



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Education and Skills Committee

Wednesday 2 November 2016

Session 5



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EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE

9th 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)

*Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green)

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)

*Richard Lochhead (Moray) (SNP)

*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:

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab) (Committee Substitute)

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 2 November 2016

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:46]

Subordinate Legislation

Additional Support for Learning (Sources of Information) (Scotland) Order 2016 (SSI 2016/299)

The Convener (James Dornan): Good morning. I welcome everyone to the Education and Skills Committee's ninth meeting in session 5. I remind everyone present to turn their mobile phones and other devices to silent for the meeting.

The first item of business is consideration of a Scottish statutory instrument that is subject to the negative procedure, which means that it comes into effect unless Parliament agrees to a motion to annul. No such motion has been lodged. Do members have any comments? Members have no comments.

Overview Sessions

09:47

The Convener: Item 2 is an evidence session with the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills. Good morning, cabinet secretary.

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): Good morning.

The Convener: Before the October recess, the committee heard from six panels of witnesses on matters that go across our remit. The purpose of those evidence sessions was to inform this session with the cabinet secretary and the committee's on-going work programme. I thank everyone who has contributed to the committee's work so far, and I welcome to the meeting John Swinney, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, and from the Scottish Government Aileen McKechnie, director of advanced learning and science, and Fiona Robertson, director of learning. I understand that the cabinet secretary wishes to make a short opening statement.

John Swinney: I am grateful to the committee for the opportunity to explore the issues that stakeholders have raised with the committee in the overview sessions that have been held since September. It may help if I provide some context for our discussions by outlining my plans and priorities for early learning and childcare and for education and skills and by setting out recent progress that we have made.

Education is the Government's defining mission, and I am determined to ensure that every child has the same opportunity to succeed. As I said when I appeared before the committee in June, I am focused on delivering three key priorities: ensuring that our children and young people get the best start in life, which will provide a strong foundation for their future; relentlessly pursuing the twin goals of equity and excellence for all in Scottish education, which will ensure that every child reaches their full potential with the right range of skills, qualifications and achievements to allow them to succeed; and widening opportunities to access higher, further and vocational education by opening up the education system for all our young people and delivering greater flexibility and more opportunities for every child to succeed.

Those three priorities are underpinned by the policy frameworks of getting it right for every child, curriculum for excellence and developing the young workforce in Scotland. It is important to remember what those familiar programmes and their acronyms stand for: they outline our ambition and succinctly describe what we are aiming to achieve.

As a Government, we have made clear commitments to using those policies to deliver improvements, and demonstrable progress has been made in doing so. Since I became education secretary just short of six months ago, we have committed to baby boxes for every child in Scotland, with pilots commencing in January 2017; launched a consultation on how we deliver the transformational expansion of early learning and childcare and established a programme of trials; begun a wide-ranging engagement on the named person approach to ensure that that vital innovation impacts swiftly and positively; launched a governance review to examine how best to devolve more meaningful powers to schools and communities; provided teachers with a clear and concise statement of the curriculum for excellence framework, along with guidance on assessing progress in literacy and numeracy; invited Education Scotland to assess the curriculum-related workload at local authority level and to follow that up to ensure that action is taken where it is needed; reduced the workload of teachers and learners for national qualifications by agreeing to remove mandatory unit assessments at national 5, higher and advanced higher over the next three years; announced an independent review of the care system to build on wide-ranging improvements in kinship care, foster care and residential care; and launched an independent review of further and higher education student support to ensure that the entire system is equitable and fair for students—particularly the most vulnerable.

We published last week the conclusions of the first phase of the review of enterprise and skills provision, which will ensure that our enterprise and skills agencies work hand in glove with each other and collaboratively with their business, academic and civic partners to optimise economic impact across Scotland. The second phase of the review will consider how to improve the learner journey as part of the process. I continue to see great examples of innovative and creative work where professionals are actively seeking to use the flexibility and resources that they have to make a significant and discernible difference to the lives of children and young people that addresses the needs of individuals and supports their aspirations.

I am sure that the committee has a range of questions, which I will be delighted to engage with.

The Convener: Thank you. We have a great deal of ground to cover and limited time. To ensure that I do not need to curtail discussion to get through all the themes, I ask for both questions and responses to be kept focused and to the point. The questions will be based on the themes that we have dealt with over the past few months.

We will start with questions on further and higher education. I have a question on the impact that Brexit will have mainly on higher education, but also on further education. What discussions has the Scottish Government had with the bodies that will be impacted by Brexit? Can you give us any information about how we will approach it?

John Swinney: We have had extensive dialogue with the higher and further education sectors in that respect. The Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science and I have been involved in those discussions with institutions. The committee will be familiar with some of the concerns that institutions have expressed. The principal and vice-chancellor of the University of Edinburgh, Professor Sir Timothy O'Shea, made strong remarks on the issue to the House of Commons Scottish Affairs Committee just last week.

The sector's concerns relate to three factors in particular, the first of which is the attractiveness of our higher education institutions for students from other countries, including those in Europe, and what signals have been given as a consequence of the Brexit vote. The committee will be familiar with the fact that the Government has provided the assurance that, for students who enter our institutions in 2016-17 and 2017-18, there will be no change to their financial arrangements in relation to fees or financial circumstances once they decide to come here. We have given that commitment and we hope that it helps the institutions in their recruitment and marketing exercises.

The second concern relates to access to research funds and research co-operation. Some assurance has been given on that, but the point that worries the institutions most is the sense that, because of the uncertainty caused by the Brexit vote, it would be disadvantageous to have institutions from the United Kingdom as part of international and European panels of research activity. That is a terribly painful issue for institutions to deal with because of the academic and research excellence that exists in them.

The third issue that is at the heart of the institutions' anxiety is about what attracts members of staff. All universities and colleges in Scotland are populated by individuals from many countries, which is part of their strength. Some of our universities' research strength is a direct result of people from a variety of backgrounds bringing their research skills together in one place. The research is not inherent in the buildings of the institutions; it is a product of the interaction of those individuals.

The institutions are particularly concerned about those points, which are being fed directly into the work of my ministerial colleagues who are leading

on the negotiations and discussions with the UK Government on the implications of Brexit. We are prioritising those concerns in the negotiations and all measures are being taken to ensure that the UK Government is aware of the issues.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Notwithstanding the issues that you have outlined about the Brexit scenario, which is obviously serious, there are domestic concerns. Do you agree with the comment that has been made several times by Lucy Hunter Blackburn that the Scottish Government's commitment to free tuition is one of the reasons for the considerable drop in bursaries and grants as a percentage share of the student support pot?

John Swinney: I do not agree with those comments.

Liz Smith: Will you expand on that? At the weekend, the Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science was in a bit of difficulty at the BBC when she tried to provide the evidence for why the free tuition policy delivers the best option for students and universities. The statistics imply that there is a great deal of difficulty for those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds.

John Swinney: The first thing to say is that free tuition means that young people from deprived backgrounds do not have to wrestle with the implications of paying back £27,000 in fees, which would be their personal liability at the end of their academic experience if they were at an institution in the rest of the United Kingdom. That would be a significant factor for an individual from a deprived background to consider as part of judging whether to embark on higher education.

There are deeper questions in relation to the uptake of and the eligibility for bursaries, which was the rationale for the Scottish Government commissioning the review of student support that we announced last week and which will be led by Jayne-Anne Gadhia. We need to ensure that the judgments that we made in 2013-14—they were driven by our dialogues with stakeholders and their purpose was to maximise the resources in the hands and pockets of students—turn out to have the intended effect. We have to look carefully at the questions of student support, which is precisely why we established the independent review.

Liz Smith: The defining agenda for the Scottish Government is to widen access and to ensure equity, yet the statistics show a percentage drop in bursaries and grants. That is having a considerable effect in not allowing as many students from disadvantaged backgrounds to attend university here as in other parts of the UK. What is the Scottish Government's answer to that?

