I have been spending a lot of time getting my head round that and understanding it.

That is why the delivery plan is so heavy on the measures that I require of the Scottish Qualifications Authority and Education Scotland, and it is why I am putting Her Majesty's inspectors into the education authorities in August. Every inspector in the country will go into local authorities to identify which of the conclusions of the working group on reducing the workload and

bureaucracy have not been implemented. I will then pursue that to get them implemented, because they were supposed to be implemented and they clearly have not been. Inspectors are going in to do that work.

There is a whole programme of interventions to reduce bureaucracy so that we can do what I said in Parliament yesterday, which is liberate teachers to actually teach.

Tavish Scott: Yes, but as a parent you will probably appreciate as much as we all do that, if the focus of Government becomes the standardised tests in P1, P4, P7 and S3, teachers will understandably be completely focused on teaching to those tests. The same happens with health targets and the other targets that Governments and Parliaments are terribly good at laying on professional people. As a parent, you know as well as I do that that is the reality. If the standardised tests become the Government's focus, they are where teachers will concentrate.

John Swinney: The crucial point here is that the national standardised assessment will inform teacher judgment and, ultimately, it is teacher judgments that will be collected. That is consistent with the principles of broad general education. We want to ensure that young people experience that broad general education and are assessed on the basis of teacher judgment, informed by standardised assessments, of the exact performance that is being achieved. It is important that we deal with the issues that Johann Lamont raised with me about the finer detail of the performance at different ages and for those from different backgrounds and the extent to which that information is clear. That will be very much at the heart of our approach.

Tavish Scott: Okay—thank you.

Daniel Johnson: The focus that the plan provides is useful. In a sense, the title sums up what we all agree are the twin priorities—excellence and equity. It is about raising attainment in general but making sure that attainment is fairly distributed across society, which is clearly a very good aim. We have talked a lot about measuring attainment, which is right, because we need to understand the size and nature of the gap, but to close the gap we need to be able to take action, which requires resource.

In broad terms, therefore, we welcome the attainment fund. I understand that the fund will be resourced through the changes to council tax. Obviously, there will be a requirement for redistribution among local authority areas. How do you envisage that being done? What steps have been taken to put in place a mechanism to allow that redistribution?

John Swinney: That work is in preparation and will be taken forward as part of the wider dialogue that the Government puts in place. We intend the measure to take effect from 2017-18, so we have preparatory time to enable us to reach that point.

Delivery of the funding will essentially be driven by identification of need in particular schools; it will be directed towards tackling the circumstances that arise out of the existence and persistence of deprivation, so the measure that we are using is entitlement to free school meals. That will enable us to guide and direct as effectively as we can the resources that have to be deployed.

Daniel Johnson: Forgive me, but the second part of your answer was interesting, so I would like to ask you some more. Given the timescale, you must have in mind at least the outline principles of how a mechanism for redistribution of the funds will work. There is obviously real concern here about the fiscal autonomy of local government because, at the moment, the funding will be raised through council tax. In order to redistribute that from central Government, there must be some kind of clawback mechanism. Are you proposing to withhold central Government grants? The mechanism for redistributing the additional revenue from council tax is not outlined in principle.

John Swinney: That will, essentially, be the subject of discussion with local authorities. I have set out in the delivery plan the approach that we will take and I have already had discussions with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities on the principles of the Government's approach, based on the manifesto on which we fought the election. I will continue those discussions. That is what is set out in the delivery plan and it will inform the decisions that we arrive at on 2017-18.

Daniel Johnson: For the benefit of the committee, could you outline those principles?

John Swinney: They are set out in the document. The allocation will be based on the number of children in primary school and in S1 to S3 who meet the eligibility criteria for free school meals. That is the principle—

Daniel Johnson: That was not my question. My question is not about the allocation; it is about how the revenue is raised and redistributed. There is obviously going to be a requirement to redistribute among local authority areas because the attainment gap is not evenly distributed. How will that be done?

John Swinney: That will be done as a consequence of discussions that I will have with local government; the work will be done over the summer.

Daniel Johnson: I want to follow up on the point about how the funds will be allocated. Your previous set of answers has implications for standardised testing and how data will be used—you said previously that it is to be used by teachers. If allocation of the funding is to be based on the standardised testing, the data will clearly not remain in schools, but will be collected and used as the basis for allocation of funding by central Government. Surely there is, therefore, the implication of a real risk of teachers essentially teaching to the test rather than to broader outcomes because there will be a financial consequence.