It seems to me that these are difficult times for disadvantaged students.

10:00

John Swinney: We are seeing an increase in the proportion of Scotland-domiciled full-time first-degree entrants from the most deprived areas in Scotland going to Scottish universities—that figure is rising. It was 11.2 per cent in 2006-07 and it now stands at 14 per cent. The Government has been clear and focused on the widening access agenda to ensure that we reach 20 per cent by 2030. The pattern of progress is in the right direction for achieving that objective.

We must take a range of necessary measures that are about not just student support but the work that has been set out for us by the commission on widening access. However, it is not possible to discount the significance of the impact on a young person who is considering embarking on higher education of having to contemplate assuming an additional student loan debt of up to £27,000 over three years. That is the comparable example in the rest of the United Kingdom to the situation in Scotland that Liz Smith put to me.

Liz Smith: Except that there does not appear to be much evidence that that is putting students off applying to universities. The key issue that I am getting at is that, although the Scottish Government says that the approach is all about equity, the number of bursaries and grants that are available in Scotland has dropped substantially as a share of student support. That money does not have to be paid back, whereas a student loan has to be paid back.

The statistics that have been produced show clearly that the balance is much more in favour of the loans system. Will your review look at that problem? The genuine concern is that the situation is having a detrimental impact on widening access.

John Swinney: That is precisely why I answered your first question as I did. We need to explore such issues, which is why we have commissioned Jayne-Anne Gadhia to—

Liz Smith: You do not deny that there is a problem.

John Swinney: We have commissioned Jayne-Anne Gadhia to do what we promised to do, which is to undertake an independent review of student support.

As I said in my earlier answer, when the arrangements were put in place in 2013-14, the objective of the Government, stakeholders and all those who welcomed the reforms that were made was to put more money into students' pockets.

That was the rationale in 2013-14, and what we announced at that time was widely supported by stakeholders and endorsed by the National Union of Students Scotland. We need to ensure that those arrangements are working effectively, which is why we have invited Jayne-Anne Gadhia to undertake that work, and we look forward to the conclusions of her exercise.

Liz Smith: I have one last question. Do you accept that those who have heard the Government make a strong commitment to free higher education would like to see the evidence that supports the idea that the policy is better than other possible funding solutions that would benefit not only universities and students but those from poorer backgrounds, to whom we want to widen access? Where is the evidence to support that policy?

John Swinney: There are two points to make—one is about political philosophy and outlook and one is about evidence. On a point of political philosophy and outlook, I take a fundamentally different view from Liz Smith. We should be honest about our differences, because in politics it is important that we are honest about our differences of view. I believe in free access to higher education and believe that part of the commitment that our country should make to young people in our society is that they should have access to that facility. I know that Liz Smith does not agree with that view, but—I make this crystal clear—that is the philosophical and political position that I hold.

The second point is evidence based. The proportion of Scotland-domiciled full-time first-degree entrants to Scottish universities has been rising since the Government came to office, during which time we have had the policy of free access to higher education. If Liz Smith wants evidence of how that policy has succeeded, I urge her to read the statistics that I have put on the record twice, which make exactly that point.

Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab): Under the policy of free access to higher education, has the number of places been capped? Would you like to comment on the view that it is more difficult for a Scottish student to get into university now than it was five years ago? Although we may be funding—some would say underfunding—places at university, are we rationing that funding by qualification? If you are not sure whether that is the case, are you willing to do research into whether it is?

John Swinney: I go back to the statistics that I cited in my answers to Liz Smith. The number of young people from the most deprived 20 per cent of areas of Scotland who are going to university is rising, which demonstrates that access is improving.

There is a wider debate about what the appropriate destinations are for young people to enable them to fulfil their educational potential. We have a broad range of destinations. I take the view, which I think is widely held, that university is not an appropriate destination for everyone in our society. A range of choices and destinations are available for young people. I am satisfied that we have the right mechanisms in place to ensure that young people from the most deprived backgrounds can access higher education, although we have higher ambitions to secure in that respect, and the Government will concentrate on those efforts.

Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP): I want to go back to research funding and how it relates to the implications of Brexit and our relationship with the UK Government. A recent development is the new post-study work visa pilot, which might increase the pressure on our universities. Universities Scotland expressed concern to us that it was not consulted. Were there any negotiations between the Scottish and UK Governments on that?

John Swinney: We have consistently made representations on the matter over a period of time, and I acknowledge that we have done so with wide cross-party support from within the Parliament, which is appreciated and valued by the Government. The nature of that cross-party support makes the argument ever more compelling. Despite the fact that we have just gone through a degree of political division and debate, it is important that we acknowledge that there are areas of political agreement within the Scottish Parliament. There is also agreement on the issue outwith the Parliament; there has rarely been an issue that has commanded such universal support within the educational community.

Points have been made to the UK Government over a long period about the removal of the post-study work visa provisions and the efforts to seek their resumption. A specific avenue of discussion was opened up as a consequence of the report of the Smith commission, on which Tavish Scott and I served. One of its conclusions was that an effort should be made to advance the issue. The Scottish Government took that up with the UK Government, which decided not to make such provision. I felt that there was a sense that there would be no movement on the issue until after the Brexit referendum. I did not quite imagine the movement that there would be on the issue after the referendum, which was to completely ignore the interests and perspectives of Scottish institutions and the unity of purpose in Scotland, and to make facilities for a new scheme available to a number of institutions south of the border. That is a perverse outcome.

I assure Gillian Martin and the committee that the Government will continue to sustain and represent the cross-party unity that exists in Scotland in an effort to persuade the UK Government to make available such provision, which would help our institutions.

Gillian Martin: On a slightly different topic, the same witnesses raised concerns about the UK Higher Education and Research Bill. In the coming weeks, we will hold an evidence session to allow those concerns to be expanded on. The relevant parties have probably expressed the same concerns to you. How do you see that bill progressing? What does the Scottish Government intend to do by way of negotiation on that?

John Swinney: We have been in close contact with the UK Government on the UK Higher Education and Research Bill. Indeed, I met John Kingman, the prospective chair of the new UK research organisation, just last week. He was on a visit to Scotland—I do not think that it was his first visit to Scotland in that capacity—to signify the importance that he attaches to the UK research organisation that is established having a UK-wide perspective, notwithstanding the fact that it will also have responsibility for research in England.

The clear substance of that conversation was to reassure the Government in Scotland that there will be a strong focus on the way in which Scotland's interests are taken into account in that perspective. The Scottish Government suggested amendments to the bill to safeguard the interests of research and innovation policy in Scotland and to ensure that the arrangements that are put in place recognise and acknowledge Scotland's particular interests. We think that the UK Government is unlikely to take on board all of those amendments, but we will continue to have a discussion to ensure that we protect the interests of Scottish institutions and that the commitments that I heard last week are followed up in the arrangements that are put in place.

A particular issue is access to the research framework. It is an option for Scottish institutions to participate in that. We have made it clear to Scottish institutions that, if they wish to do that, they should feel free to do so.

Gillian Martin: As a result of the things that we have discussed with regard to Brexit and the issues about research staff from European Union countries, as well as that bill, there is potential for a perfect storm in our universities. What contingency plans is the Scottish Government making to support universities if EU staff are not available to them and they cannot attract research funding in the way that they do at present? That is probably an impossible question to answer at the moment.

John Swinney: There are quite a few uncertainties around what the arrangements might look like. If EU nationals are unable to remain in employment at Scottish institutions, Brexit will have delivered an absolutely disastrous outcome to Scottish institutions and Principal O'Shea's comments last week will be absolutely vindicated. Over time, I have seen principals of universities express some pretty strong opinions about certain things, but I do not think that I have seen commentary with the level of unease that Principal O'Shea expressed last week about the implications of Brexit.

The United Kingdom Government has to tread extremely carefully on those questions. All higher and further education institutions in Scotland are a collection of individuals from many different countries who are working together to create research and teaching excellence. If that situation is damaged or weakened one bit as a consequence of Brexit, we will suffer negative economic consequences.

Gillian Martin raises a fair question about what the Government in Scotland will do to try to address that issue. We will, of course, work closely with our university colleagues to do as much as we can to articulate their concerns and address any possible negative implications.

Gillian Martin: Thank you.

The Convener: Johann Lamont has a couple of questions on colleges.

Johann Lamont: The cabinet secretary did not answer my question on the simple proposition that, if there is a cap on places, people are potentially being excluded from qualifications by rationing. The point is not that people are going to university inappropriately; it is that somebody with qualifications that would have got them into university five years ago will no longer get into university. Will you at least make a commitment to explore that proposition and ensure that your policy is not causing that situation?

I have two points to flag up on college places, both of which relate to the attainment gap and young people achieving their potential. The first is on the evidence that we have received on the Government's decision to reduce the number of part-time places. The NUS in particular has expressed concern about that policy, which has a particular impact on women, carers, adult returners and people who perhaps would not be able to stay in a full-time place. Have you investigated the impact of that policy decision and will you review it?

Secondly, there is the question of the drop-out rate in FE. Something like 36 per cent of people who take on FE courses fail to complete them. When Shona Struthers from Colleges Scotland

was before the committee, she said that it was possible that some of that could be explained by people having positive destinations—people stopping their courses because they had something else to do. We were told that further information would be provided in a publication entitled “College Leaver Destinations 2014-15”, but it does not provide that information. Have you considered why there is such a high level of drop-out in further education? What is your Government exploring to address that problem?

10:15

John Swinney: We must always be mindful and focused on ensuring that people reach positive destinations and have access to educational opportunities that address their circumstances and their needs. When we look at some of the detail that underpins the question, we see that the number of part-time college enrolments in HE and FE has remained stable since 2012-13. As regards the part-time position, there is a continuity around those points.

Johann Lamont is correct in that the Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council, in response to guidance from ministers, deprioritised short courses, which were often around five hours in duration, and that had an effect on the number of students who were participating and the head-count calculation that was involved.

In 2014-15, 97 per cent of learning hours were delivered in courses that led to a recognised qualification. That was an 8 per cent increase since 2006-07. The purpose of that reform was to ensure that more and more of the activity that was undertaken in colleges enabled people to acquire qualifications that enabled them to progress to positive destinations.

On Johann Lamont’s point about the participation of women in colleges, I note that the number of women studying on full-time courses has gone up by 16 per cent since 2006-07. Although I accept that there has been a shift in the emphasis from part-time to full-time courses, the purpose of that has been quite clear. It is to try to enable individuals to gain access to qualifications that will help them in their progression to positive destinations. If that is the overall strategic direction that has been delivered, then, looking at it from the perspective of women, we see that there has been a significant increase in the number of women undertaking full-time courses. In 2014-15, women accounted for a majority of the college population, at 52 per cent.

Johann Lamont: So is the NUS simply wrong to suggest that, in the context of significant cuts to further education, the deliberate targeting of part-time places has a disproportionate impact on

women, disabled learners and mature adult returners? It says that it would like to see some rebalancing of that. I think that a gloss has been put on the matter that, somehow, those are all leisure courses, but that profoundly misunderstands the learner journey for some people.

John Swinney: Obviously, I will be very happy to discuss those questions. However, I make the point that, when we look at the numbers of full-time equivalent places, we see that there were 119,078 in 2014-15 and 116,399 in 2012-13, so I think that some of the language that Johann Lamont uses to characterise the situation is not valid.

Johann Lamont: So the NUS position is wrong, then. There has not been a disproportionate impact.

John Swinney: I am simply saying that the evidence does not substantiate what Johann Lamont is saying. The number of full-time equivalent places has grown between 2012-13 and 2014-15. I am the first to admit that there has been a change of emphasis to prioritise more full-time learning—I am not going to sit here and deny that. However, the purpose of that has been to create better capability among individuals to gain access to the labour market. As a consequence, a greater proportion of learning is now focused on courses that lead to a recognised qualification.

Johann Lamont: First, you miss the point that people may be unable to take up a full-time course because of their caring responsibilities. Those people are not transferring to full-time courses; they are simply being excluded. It is not my comment, but that of the NUS that that balance is wrong and it should be remedied.

Secondly, you have not answered the question about the 36 per cent drop-out rate in the college sector. What are you doing to understand the reasons for that and the extent to which it is caused by the different funding regime in colleges? I emphasise again the importance of the college sector in providing a bridge into education for people who, frankly, have been failed by education at the school stage.

John Swinney: On the last point, I agree unreservedly with Johann Lamont. When I talk about the priorities that are very much in my mind as I pursue my responsibilities, I mean the three policy foundations for what we are doing in education: getting it right for every child, the curriculum for excellence and developing Scotland’s young workforce. The concept behind getting it right for every child is that we have to enable and support individuals to fulfil their potential. If people have had an unhappy educational experience in school, we have to find

a way of intervening and delivering a better outcome for them at a later stage in life.

The learner journey that Johann Lamont talks about is an entirely appropriate one, with individuals coming into the system and acquiring new skills that will help them to move on and do other things. They might not be able to come in on day 1 and do a full-time course. That is why short courses that lead to work and progression within the system are still funded in our colleges. It is right to ensure that progression is available to individuals. Equally, however, it is right that we focus more and more on ensuring that individuals can acquire skills that enable them to make an economic contribution in our society.

I will explore the drop-out rate further and identify the factors. There is nothing desirable about the situation. We have to understand better what is causing it and ensure that, if we can do something to remedy it, we do exactly that. However, colleges will be focused on minimising that drop-out rate by ensuring that they deliver learning in a fashion that meets the needs of individuals.

Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD):

Recently, you hosted a series of extremely lengthy meetings in Inverness with regard to the University of the Highlands and Islands. Can you assure me that the further education colleges will now be full partners in the Highlands and Islands with regard to delivering courses for students, rather than having the traditional top-down university model foisted on them, which many people have said that they were disappointed to see?

John Swinney: As Mr Scott knows—obviously, because he asked the question—I have spent a lot of time in the past few months trying to ensure that the University of the Highlands and Islands is able to fulfil its potential. It is one of the most exciting economic propositions for the Highlands and Islands, which is why I have devoted a significant amount of my personal time to making progress on the matter.

The argument for establishing a University of the Highlands and Islands was predicated on the fact that, however good the colleges were, they were not able to offer opportunities that would enable young people to remain in the Highlands and Islands to complete their higher education, which in some cases they now can, even up to PhD level. That is one factor that will help with regard to access. Another argument was that it would provide a compelling reason for people to come to the Highlands and Islands to pursue their education and research careers. None of that could have been achieved if my predecessors had not succeeded in achieving university title for the University of the Highlands and Islands. That is a massive prize.

On Monday, I chaired the convention of the Highlands and Islands, at which the principal of the University of the Highlands and Islands gave a presentation. I cannot remember his exact words, but he summed up the situation in one bullet point—once I rediscover it in my mind, I shall write to Mr Scott with it. He said that we should have learning in all the various Highlands and Islands communities but that, as a consequence of the UHI platform, that should have global reach. That is exactly what I want to create: education in the communities with a global reach.

The University of the Highlands and Islands will develop not in a top-down fashion but by building on the strong foundations of the colleges within it, but—there is always a “but” with these questions—the need for co-operation and collaboration between institutions must be acknowledged to ensure that there is no wastefulness or duplication.

Secondly, it must be accepted that there will be major projects that will deliver on our global ambition for the University of the Highlands and Islands. It has done a super job in establishing its centre for health sciences, which delivers a fantastic level of global capability in the Highlands in life and health sciences research and teaching. The institutions must collaborate to make that work possible. That might mean that not all the projects can happen in every locality in the Highlands and Islands, but I assure Mr Scott that the work will proceed based on the federated nature of the college input to UHI. I will ensure that, alongside that, the university will deliver a global reach.