John Swinney: I do not really follow the logic of your question. The distribution of the £100 million will be determined by the number of children in primary school and S1 to S3 who meet the eligibility criteria for free school meals. That will be the driver for distribution of the resources. The information that is gathered on standardised assessment will then inform teachers' judgment and will give us a clear sense of where the gaps in attainment are.

I have been clear about this in all that I have said. The point is not to point fingers at people, but to improve attainment and facilitate the attainment that young people are entitled to.

The collection of the information is designed to identify where we need to intervene and what methods need to be used to improve attainment. That is the purpose of the reform. That is why I do not share Tavish Scott's concern. I do not meet anybody in Scottish education who is interested in anything other than improving the performance and attainment of young people.

10:45

Liz Smith: I would like clarification. You mentioned that free school meals will be the indicator. In primaries 1 to 3, everybody gets a free school meal.

John Swinney: Yes—but regardless of the fact that pupils get free school meals there are eligibility criteria for free school meals.

Liz Smith: It is only those who are eligible in the old sense—

John Swinney: It is about identifying in a school how many children would be eligible for free school meals if the blanket availability of free school meals did not exist. That will drive what resources go into that school out of the £100 million.

Liz Smith: Thank you.

Tavish Scott: If you plan—as is reported in *The Herald* this morning—to move the legal

responsibility for education from local authorities to schools, then what Daniel Johnson said is correct. Depending on how that is all crafted, teachers will face the direct legal responsibility for the attainment gap measures that you are putting in place for P1, P3, P5 and so on.

John Swinney: Let me refer to the document to get this absolutely correct. The policy is not about transferring the legal responsibilities for education from local authorities to schools, but is about bringing schools into the legal responsibility; it is about ensuring that both local authorities and schools carry the legal responsibility for education. That is for completeness, to ensure that there is the necessary statutory focus on the particular objective.

Tavish Scott: I quite understand that, but is it fair to say that schools will at some point later this year have legal responsibility that they do not currently have for education of children?

John Swinney: They will have that responsibility once Parliament has agreed to the education bill.

Ross Greer: My question follows on from Fulton MacGregor's point about specific groups of young people. Can you build on what you said yesterday and address the issue of closing the attainment gap specifically for young people with additional support needs? Can you talk specifically about provision of dedicated staff capacity?

John Swinney: The deployment of staff in the education service is fundamentally an issue for individual local authorities. There will be examples around the country—I receive correspondence from different parts of the country—where provision is changing and being reduced. Members of the public are understandably concerned about that, and I acknowledge that concern. However, it rests fundamentally with local authorities to make judgments on those points.

The Government's approach—which is very much supported by local authorities—is designed to pursue an agenda whereby we put in place the mechanisms and support that are appropriate to each individual person. That was the substance of my answer to Mr Greer in Parliament yesterday. It is important that we work to ensure that young people have the resources that are appropriate to their needs.

Certain aspects of statute will require that, once a provision has been made under the additional support for learning legislation, which structures the entitlement that a young person with additional support needs would have, those resources have to be deployed appropriately within the education system.

The best answer that I can give is that the policy framework that we operate in—getting it right for every child—means that children with additional support needs should have those needs reflected in the design of the support that is made available to them.

Johann Lamont: On responsibilities being devolved to schools and education being distanced from local authorities, will the resources for those extra responsibilities come from an increase in council tax, rather than from an increase in funding from the Scottish Government?

John Swinney: We have made a specific commitment on additional resources that will come from the changes that the Government intends to make to council tax. Those changes were part of our election manifesto. Wider decisions will be taken, as part of the spending review, about allocation of resources across the board in public services in Scotland. The Government will make its decisions in that respect as part of the budget process.

Johann Lamont: So, you are saying that your specific commitment on closing the attainment gap is to be resourced through a mechanism that involves local authorities raising more council tax, rather than saying that the issue is a priority that will be reflected in the Scottish budget. I would have thought, if closing the attainment gap is a priority, that it would be at the centre of your budget rather than being left to what seems to be, frankly, a very odd mechanism. You say that it is core business, but it is to be funded by local government at the very point when local government is to have less influence over what is happening in education at local level.

John Swinney: Page 11 of the document that was published yesterday says:

“Currently, legal responsibilities for delivering education and raising standards in our schools sit largely with education authorities, not with the schools and teachers that teach our children and young people every day. We will address this imbalance by extending to individual schools responsibilities that currently sit with local authorities.”