The Convener: Iain Gray has a supplementary.

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): I want to follow up on Johann Lamont’s point. Cabinet secretary, you made it clear that you felt that NUS Scotland was wrong to say that the college reforms have had a disproportionate impact on women and second-chance learners. However, the Auditor General for Scotland made exactly the same point in exactly the same terms in her recent report on the FE sector, “Scotland’s colleges 2016”. Is she wrong, too?

John Swinney: It depends on the purpose of the question. If that is to say that certain learning opportunities that were available in the past are no longer available, I accept your point. Those opportunities are no longer available because we took a deliberate decision to focus more learning on progression towards qualifications and employment in order to enable and equip individuals to make an economic contribution to our society. I do not think that that aim is undesirable, and I would be very surprised if it was viewed as such.

Short courses that lead to work or progression remain in the system and are still funded. There are a variety of different access mechanisms that enable individuals to make the journey back into education where education has not worked out for them the first time round. However, short courses of around five hours were deliberately de-prioritised to increase individuals' ability, to enhance their employability and to lead to progression. That is the purpose of the reforms that we have undertaken.

The Convener: Colin Beattie has the last question on this area.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): Colleges Scotland has stated in a submission to the Government's 2017 spending review that delivering national pay scales for college lecturers could cost up to £80 million. That is a wee bit alarming in terms of funding for the college sector. Comments have also been made to the effect that funding that sits with the arm's-length foundations could be utilised to meet those costs, which clearly should not be the case. Do you have any comments on that?

10:30

John Swinney: We have put in place measures to address the issues around the pay arrangements in the college sector, which will be part of the discussions that the Government will have on the wider financial settlement for the college sector.

I have to be clear with the committee that the financial decisions will be made in the extremely challenging context of the forthcoming spending review. We have put in place a number of different measures to assist the colleges in resolving the issues and we will of course continue to discuss those questions.

The arm's-length funds were put in place to ensure that colleges remained incentivised to generate income and to be efficient. The resources can of course be used appropriately to support and enhance the college propositions that are undertaken. I understand from the funding council that that is exactly how they are being used.

The Convener: Before we move to a question on skills from Ross Thomson, I remind people that we have a full agenda and we have spent 45 minutes on the first theme alone. I ask for questions and responses to be as short as possible.

Ross Thomson (North East Scotland) (Con): As the cabinet secretary knows, the apprenticeship levy is coming into force next year. He is no doubt aware that it is expected that as

much as up to £300 million could be made available to the Scottish Government. Does the Scottish Government intend to reinvest the money that is raised from the levy in developing a skilled workforce, particularly in the region that I represent—that is incredibly important—and to ensure that that money is directed in that way rather than being siphoned off into any other projects?

John Swinney: First, I think that Mr Thomson is being a tad optimistic with his numbers. We will wait and see what comes, but I think that he is being a bit on the optimistic side. I also point out that those sums will be allocated as part of our block grant allocation from the United Kingdom Government in the light of the autumn statement.

Secondly, the Government intends to use the resources that arise from the apprenticeship levy to support the development of our skills agenda. Detailed announcements on that will be made once Mr Mackay has made his financial statement.

Ross Thomson: As part of the committee's work, we know that the commission for developing Scotland's young workforce highlighted that about 30 per cent of employers have contact with colleges and schools and that a lot of work could be done to improve that number. That point follows on from some of the comments that have been made about the loss of flexible and part-time places in colleges. What steps will the Government take to help to improve that relationship between colleges and the private sector? How could those links be built, particularly in relation to skills and developing the young workforce?

John Swinney: I have put it on the record before, but I am delighted to do so again: the developing Scotland's young workforce report that was produced by Sir Ian Wood was one of the best pieces of work that I have seen in my public life. As a consequence of the manner in which Sir Ian undertook that task, the implementation of that report has been very energetically pursued by a range of different organisations because, essentially, they agreed with the report's contents and had felt involved in the process. It was a model exercise in how such things can be undertaken.

The fundamental point that Mr Thomson raises is an important one, with which I agree entirely. We cannot have enough connections between the world of work and business and our academic and educational services. As I go round the country, I see a significant development—a manifestation, in fact—of the application of developing Scotland's young workforce in schools. With Mr Hepburn, I attended one of the gatherings of the developing Scotland's young workforce national group, which is chaired by Rob Woodward. We met in Our

Lady's high school in Cumbernauld. We had a demonstration from the pupils there of the steps that they have taken to incorporate developing Scotland's young workforce into the life of the school. In a very short space of time a remarkable amount had been achieved, and that has been replicated broadly across the country. I am sure that more needs to be done to enforce that, but I give Mr Thomson the assurance that the Government is very much focused on encouraging that.

I met Rob Woodward, the chair of the national group, yesterday. Later in November I will meet the chairs of all the organisations around the country, which are doing a lot of good work in ensuring that practical work is undertaken to establish the connections between schools, colleges and the world of work.

Returning to my earlier point, I give the committee the assurance that we view developing Scotland's young workforce as one of the three foundations of our education policy. If we get the arrangements for that correct, we may reduce the number of individuals whom Johann Lamont cited to me as people who have not had a very good educational experience by identifying their needs earlier and having connections to the world of work. That may enable us to create opportunities and links that will better serve those individuals, rather than trying to maintain their school presence when, in all honesty, we accept that it is not going to work very well for them. I see developing Scotland's young workforce as opening up very significant opportunities for young people to secure outcomes that are appropriate for their needs.

Richard Lochhead (Moray) (SNP): Good morning, cabinet secretary. On Monday, I had the pleasure of visiting Skills Development Scotland Moray, which is a very good example of collaboration between Skills Development Scotland, the schools, the college and employers. It is certainly working well in Moray.

What will the impact of Brexit be on Scotland's skills agenda? I appreciate that that is very much linked to your previous portfolio. Until now, skills gaps have often been plugged, in part, by people being attracted from overseas to work in Scotland. Looking ahead to the challenges that we may face in plugging those skills gaps, how would that influence your skills agenda?

John Swinney: The answer to that lies in knowing the answer to the question of what will happen with the free movement of individuals. As Mr Lochhead will know intimately from the area that he represents—I see this with a range of organisations around the country—there are organisations that would literally find it difficult to continue to operate without the mobile workforce

that they have been able to attract. That is a significant issue for us, and that is why the question of what the free movement of individuals represents should not in any way be underestimated. I can readily see how we could face skills shortages as a consequence of such measures.

That is why we have to ensure that those points are fully and properly understood by the United Kingdom Government in its negotiations. The general ethos of our approach on skills is to be involved in engaged dialogue with different stakeholders, ensuring that we have all the necessary skills available to us in different localities.

On Monday, I attended the convention of the Highlands and Islands, where we had an update on the delivery of the skills investment plan that has been facilitated by the convention of the Highlands and Islands and anchored by Skills Development Scotland. A tremendous amount of work is going on in dialogue with companies and organisations so that we weave together the intelligence on skills requirements and so that we address that satisfactorily.

The Convener: We move on to attainment and curriculum for excellence.

Liz Smith: My question is related mainly to SQA issues and the question of attainment. You were, rightly, very frustrated when you told the chamber that some aspects of the national 5 computing science exam were not particularly accurate as the exam paper contained both typographical and coding errors. You said that you would have regular meetings with Janet Brown. Recently, other exams have not been quite up to the mark.

Are you completely satisfied with the paper that Janet Brown produced for the committee, which talks about the quality assurance for the exams process? On the last page, she says that there have been

"additional subject specialist meetings to finalise the draft Question Paper"

for science, technology, engineering and mathematics subjects. Why is there to be additional scrutiny for STEM subjects? If I was a parent, I would want to know why STEM subjects were being picked out and whether there was appropriate quality assurance for other exams.

John Swinney: Quality assurance is an absolute requirement in the system. It is essential that those arrangements are put in place to ensure that young people have no other factors to contend with when they are sitting exams. The purpose of the exams is to assess their eligibility for qualifications by testing their knowledge, awareness and learning, and accuracy is an

absolute necessity. That is why, as Liz Smith correctly identified, I was frustrated. It is intolerable if there are errors of whatever nature—it does not matter what adjective we put in front of them—in exam papers. There should not be errors in exam papers, as there is plenty of time and opportunity to ensure that the papers are quality assured.

I intend to make sure that quality assurance is at the heart of the SQA's approach. I continue to have my regular dialogue with the chief examiner to ensure that all such questions are raised, and I am happy to raise the point that Liz Smith has raised with me. I suspect that the issue was raised with Liz Smith as part of the argument for extra scrutiny in the process to ensure that we are extra sure rather than in relation to the level of assurance that should give us confidence the first time round. Nevertheless, I will raise the point that she makes, partly for my own satisfaction.

Liz Smith: Thank you. I have done some work on the number of markers that are available for each exam, and the numbers seem to be reasonably consistent notwithstanding the change that has taken place between the old and new highers. However, I am also interested in the issue of quality. In her paper on the national 5 computing science exam, Janet Brown identifies a series of issues relating to the questions and their comprehensibility to students who sat the exam. There was something wrong with the way in which the questions were asked, which meant that pupils had difficulty in answering them.

Particularly in the context of attainment and the importance of having absolute equality for all youngsters who are sitting exams—let us be honest: their future is at stake—we must be sure that the setting, verification and marking of the exams are up to scratch. I ask you to give a guarantee that everything possible will be done to ensure that that is the case.

John Swinney: I am happy to do so, because that must be a given of our examination system. I make absolutely clear to the committee the importance that I attach to Liz Smith's point. What she describes is the core purpose of the Scottish Qualifications Authority—that should be clearly understood—and, if it is not being done correctly, there are significant issues with the performance of the SQA.

However, I will add one caveat. Let us take computing as an example. Young people must have a satisfactory level of literacy to be able to comprehend the questions that they will be posed in computing. Therefore, their fundamental literacy skills will be tested—that is the wrong word: they will be challenged—in other subjects. We have to ensure that the SQA's core purpose is fulfilled and that it is not impossible or unimaginable for young people to comprehend the questions, but their

literacy skills will be challenged in other subjects to a degree. That is why it is important to ensure that the broad general education has provided them with the necessary foundations to be able to perform in that context.

10:45

Liz Smith: Either the literacy aspect of some of the questions that are asked is not good enough or too few children are coming through the system with good literacy skills.

John Swinney: That is the point that I am making. The second point is obviously an issue of the education system's performance; the first one relates to the SQA's performance. We cannot have questions that are incomprehensible. That is not the SQA fulfilling its core purpose. However, the literacy skills of young people are a direct product of the education system, which is why I have such a focus on attainment.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): The attainment gap is particularly acute when it comes to young people with additional support needs. They are more than twice as likely as other young people to be unemployed some months after leaving school, and only 65 per cent of them achieve at least one level 5 qualification before they leave school, in comparison with 90 per cent of young people who do not have an additional support need.

The Scottish children's services coalition has proposed that a proportion of the attainment fund be used, or a new fund be set up, specifically to address the attainment gap for young people with additional support needs. Will you outline the Government's thoughts on that?

John Swinney: There would certainly be opportunities for the attainment fund to be used to support the improvement of attainment for young people with additional support needs. There is no reason why that could not be done.

I come back to the three foundations of our policy, which are in my mind in all the actions that I take. Getting it right for every child means that children with additional support needs must be supported to fulfil their potential as a consequence of their interaction with education and other public services.

Ross Greer: There seems to be an issue with diagnosis for young people with additional support needs. There is quite a lot of disparity among local authorities on that. I will not get the numbers exactly right but 35 per cent of the young people in West Dunbartonshire have been identified as having an additional support need, whereas I believe that that the figure for North Lanarkshire is now 5 per cent. The committee has heard

concerns from the Scottish Parent Teacher Council that parents' requests for diagnosis and support are sometimes going unheard.

Does the Government believe that significant numbers of young people with an additional support need are not receiving the support that they need because their need has not been diagnosed, perhaps because of a lack of support due to constrained local authority budgets?

John Swinney: Statute is crystal clear on the matter: the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 requires education authorities to identify, provide for and review support for pupils who need support to overcome barriers to learning. There can be little debate about whether the assessment should be carried out because young people should be protected by the act. The act should ensure that their needs are met appropriately by local authorities, which carry that statutory duty.

Ross Greer: What work is the Government undertaking to ensure that there is a bit more consistency and that support is available to local authorities to ensure that they identify, diagnose and support all young people with additional support needs?

John Swinney: The Government reports annually to Parliament on the implementation of the additional support for learning provisions. The most recent report and the forthcoming report indicate that attainment for pupils with additional support needs has increased by 4.3 percentage points since last year and that 86.2 per cent of pupils with additional support needs are now in positive destinations. That has been a continuing trend. Obviously, we will work with local authorities to ensure that we continue in that direction, but there is some encouragement that that is happening.

My constituency experience tells me very directly that some assessments of the relevant support needs of young people are not straightforward processes. However, in dealing with the complexity and challenge, a very clear statute has to be followed to ensure that the needs of young people with additional support needs are met in all circumstances.

Ross Greer: We can all agree that that is a positive trend, but it relates to young people with identified additional support needs. My point is that it seems that a significant number of young people out there have unidentified additional support needs.

John Swinney: I go back to my point about the statute. There is a duty on education authorities to ensure that assessment is undertaken. There are various interventions to assess the capacity and capability of education authorities in fulfilling that

obligation. I will certainly look carefully at the issues that Mr Greer has raised to ensure that I am satisfied that the needs of young people are being met in those circumstances.

Ross Greer: Thanks.

Tavish Scott: I want to deal with curriculum for excellence in the context of the cabinet secretary's laudable observations, particularly in the letter that he sent to all teachers at the start of the school term, about the clarity that teachers need. This week and in previous weeks, Education Scotland has dispatched 62 pages of benchmarks for experiences and outcomes to science teachers, a comparable number of pages—49 of them—of benchmarks on literacy and English, and 43 pages on numeracy and mathematics. How is the aim of clarifying and providing simplicity, which I entirely agree with, helped by a vast amount of paper being sent to those teachers?

John Swinney: On the volume of paper that Mr Scott talks about, I will express my view in relation to literacy and numeracy, although I will not comment on the specific examples that he has raised.

The literacy and numeracy benchmarks that are being issued, which are the definitive benchmarks—young people have to reach them to be judged to be at the appropriate literacy and numeracy levels—span the ages of five to 18. Therefore, we are not talking about everybody having to be conversant with absolutely every part of those documents. The teaching profession will be able to utilise the parts that are relevant to their circumstances, but the benchmarks have been set out to make clear what is expected of a young person in their journey through the curriculum over the period. That is their purpose. The benchmarks replaced the significant aspects of learning that Education Scotland previously issued. The approach is designed to simplify the process and give definitive guidance to the teaching profession, as I said in my covering letter to the chief inspector's letter in August. I appreciate that there is a level of detail, but I give the committee the assurance that this is the definitive guidance.

The science benchmarks are out in draft. They will be the subject of interaction with the profession until they become the definitive guidance. The benchmarks are designed to ensure that needs are met.

Mr Scott raised a not unreasonable point about volume and breadth. I discussed that issue with the teachers panel, which I met last week. One of our conclusions was that, in general, we should have an eye on ensuring that the benchmarks are as focused as they can be.

However, I have looked through the literacy and numeracy benchmarks, and I can see exactly why

there is a need for that level of detail across that age range. Given that I was able to do it, I think that it is possible for anyone to navigate their way through the benchmarks to work out what a child would require to reach a particular stage in their education journey—that is quite clearly expressed.