It does not say “by taking away from local authorities and giving to schools”; it says “extending”. The idea is to bring schools into the legislative responsibility for delivering education.

Johann Lamont: You are not proposing to take responsibility for education away from local authorities.

John Swinney: The paragraph is very clear: this is about extending the legal responsibility to schools, not removing it from local authorities.

The second point concerns financial provision. The issues around attainment will, of course,

feature in the Government's budget. However, we set out in our manifesto a specific mechanism by which we would raise the additional resources to invest in attainment in schools, which involves the proposed changes to the council tax. That is what we are fulfilling as part of the delivery plan.

Johann Lamont: I accept that the mechanism is in your manifesto, but I think that it is still reasonable for us to test whether it is an effective mechanism for funding our schools. We can still have some transparency in that regard.

I was interested to read your opening statement, which you provided to the committee. I was surprised by the emphasis on teachers in education. As a former school teacher, I recognise their role and importance. However, with regard to the attainment gap, do you accept that some young people need to be supported by a broader school community? Some young people arrive at school, sit down with a book and a teacher in front of them and thrive, but things are more difficult for other young people.

What assessment have you made of the level of support that is required in schools, including behaviour support, learning support, administrative support, home link teachers and so on? I am talking about the kind of provision that supports young people to come to school when there is not necessarily someone pushing them towards school. Do you recognise the importance of the support community in closing the attainment gap?

John Swinney: I completely accept that point. I have seen some good examples of decisions that have been made by individual schools. That is why empowerment of schools and provision of resources directly to schools are important.

I have been to schools where it has been decided that the most important thing for some young people when they arrive in the building is to get the toaster on. Teachers, the school community, admin staff and home link workers are all doing those sorts of things, because they recognise that being hungry can be an impediment to a child's learning.

I have seen examples of inventive work on procurement of school uniforms, such that young people who cannot afford a uniform or do not turn up with one are equipped with one and are therefore on a par with all the other children. Fundamentally, it is about the school community being empowered to meet the needs of the children in its locality, which is why we are putting the emphasis on schools.

I have seen some interesting work focusing on the degree to which people from other disciplines, for example speech and language therapy, are integral to addressing the vocabulary gap for children when they present at primary 1. Some

inventive models that have been developed for speech and language therapists to work alongside teachers are very successful in closing that gap.

Johann Lamont: There is fantastic work in place—I have seen it myself, as an elected member and as a teacher—but there is anecdotal evidence that when budgets are being decided, those supports are stripped out of schools because the schools have to meet statutory responsibilities and core business. When you focus on teachers, you lose, for example, the attendance officer who monitors attendance, which is often an early signal of the problem of a child falling out of the system.

Would you be willing to commit at least to looking at that particularly important issue? It is one that will be raised by families of young people with additional support needs. Personal support and classroom assistants are disappearing from schools, which has a particular impact on those children. When there is pressure on budgets, those are the things that disappear, which has a disproportionate effect on specific young people. If we do not have the conversation about what happens to those resources for our schools, we are compounding a problem for a lot of our young people.

John Swinney: I am very happy to look at that issue and to discuss it with the committee on an on-going basis.

Johann Lamont: I am interested in some of the models for a solution, such as standardised testing and diluting the role of local authorities in school education. I was fortunate to work many years ago under Strathclyde Regional Council, where a radical approach was taken. Have you looked at good practice in local authorities in Scotland?

John Swinney: Yes, but I have not completed that exercise. The work that the delivery plan sets out about the governance review is designed to do that. Johann Lamont raised an interesting point about the capability of Strathclyde Regional Council in education policy development. I very much accept that the old regional councils had strong capability in development of education policy and capacity. That is now spread across 32 local authorities.

One of the issues that I am interested in—I made this point yesterday in my statement—is local clusters. In the north of Scotland, there is a grouping called the northern alliance, which is a number of local authorities—Aberdeen City Council, Aberdeenshire Council, Moray Council, Highland Council, Western Isles Council, Orkney Islands Council and Shetland Islands Council—coming together voluntarily to share good practice. I was at one of its sessions a couple of Mondays ago in Aberdeen. It was a substantial, thoughtful

and challenging occasion, with good input. It was obviously informing the development of education policy and thinking in all those localities. I am interested in exploring how we can ensure that we are confident that we have got all the capacity and capability that we require to guide effort at local level.

11:00

The Convener: I think that Ross Thomson wanted to come in with a supplementary.