Tavish Scott: You are not concerned that the benchmarks encourage a box-ticking approach to teaching. That concern has been expressed.

John Swinney: That is a slightly different issue. I would be concerned if they led to a box-ticking exercise, because that would defeat the objectives of curriculum for excellence.

I will rehearse out loud my view of the dilemmas that exist at the heart of this. We have a curriculum that is, in essence, dependent on teacher judgment. It is a liberating curriculum for teachers and a great reform that has been very successful and has attracted international commendation. However, we also have teachers saying, “I’d like a bit more clarity about whether I’ve got the children to where they need to be.” That is equally understandable, because teachers want to deliver the goods for the young people in their classrooms. However, I would be concerned if the benchmarks became part of a box-ticking exercise. I do not see the need for that, because the system is fundamentally driven by teacher judgment and the benchmarks are there to help teachers frame in their minds where a child needs to be to reach a satisfactory level.

Tavish Scott: You said that the literacy and English and numeracy and mathematics benchmarks were definitive, but is that absolutely the case? I understand that the documents have “Draft, August 2016” written on them, which suggests that there is more to come.

John Swinney: I should have said that they are out to consultation, so it is about—

Tavish Scott: So, with great respect, they are not definitive.

John Swinney: They will be. They are in a consultative phase, so they will be definitive very shortly—once we have had all the feedback. However, there is a dilemma here that I hope Mr Scott understands, which is that we want to take the profession with us and put in place measures that the profession will look at and think, “Yes, that’s valuable. That helps me.” It is not about us sitting here or, dare I say it, top-down Education Scotland saying, “This is what’s good for you.”

Tavish Scott: Indeed.

John Swinney: I assure Mr Scott that the point of the process that we are going through is to get definitive guidance that is not replaced in a couple of years’ time but which gives the clarity that the

profession is looking for. However, we want to do that in an inclusive way.

Tavish Scott: Indeed. Did you—

The Convener: This is your last question, Tavish.

Tavish Scott: Did you notice the observation from Professor Priestley of the University of Stirling that he had two suggestions for you as cabinet secretary? The first is to abolish the Es and Os—the experiences and outcomes—because they are the main cause of the bureaucracy that affects all teachers. The second is for you to ensure that a single set of detailed CFE guidelines, with a clear and consistent message about the curriculum and development, is put in place. I thought that that was quite pertinent advice.

John Swinney: I have not seen that from Professor Priestley, but if Mr Scott can give me the reference, I will have a look at it.

Tavish Scott: It is in the *Times Educational Supplement*.

John Swinney: I try to keep an eye on that.

Tavish Scott: I am sure that you will agree with everything there.

John Swinney: I cannot say that I manage to see every edition.

I have two points to make to Mr Scott, the first of which is that the document “Education Scotland: Curriculum for Excellence”, which was issued by HM chief inspector of education and to which I attached a covering note, was designed to address what Professor Priestley’s second suggestion refers to. He has made a fair point, but the document addresses the issue.

I have to say that the document has had a very good reaction from across the education system. I do not think that just because people are polite to me about it when I go around schools. Teachers come up to me in the street, and not just in my constituency, to tell me how valuable the document is. In fact, a teacher told me that when I was waiting to board a ferry in the Western Isles the other day.

There has been a lot of good feedback on the document, which has been downloaded from the Education Scotland website more than 50,000 times. It therefore cannot be just members of the Scottish Parliament who are downloading the document; members of the teaching profession must be downloading it, too.

On Professor Priestley’s first point about the Es and Os, the document gives “key messages” about “what to avoid” and says:

“Do not plan for individual Es and Os ... Do not ‘tick off all of the Es and Os separately”.

The point of all that is to say that the Es and Os are not some obligatory tick list; they are there to contextualise learning and to give teachers guidance, background and reference. They are not a tick list, and they should never be viewed as that.

11:00

Richard Lochhead: One thing that I have learned in this committee is what the term “Es and Os” stands for—I hope that the rest of the world understands it, too. I used to think that it was a pop song by Pulp.

I commend the cabinet secretary for wanting to tackle teachers’ workload, because that is important.

Tavish Scott and Ross Greer raised issues about additional support needs. As politicians, we have to do our best to put ourselves into teachers’ shoes and understand the 21st century classroom environment and the pressures that teachers face. Between 2011 and 2015, the number of pupils with additional support needs increased by 57.2 per cent, which is a significant increase. The modern classroom environment involves inclusive education—which is the right thing to do in getting it right for every child—and is different from the environment 20 or 30 years ago. If the level of resources to support teachers who deal with pupils with additional support needs does not match the increase in demand over that period, there will clearly be a lot of pressure on classroom teachers.

Is the Government willing to look at the correlation between the increase in the number of children with additional support needs and the level of resources available to deal with that? A headteacher who gave evidence to the committee a few weeks ago said that a small number of pupils with particular support needs can take up quite a large amount of resource and time, which is an obvious and understandable statement. Are you willing to look at the balance between the level of resources and the number of children who require those resources, which has increased?

John Swinney: I am certainly prepared to look at that. The issues that are raised are genuine. When Parliament passed the Standards in Scotland’s Schools etc Act 2000, it built in the presumption of mainstream education for all children. There are of course a couple of caveats to that, one of which is that there must be an appropriate assessment of the educational environment in which a young person should be educated to ensure that their needs are met. Obviously, a range of provision is then available within schools.

I have seen a range of the approaches that are taken. At the weekend, I was at Preston Lodge high school, which is in Mr Gray’s constituency, where I observed a workshop led by one of the additional support for learning teachers in the school, who went through the developments in the school over a period of years. In essence, those changed the focus of the facilities that are available for young people with additional support needs to ensure that their needs are better met. That is a good example; of course, there will be many examples of a similar character around the country.

The question that Mr Lochhead raises requires further scrutiny, and I will certainly undertake to do that.

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): I have a quick supplementary question on the points that Richard Lochhead and Ross Greer made about children with additional support needs. Quite a lot of constituents have come to me about the issue and one thing that has come up consistently is that parents feel that, when they are dealing with the local authority, their views are not being heard and they are not treated as the experts. Under the attainment agenda, might parents’ views be given more weight when they deal with local authorities?

Before you answer that, I want to put on record my thanks to you for your recent visit to my old school, Coatbridge high school, which was very much appreciated by the staff there.

John Swinney: I was there to visit a literacy festival, which was a fantastic example of innovation in the school. It was a great experience.

The whole question of parental involvement in education is central to ensuring the strength and effectiveness of our education system. It is therefore really vital that there is effective dialogue. There are obviously challenges in there in terms of addressing fully parents’ views on their children’s needs. That has to be the subject of active discussion with parents to ensure that schools are properly meeting the needs of all young people, regardless of what those needs are.

The Convener: We will now go on to the governance review.

Iain Gray: Cabinet secretary, we know that the governance review is now in the consultation phase and that a number of engagement events have been set up in different parts of the country for parents, which is commendable.

We also know that the first of those, in Glasgow, did not go particularly well. We read in the press that some of the parents who were there felt that the consultation document was full of jargon, that the officials who were present could not provide

clarification on some straightforward questions and that the questions that the consultation asked of them made little sense to them. I have spoken to one of the parents present, and they have confirmed that that is an accurate representation of what happened. In light of that, what action have you taken to improve the quality of the consultation?

John Swinney: The consultation has been published and we will hold the events. I am certainly not going to publish another consultation document. The consultation document addresses the issues that have to be addressed, and we will have a dialogue around the country at the different events. I will make sure that officials are in a position to address the questions that are asked and I will be involved in a range of different conversations so I will be able to hear at first hand the different perspectives and views of parents.

Iain Gray: So you do not feel that the concerns of the parents at the Glasgow event are valid.