Ross Thomson (North East Scotland) (Con): Yes. I wanted to follow on from Johann Lamont's point about resources and provision. I do not know whether the cabinet secretary is aware of this, but there is a report in *The Press and Journal* today in which a leading educational expert says that we could risk a lost generation because of cuts in classroom assistants, with the figures in Aberdeen falling from 191 in 2007 to 115 now. What provision will the cabinet secretary make to increase the number of qualified nursery teachers, as well as reversing the decline in classroom assistants? Both are absolutely crucial, particularly for our most vulnerable children.

John Swinney: I have not seen the report to which Mr Thomson refers, but I will certainly look at that in the course of the day.

Let me start with a general point about budgets. I am afraid that, since it is Mr Thomson who has raised the matter with me, I will give him a very direct response. We have to live within the resources that are available to us when we decide what to put in place. A large measure of those resources is determined by the financial decisions of the United Kingdom Government, so when a Conservative Government does to our public finances what the Conservative Government has done over the past five years, I must put it courteously to Mr Thomson that it is a little bit rich to press me on the availability of public finances. I have said it the once; I will try not to return to that point every time Mr Thomson asks me a question, but I cannot promise to be as well behaved as that in future.

There is an issue about resources and I accept that. We cannot spend the same money twice. I am beginning to sound as I used to sound when I was finance minister.

Tavish Scott: Hear, hear.

John Swinney: Old habits die hard, as Mr Scott knows.

Having said all that, Johann Lamont raised a serious point, and there is a mix of skills and talents that have to be in place in the education system. I acknowledge the importance of educational capability in the early years—the

delivery plan makes this point—because if young people are presenting with a vocabulary gap even at nursery at the age of two, the more we are capable of making interventions at that time to address the issue, the better. The earlier that we can nip it in the bud the better, so I accept in principle Mr Thomson's point about the importance of that skilled capability being available at all stages of the educational journey, but I simply put on record the fact that there will always be challenges around resources.

The Convener: There are a couple of questions on local authorities. Liz Smith will kick off.

Liz Smith: You have expanded on the idea of increasing autonomy for headteachers, but at the same time you want to have regional control, and that might provide a cluster model. Could you say something about that?

Secondly, if we are going to be really radical in an age when schools, colleges and universities are becoming more integrated in the general pattern of educational development, can you foresee a cluster model that might include colleges and universities in their local communities as well? We are talking about a widening access agenda, and it might have some interesting repercussions for furthering that widened access if the school community felt that there was a college or university that was close to the same ambitions that they had. Can you expand on that cluster model?

John Swinney: The cluster model concept will open up a debate about the most effective way of ensuring that we deliver education policy effectively at local level. In my answer to Johann Lamont a moment ago, I cited one of the education clusters, which is a gathering of local authorities that shares good practice and works collaboratively. It is working on some of the thinking on the challenge of teacher recruitment in different parts of the country.

I am certainly open to greater collaboration and co-operation between schools, colleges and universities. One of the great successes in the reform agenda is the progress that has been made on developing Scotland's young workforce. It has the advantage that the original report was very clearly written; it is one of the most clearly written things that I have seen in my puff. Simply as a consequence of that clarity, it has provided good, clear thinking at local level and has now been implemented probably more quickly than I have ever seen anything implemented. That is enabling young people's needs to be met most effectively.

The danger of the type of approach that I take of being out and about, listening to what is going on within the school community and the wider community is that I hear a range of different

anecdotes. However, I am hearing good examples of young people who might not have fulfilled their potential at school being identified much earlier in the school journey as being people who would benefit from vocational education. Good college partnerships are working with those young people and, before we know it, they are in a different learning environment that suits them and their needs, so they prosper.

Liz Smith: Will the clusters be a reaction to a demand in the local community rather than a model that is considered to be good and is transplanted into education in general? Will the approach be responsive to local demand, parents' wishes and schools' wishes, or are you considering introducing it across the board?

John Swinney: The subject is open for discussion as part of the governance review. I appreciate that the committee will want early clarity from me on all questions, but I intend to discuss the matter widely, because there are many different viewpoints that will have to be taken into account in how it develops. The points that Johann Lamont raised with me about her experience in Strathclyde Regional Council and how co-operation across a wider area, with more experience and resources available, can be effective are not lost on me. I must also think about how that can work in harmony with the work of Education Scotland, which is the principal organisation that works on the Government's behalf to improve attainment and performance in schools.