John Swinney: I did not say that—I said that I am not going to issue another consultation document. I will listen carefully to what is said at the events and make sure that officials are able to handle the questions that are put to them.

I had one conversation with the national parent forum of Scotland near the beginning of the consultation process. I will see the forum again in, I think, a couple of weeks at one of its regular meetings—I will attend to hear the forum's perspective. We will take things forward from there.

I am also advised that the event that was held was not a Scottish Government event. I am therefore not sure whether Government officials were there, but I will certainly make sure that the Government officials who are at the events are able to answer the questions that need to be answered.

Iain Gray: Government officials were there—they were named in the reports. The concerns that were expressed seem to be genuine.

It is early days in the consultation, but in my initial discussions with some of the members of local parent councils, including that of the school that you visited at the weekend, and in some of the soundings that have been reported back to me about meetings of the national parent forum, concern has been expressed about the idea of a national funding formula. I fear that it will mean the centralisation of decisions about budgets for particular schools. My question is simple: if, in response to the consultation, stakeholders overwhelmingly believe that a national funding formula is not a good idea, will you withdraw it?

John Swinney: We are in a consultation about the governance process and, as part of that process, I have signalled that further work will be undertaken in March 2017 on the question of a national funding formula for education. What we say in the document is that the review offers an opportunity to comment on the principles that will underpin such a formula, and we have invited individuals to contribute. A consultation process is under way, and I will listen to and reflect on what comes back.

Iain Gray: But the questions in the consultation are about the principles underpinning a formula, not about the existence of such a formula as a mechanism. If stakeholders overwhelmingly reject the idea of a national funding formula in favour of those decisions being taken locally, will you listen to them?

John Swinney: I will listen to all the consultation responses. However, I remind Mr Gray that the Government put this proposal in its election manifesto and was elected as a consequence.

Iain Gray: Without either a majority of the public vote or, indeed, a majority of members of Parliament. My question is whether the consultation that you are undertaking now—

John Swinney: I understand the question entirely, and I am simply giving a complete answer, which is that I will listen to the consultation. At the same time, however, I remind Mr Gray that the Government was elected on a manifesto commitment to deliver this proposal. The Government needs to effect its agenda properly, but that is one of our manifesto commitments.

Liz Smith: Will the cabinet secretary update the committee on where the Scottish Government is with the request from St Joseph's primary school to come out of local authority control?

John Swinney: I am considering the request from the school. I met the parents group in late June and said that I hoped to be in position to give it a response to the issues within six months. I am mindful of the fact that the governance review addresses some of those questions and is scheduled to run until 6 January 2017. I am wrestling with those issues and the competing timetables between the two.

Tavish Scott: I would ask you to wrestle with two other issues in the context of the governance review. The first is that in some areas, such as Shetland, there are teaching heads. In your consideration of how headteachers take on greater responsibilities, will you please be aware of the complexity of their lives, when they already teach and have classroom contact time? I appreciate that that applies to small schools and

probably does not happen in many parts of Scotland, but it certainly happens in mine.

Secondly, as you will know, the Royal Society of Edinburgh and many others in education have repeatedly raised the dual role of Education Scotland, with its inspectorate on the one hand and its policy role on the other. Would you be open-minded in considering reform in that area, too?

John Swinney: I am acutely aware of Mr Scott's first point, although I point out that at the weekend the headteacher of Preston Lodge high school, which is a large secondary school in Prestonpans, told me that he still teaches in the classroom. It is not just small schools where headteachers teach, and such moves are very welcome.

This is an appropriate opportunity to explore Mr Scott's second point, which he has raised previously. Discussion of that issue must be informed by consideration of the question of the purpose of inspection and the purpose of improvement activity. If I understand the RSE's position, it is suggesting that there is a fundamental distinction between inspection and Education Scotland's other, wider roles. I am not sure that I accept such a distinction, because I see the purpose of inspection as being about improvement and the other bit of Education Scotland as being about improvement, curriculum development and the enhancement of teaching and educational practice. To me, the enhancement of teaching and educational practice is the point of inspection.

I give an assurance that I will consider that issue as part of this exercise, but I put down the marker that we might have to look at the purpose of inspection in a slightly different fashion from the way in which some people might characterise it—not that I am attributing that to the RSE. In general, though, inspection is perhaps not always readily viewed as being about improvement, and I unreservedly believe that it is.

11:15

Tavish Scott: I take the point, but I presume that you accept that a lot of teachers and people in education authorities also think that Education Scotland is the basis of the huge amount of paperwork that we were discussing in our earlier exchange. I hope that you are at least prepared to accept that there is a better way forward on that.

John Swinney: I can assure Mr Scott that there is a better way forward on the paperwork. There will be vast amounts of guidance that previously has just been added to the Education Scotland website, making it very difficult for teachers to navigate and work out the best thing to do. A lot of

that will be getting dumped over the next few weeks and months.

We are moving towards having on the Education Scotland website a national improvement hub, which will be a gathering point for really strong and noteworthy measures to improve educational performance. It will be a real asset for the teaching profession, and it will be much easier to navigate than the current range of different sources.

Undoubtedly, Education Scotland needs to slim down the volume of available material, and that work is under way. I will make sure that that happens, because teachers must be able to access material more readily than they are currently able to. That said, I am also struck by the feedback that I get about Education Scotland's role in inspection activity, which is viewed—certainly by many individuals who have made representations to me in my discussions around the country—as having had a profound benefit on schools. The real, valuable deep inspection activity that is undertaken can really enhance educational provision—and so it should. However, I will reflect on Mr Scott's points.

Ross Thomson: The cabinet secretary announced that the Scottish Government would look to create new educational regions with an aim of helping to encourage collaboration among our local authorities. Educationists in my region have advised that, at the moment, there seems to be a lack of clarity and understanding about how the regions will operate. Obviously, different professionals are reaching different conclusions and interpretations about how that would work. That makes it quite difficult to participate in any meaningful consultation, because they do not really know what they are being asked to comment on. Will the cabinet secretary advise the committee on how he envisages the educational regions working and the relationship between schools and education authorities?

John Swinney: In a sense, that is a key question in the consultation exercise. My view is driven by a number of factors. First, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's assessment of Scottish education commended curriculum for excellence and said that we had every right to be proud as a country of the bold reform that we had undertaken. That is welcome. However, the OECD also challenged us to have more collaboration in education, and we would be well served if we followed and accepted that bit of advice. That is where the educational regions come from: the need for us to ensure that there is much more collaboration in educational practice and enhancement in the years to come.

The second factor is that we are doing things in education 32 times at varying scales of intensity.

Some local authorities have three secondary schools; some have 20. As I have said, we are doing things 32 times, but we are doing them on very different scales, and we have to address the inefficiency of some of that. Shared purposes could come out of that educational collaboration that would be beneficial through the sharing of good practice and learning in the development of educational provision.

The third factor is money. I venture to suggest that, if we are doing things 32 times in what is a tight financial climate, we could collaborate to save money for local authorities in doing things that are done next door in exactly the same fashion and avoiding the need for replication on a multiple scale.

If I am frustrated about anything, it is about the lack of progress on some of these questions. That is not necessarily to do with my responsibilities as the education secretary; it is more to do with my frustrations as a former finance secretary who gave every encouragement to local authorities to pursue some of these efficiencies. Frankly, I do not see much evidence of them having done so.

Those are the three points of principle behind the issue. I am sure that Mr Thomson will be aware of the work that is going on in the north alliance in his locality, which brings together Aberdeen City Council, Aberdeenshire Council, Moray Council, Highland Council, Western Isles Council, Orkney Islands Council and Shetland Islands Council in a collaboration to support and enhance educational practice. Yesterday, I attended an event organised by the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, at which there were presentations from three different collaborations: the north alliance; one in the Tayside area; and one in the west of Scotland. All of them demonstrated to varying degrees the opportunities to collaborate to enhance educational practice and secure efficiencies that could be deployed to invest in education.