Daniel Johnson: My question follows on from Liz Smith's line of inquiry. We recognise that we need to review how we run and resource our schools. That is pivotal to improving attainment. However, the cabinet secretary raises a number of questions. We have already discussed where responsibility for standards lies between local authorities and schools, the role of the clusters and the role of central Government in setting the standards in the first place. I realise that that is work in progress but will the cabinet secretary outline in broad terms the different roles and responsibilities in the network of four players—the school, local authority, regional cluster and central Government—for setting the standards, reviewing them and resourcing?

John Swinney: That is an absolutely fascinating question. How long do you have, convener?

The Convener: How long do you have, cabinet secretary?

John Swinney: The visit of the President of the Republic of Ireland might be delayed as I work my way through the answer.

It is a question with which I am wrestling a great deal in my thinking. In my answer to a question that Liz Smith asked me yesterday on the education statement, I shared some of that dilemma. I do not in any way wish to personalise this but although Liz Smith is an advocate of schools having more and more autonomy to decide what they want to do, she then asked me a question in Parliament essentially saying, “Why don’t you just tell them what to do?”

Liz Smith: I did not quite say that.

John Swinney: Well, it felt a bit like that.

I am simply setting out that there is a dilemma between how much I should prescribe and how much I should leave to the judgment of teachers and schools. That is a very real debate that I am having on a host of issues. There is a lot of stuff in the delivery plan that I announced yesterday that was quite directional from me—there was quite a lot of, “Cut this workload; cut that bureaucracy; send in the inspectors”. That is because I need to move the system quickly to tackle some of the issues. I can then liberate teachers to teach, so that they can focus on closing the attainment gap.

In that respect, I am taking quite a series of directional steps. However, I will never, ever be able to make a better judgment in St Andrew’s house about what a child in—let me get my geography right—

Tavish Scott: South Morningside primary school.

Daniel Johnson: Yes.

John Swinney: Yes—about what a child in South Morningside primary school will need than the teachers and staff in South Morningside primary school. There is a tension there; there is a dilemma. However, I want to be clear that I want to have the whole system focused on closing the attainment gap and on improving attainment within our schools with as few impediments as possible in the way.

I chew over in my mind the question of what some of those impediments are. We will start at the coalface, with a teacher being asked by a headteacher to produce material to satisfy the headteacher, so that he or she can satisfy the education authority, so that the education authority can then satisfy Education Scotland, and so that Education Scotland can then satisfy me.

That suggests to me that we have multiple levels of bureaucratic burden on individuals when, ultimately, what we all want is to ensure that a child can get the educational experience that will enable them to fulfil their potential. Frankly, that is the \$64 million question, which then has to be addressed to answer the question that Mr Johnson fairly asked about where the balance lies between

schools, local authorities, regional clusters and the Scottish Government. To be complete, Mr Johnson, you missed out Education Scotland and the SQA.

Daniel Johnson: Thank you for correcting me.

John Swinney: I added those in for completeness. As a country, we have to look pretty hard at how that all works.

Daniel Johnson: Let me be blunt. There is a fear in all this that we somehow almost knee-jerk to the assumption that there is no value add for local authorities from that layer. There is a subtext in the discussion that is going on, which I would guard against from two perspectives. One is that there is that local perspective on a local authority area and balancing and reflecting that, which I think that local authorities can bring. Also, there is the element of accountability. As we have seen with other changes, when things are moved to local clusters the direct accountability to one body is lost—instead, it becomes some sort of portfolioised or amalgamated accountability.

Last night, Larry Flanagan said:

“if there is any suggestion of centralising control of schools and reducing the role of democratically elected local authorities in running education, that would be an issue of huge concern for the teaching profession.”

What is the cabinet secretary’s response to that?

John Swinney: My response would be that we are involved in a discussion about the point.

The one point that I want to make clear is that I do not have a model or a blueprint of what this is going to look like. I am simply—and, I think, fairly—saying that there is a lot of clutter in the system, which we need to get some clarity over. The question that we have to answer is the one that Mr Johnson poses—where and how is value best added? That might be the best way to address the question. Ultimately, a child cannot have a chance of fulfilling their potential without good educational input in the environment in which they are directly being educated. That is the first point at which value gets added.

11:15

The question then is where else value gets added and, in essence, that is what the governance review will explore. I go into that with a willing spirit to work with others and with the committee. Members here represent different geographies of the country, with different backgrounds. There are some well-experienced individuals in the field of education around the table, and I am very open to input from the committee on how we pursue this discussion.

Tavish Scott: On the theme of that very reasonable discussion—this is probably a totally unfair question—how many N5s should pupils at S4 be sitting? You seem to have encapsulated it neatly. For me, that is one of the fundamentals. Should you be setting how many they sit?

John Swinney: I wonder whether Mr Scott would forgive me if I respond—

Tavish Scott: By asking the question back?

John Swinney: By asking the question back. I had a discussion on that very point with my officials last night. Ultimately, teacher judgment in individual schools will determine the best approach to presentation for every young person involved.

We can work back from what a young person might leave school with. Let us say that a young person leaves school with five highers. Working back from that point, the theory of broad general education would say that that young person is not disadvantaged in any way if they sit six nat 5s as opposed to eight nat 5s because, ultimately, they have come away with their five highers. The theory would say that, by doing six nat 5s, they will have experienced a broad general education.

However, I accept that that does not create all the reassurance to pupils, parents and some teachers that the right judgment has been arrived at. I suppose it is a very fair question to ask me, and it also fits into the bill. Should I be saying that the number should be X? In weighing up that question, you have to explore the implications of me doing that for the confidence of teacher judgment. One of the things that I am anxious not to do in any respect is to undermine teacher judgment.

Tavish Scott: That is fair. Are you open to that discussion about that choice? I think that it is pretty fundamental for everyone in schools, never mind for parents and pupils.

John Swinney: I am coming into this job with an open mind, and I am very happy to explore those questions. I do not want people to go away with a sense that I am leaping to a judgment about that point.

Tavish Scott: No—that is fine.

John Swinney: Having tested the arguments about this whole question just last night, I thought that I heard a clear, rational explanation as to why a school would be perfectly within its rights to say that six nat 5s would be appropriate for candidates who were then proceeding to take highers at a later stage. There would be no damage or loss of potential for the young people who would be affected in that way.

Tavish Scott: I am sure that part of that very rational discussion was that six, by definition, limits what that is. Six goes into five, and the young person does five highers but, if it is not eight, there is, by definition, less choice. That has to be at least very carefully thought about when we are still struggling for science, technology, engineering and maths—STEM—subjects, languages and so on.

John Swinney: The answer to that point, which is underpinned by the thinking around curriculum for excellence, is that young people will benefit more in their educational journey from having a broad general education than from what there was when Mr Scott and I were wandering through ordinary grades and highers in what my son calls the olden days.

Tavish Scott: Indeed—and, in my case, badly.

Jenny Gilruth: Cabinet secretary, following the concerns that were highlighted by the Educational Institute of Scotland teaching union and, indeed, by my colleague Daniel Johnson, how will you ensure that national agencies such as Education Scotland and the SQA work with local authorities to ensure that there is consistency in the messages that go to the teaching profession?

John Swinney: This is one area in which I am prepared to be directional, because I think that it is too cluttered. If people were to say of the delivery plan that I announced yesterday that I had started a process of going in with tackety boots to attack bureaucracy, duplication and all the rest of it, I would not object at all to that headline, because that is what I am doing. I think that there is too much duplication and I do not think that there is sufficient alignment. An awful lot of the work that is asked of people is really not on the critical path of sustaining young people's educational journey.

What am I going to do about that? Over the past few weeks, it has commanded a very significant amount of my time and attention in order to get us to the point at which we were able to publish the delivery plan yesterday. My highest priority since I became education secretary has been to give the firmness of direction just at the end of the school term and before the start of the new term in August that will enable schools to operate in a certain fashion.

I recount a conversation that I had with the headteacher of a primary school in Inverclyde. We were talking about the issue of primary curriculum congestion—that is the delicate way that I can put it—and the headteacher simply said to me, "I've decided that I'm going to concentrate on literacy, numeracy and health and well-being, and in whatever time we've got left we'll do as much justice as we can to the rest of the stuff. I'm not going to do eight equal parts in the curriculum." I

said to him, "What about when the inspectors turn up?", and he said "Och, well, you know, we'll deal with that when they turn up."

I need to take that feedback, and the chief inspector of schools has heard that feedback from me. Our inspection approach has to respect the fact that that headteacher is making a judgment that is appropriate for the children in his locality, who are probably presenting themselves to his school with a vocabulary deficit and numeracy issues. If he does not get on top of those issues for those young people, they will never recover from them. Our inspection regime has to respect that, and it will. That is what the inspection guidance from the chief inspector is all about. It is about lining up all the different elements so that teachers can take empowered decisions.

The Convener: Liz Smith wants to come in.

Liz Smith: I have just one point. I entirely agree that subject choice should be about the best interests of each child and therefore there has to be flexibility in it. The issue for many parents, however, is that some schools cannot provide that flexibility because they are constrained by the subjects that they are able to offer. That is sometimes because of teacher shortages and sometimes because of a direction from a local authority that insists that schools must have a certain number of subjects. That is the problem; it is not that there cannot be flexibility within individual schools.

John Swinney: That is part of the dilemma, and there are some real challenges there. When a school gets a direction from a local authority that says, "You must do this," I quite understand the difficulty for the headteacher in saying, "Well, we're going to do something different in this school." That is not a comfortable position to be in, which is why I am very happy to engage in discussion about this particular question.

There are of course other models for tackling teacher shortages. Liz Smith takes a particular interest in the Perthshire area. Just the other week, I was at the awards ceremony for St John's academy, which is an absolutely fabulous school in my constituency, and I talked to young people who at different stages have done courses in other secondary schools in Perth city. I realise that, in Mr Scott's constituency, the idea of a secondary school cluster is a bold proposition but, in the city of Perth, the schools are working in a fashion that allows certain subjects at certain levels that are available in school A to be available also to pupils in schools B, C and D. Some imagination and innovation are needed to make that possible. It also provides a good experience for young people.

Liz Smith: Perth College is also involved.

John Swinney: Yes.

Fulton MacGregor: Does the cabinet secretary agree that the move to the cluster approach is at least a small step in bringing about real local democracy and decision making? I direct members to the fact that I am still a councillor in North Lanarkshire Council. Taking that council as an example, I point out that it has 70 elected members and is due to increase in size—it is bigger than the Welsh Assembly. Considering that, I welcome the fact that local areas will be able to take a wee bit more responsibility. Does the cabinet secretary agree that in that vein and on that basis there has been political unity in recent years about having more local democracy?

John Swinney: In my tenure as education secretary, I will try to keep on asking my question, which is, "Is this getting it right for every child?" Every time I take a decision, I am going to ask myself, "Is this the right thing for children's education or wellbeing?" I will keep on asking myself that question, all the time. Ultimately, making sure that the needs of children are met in the education or the wellbeing environment must drive our decision making. Mr MacGregor makes points about local decision making and local flexibility. If that delivers what is right for the child, then why not?

Johann Lamont: On that point, there is a question about local accountability at the very local level. Although Strathclyde Regional Council was a big organisation and was not always the most wonderful organisation to work for, it had at its root local councillors advocating for local communities and schools, who were able to influence the decisions that were made. If we are saying that local accountability can be about local pressure but without direct political influence in terms of local accountability, there would be a concern about that. I will leave that there.

The other question that I want to come back to—

John Swinney: Could I just say something on that first point? I totally accept the point about local political accountability, which is a central part of our education system. That is where statutory responsibility lies, and that needs to be respected and reflected, which is exactly why I will take forward the discussion with our local authority partners. There is sometimes a danger that local flexibility can be eroded by the need to follow a particular direction. That is the dilemma that I have openly aired with the committee about central direction, whether by me or by a local authority, versus meeting the needs and circumstances of individual schools. Ultimately, however, there needs to be political accountability on all those questions. There is a lot of accountability for the education of young people within the school environment and in other ways.

Johann Lamont: Another observation that I would make—I am not sure whether you would agree with it—is that although I recognise the role of the headteacher as a leader, there is no doubt that, in the past, progress in education has come from challenging the teaching profession, because there is a kind of comfort zone. It is great that there has been movement on mainstreaming and access to education for young people with disabilities, but there is no doubt that we cannot simply leave schools always to do their best and that there has to be some kind of safeguard.

I want to ask you a question about qualifications. I understand exactly what you mean about someone doing six nat 5s and going on to do five highers, but there is a different attainment gap. There is the young person who falls out of the system early for whatever reason. There is also the young person who comes from a background where there is a lot of deprivation, but who is very motivated and bright. However, they go to schools that do not offer the same level of opportunity to a range of highers. I taught at a school that offered only four highers, whereas other schools offered five. In a world where young people are now competing at higher education level, they need to have five highers, but a sixth is better. Having a good group of advanced highers is better still and, if they can show that they have X number of qualifications before that, all the better. The inevitable filtering out of young people—as higher education is being rationed—means that the attainment gap is partly about young people who have not had the opportunity to access qualifications.

11:30

I hear what you are saying about sharing, so that a student can sit their higher English in another school—we were doing that 20 years ago in the area where I taught. However, it meant that a young person who was already challenged was having to travel to access a class while a youngster in a better area—better in the sense that the school offered a broader range of subjects—sat in their own classroom and learned. It was immediately slightly more difficult for the first youngster, although I know lots of young people who rose to that challenge.

Have you looked at that different type of attainment gap, in which, no matter whether an individual is able to achieve their potential, their opportunities are more limited than in other areas? That might be a rural issue or a question of deprivation. Are you looking at that?

John Swinney: Yes, and that is an entirely valid point. It is integral to the issues that we have to consider about widening access to further and higher education. The question that Johann

Lamont raises is a further illustration of the debate that we need to have, as to whether we do things on a prescribed basis or on a flexible basis. There is no absolutely perfect answer to that question. We have to debate and discuss it and I am very open to colleagues' views on some of those questions.

To go back to my answer to Mr MacGregor, if we want to get it right for every child, why should a young person coming from a background that Johann Lamont just talked about be prevented from realising their full potential because they happen to go to a school with a more limited curriculum than others? That is an inequity that we have to tackle. The preamble to Johann Lamont's question was significant because it involved the question of challenging headteachers to do things differently, which is an essential part of having a framework in place—which we have with the national improvement framework—that is all about driving progress, achievement and improvements in attainment and outcomes for young people in Scottish education.

Johann Lamont: Do you accept the picture that I described, which is that part of the issue is simply about resources, and that the formula for staffing or whatever does not recognise the attainment gap that comes from not having sufficient teachers across subjects? I have seen, for example, that a school will no longer have a modern studies teacher, a geography teacher and a history teacher, because that does not make sense in terms of numbers. Later on, however, that very bright child will not be able to study geography and history, geography and modern studies, or whatever it might be. Do you recognise that there is a case for at least looking at how resources are directed in that way to address the attainment gap?

John Swinney: The first point that I will make is that I am not sure that all those judgments are about resources.

Johann Lamont: Not all of them, but some.

John Swinney: Some, maybe, but I would not concede that they are all about resources.

Secondly, as we move towards a system where we put more resources directly into particular schools—resources that are driven by the criteria around deprivation and disadvantage—then, obviously, there are mechanisms in place in those schools to try to address those issues.

The Convener: Thank you very much for that, cabinet secretary. I am going to move on to further education—Gillian Martin has a question on that topic—and then we are going to wrap up.

Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP): I am from a college background. I recently spoke to

Colleges Scotland and various people from further education about the idea of their having more flexibility in how they can use funding. Does the cabinet secretary have any thoughts on that?

John Swinney: I would need to see a little bit more on the specifics from the college sector about what their aspirations are in that regard. We have taken a number of very clear decisions to relate the activities that are undertaken in colleges more directly to the world of work. That has been a major part of Government policy in the past few years, and we are seeing the benefits of that policy in the outcomes that are being achieved. I am certainly very happy to consider the desire for flexibility in the use of funding by colleges, but I would need details on the points that they would like to consider.

Gillian Martin: I have a recent and specific example of good practice in North East Scotland College, which is in my area. It has footprints in schools—for example, the Ellon academy learning centre—and it has a very close relationship with Robert Gordon University. The college principal's description of the issue was that he did not mind how funding was used, because it is public funding. He was very much into using and sharing resources across schools and colleges. Has that been your experience in speaking to other colleges?

John Swinney: Increasingly it has been, although I would not say that the journey is complete. I am very mindful of the learner journey. To go back to what I have said, taking the Ellon academy example, there will be some young people whose educational outcomes are much improved and whose needs are fulfilled much more effectively by the fact that, instead of going through one door, into an Ellon academy classroom, they go through another door, which is a North East Scotland College door. If that is the case, we should celebrate that. Indeed, that closer working between schools and colleges is exactly what we want. There is a role for employers, too, and all the thinking about developing Scotland's young workforce is integral to that process. I would be very open to such proximity.

The Convener: We are going to draw the meeting to a close now. We said in our pre-meeting that there was a great deal of ground to cover, and although you have been answering questions for about an hour and 40 minutes, cabinet secretary, there is still a lot of ground to cover.

Johann Lamont: So you are not getting out. [*Laughter.*]

The Convener: We will have other sessions in September, but I really appreciate that you have given your time to answer our questions today,

cabinet secretary. You have created lots of work for the committee. Thank you very much.

I ask non-committee members to leave.

11:38

Meeting continued in private until 12:02.

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