There is a conversation to be had based on those questions. I think that the rationale is pretty clearly explained by the OECD, and I have put some more colour on it this morning. Obviously, we will listen to what comes back from the consultation exercise.

Ross Thomson: When Keir Bloomer gave evidence to the committee on 28 September, I asked him a similar question about the proposed educational regions, and he responded that the Royal Society of Edinburgh was “likely to be sceptical” that the proposed new set-up would offer anything “additional and helpful”. What assurances can the cabinet secretary give the committee that the proposals will not simply create another layer of bureaucracy in our system?

I welcome your mention of the north alliance, because collaboration is happening there. However, I think that members of that alliance seek assurance that duplication and additional bureaucracy will not be added to the work that they are already doing.

John Swinney: I cannot see how that could be a worry for the north alliance, given that it probably represents the most advanced concept of an educational region in the country. My question is: what is the rest of the country doing? Why is the rest of the country doing things 32 times when people could be collaborating, not to duplicate effort but to avoid costs and ensure that we are adding value?

There is a core question in the governance review. We all accept that the quality of learning and teaching is essential to closing the attainment gap. If we all believe that, my question, as posed in the consultation document, is: what adds value to the learning and teaching experience in a classroom? Surely the individual interaction between a teacher and a pupil is the opportunity to convey learning, so it must be good. Therefore, the question that I ask in the governance review is: how can we make that interaction better and add value to it?

To be honest, I am asking whether all our local authorities are adding an equal amount of value to that learning and teaching experience. That they are not doing so is not simply my opinion; Audit Scotland’s assessments of the capabilities of education authorities vary significantly across the country. I cannot afford to ignore that. If we are interested in closing the attainment gap in every part of the country, it is not good enough to resign ourselves to the idea that one education authority is fabulous and adds lots of value to the learning and teaching experience while another authority at the other end of the spectrum is not and does not. That is not fair to young people.

I am not raising an abstract discussion about lines on a map; I am raising an issue about what enhances the learning and teaching of young people in our country. We have to be honest enough to confront those issues. Not all of the practice that is undertaken in our country adds enough value, and that must be addressed.

Another thing to put into the mix—and this is where some of Mr Scott’s points about Education Scotland are relevant—is that I want to ensure that Education Scotland, with its improvement function, is able to assist in that process, so that we can add value to the educational experience of young people in our localities.

The Convener: We will go on to children’s services, followed by early years.

Fulton MacGregor: The cabinet secretary will be aware that the First Minister confirmed at First Minister's question time last week that there will be a root-and-branch review of care services. How might that work and how might it link into the on-going child protection review?

John Swinney: The reviews have two very different purposes and, although similar issues might arise from them, I want them to be undertaken as two distinct exercises. Catherine Dyer is undertaking a challenge exercise on our child protection arrangements to ensure that they are as effective as they need to be to fulfil the statutory obligations of child protection and to ensure that we have all the necessary arrangements in place to address young people's welfare. That is a specific exercise to ensure that the practical arrangements that we have in place live up to the requirements of statute in all circumstances.

The wider review that the First Minister committed to is in response to the appeal from young people who have been in care or are still in care that the system has not served them and—despite its complexity, detail and good intentions—that it has not delivered the best outcomes for them. The First Minister has committed to an engaged process with those young people and other stakeholders to ensure that the review is undertaken and that lessons are learned by listening to the experiences of young people who have been in care. They can assist us in addressing the system's requirements.

Fulton MacGregor: The committee is considering looking at the children's hearings system as part of our work programme. As part of the review process, will it be useful to look at that system and at how children—and particularly looked-after kids—feel involved in it?

John Swinney: We will look at the hearings system—we would not be looking at the whole system if we did not do that. In a conversation that I had with young people who are in care, I was struck by an experience that a young man recounted to me. He told me how it feels to be an eight-year-old at a children's hearing with everybody talking about you, but you not saying a word. I had never thought about the situation in that fashion and his explanation was profoundly powerful. We were in a meeting room with about 12 of us around the table—that is probably the same number as would be around the table at a children's hearing—and he explained the feelings that he had at the age of eight, when everyone was talking about him and he did not say a word. I was stunned by that.

The children's hearings system does a tremendous amount of good work and there is an awful lot to be proud of in it, but we cannot be

oblivious to input about how it makes a young person feel, particularly when their whole circumstances and their life are being assessed. Therefore, the hearings system will be part of the review.

Johann Lamont: I recently had the privilege of being an observer at a children's hearing and I was grateful for the opportunity. There is nothing so powerful as watching a child's life being discussed for understanding the importance of that and the challenges that exist. I might write to you separately with some observations about that, because there are big issues.

You talked about a young person having a voice but, if we strip out all the support workers from our schools, there will be a question about how we ensure that that voice is heard.

I am grateful that you are looking at the whole issue, but there is also a question about how the hearings system relates to the legal system—it feels overlegalised to me, too. Nevertheless, the review is an important piece of work.

11:30

John Swinney: Some weeks ago, I was given a presentation by looked-after children that contained a graphic that showed a roundabout with all sorts of exits. At the core of it was written in small letters all the legislation that constructs the system in which their lives are, as Johann Lamont said, discussed—and there is a lot of it. Most of it was created out of difficult situations that have emerged, but the system is very legalised: it is legislation heavy.

When I listened to the young people's experiences, what made a profound impact on me was the fact that it was not a piece of legislation that set them on a better course but individuals. They could name the individuals who gave them the turning points in their lives. It was not subsection (6) of section 2 of any act but a person who made the difference. I was struck by the complexity of the legislative framework that underpins the system and I think that we all—regardless of our politics—have a duty to look carefully at that.

Johann Lamont: I agree, but I remain sceptical about your proposals on governance. Whatever happens, you cannot pluck schools out of the support system that young people find themselves in, which includes the services—social work and whatever—that come together to support them. However, that is a separate question for another day.

I will reflect on the importance of child protection. As a society, we have been playing catch-up in understanding what the abuse and

neglect of children means, and we have ended up holding an inquiry into historical child abuse. That reflects society's failure to listen to young people when they told us what was happening to them and to believe that what they said could be true.

The chair of the inquiry has resigned and another panel member has resigned, citing Government interference as the cause. Survivors are concerned about the inquiry's remit not being addressed—it excludes people who feel that they have been abused in other situations. People also feel that the question of redress is not being progressed properly, and there has been significant criticism of the way in which the Scottish Government has delivered survivor support.

We cannot go into all those issues now, but do you agree that it is a serious matter that survivors who saw the inquiry as an important way for them to get justice do not believe that any more? Do you accept the significance of that lack of confidence, which is sapping the energy of survivors and those who want them to get justice? Do you have a view on why we have ended up in this serious situation?

What actions will the Government take to convince survivors that the inquiry is serious and will be able to do its job independently, uninhibited in the recommendations that it makes? Will you confirm that you are actively looking at redress and at amending the remit to ensure that people are not unnecessarily excluded from the investigation?

John Swinney: I acknowledge the significance of the issues that are involved in the inquiry, which is why I have taken steps to keep the committee and the Parliament updated on a range of questions that relate to it. I will go through the issues that have been raised and begin with the chairing of the inquiry.

In the circumstances that I faced over the summer, I listened to survivors, who told me that they have always felt that the inquiry was not fulfilling their expectations because it was not led by a judge. I went to great lengths to address that, and I appointed Lady Smith to lead the inquiry. I have heard nothing other than commendation for her appointment. I responded to the views of survivors, who made it clear to me that they wanted a judge to lead the inquiry, and I hope that Lady Smith's appointment fulfils that commitment.

I have made it clear to Parliament on a number of occasions that I am satisfied that the steps that my officials took were proper and appropriate in relation to their duties under the Inquiries Act 2005. I have absolutely no desire for the Government to have any role in the inquiry that it is not entitled to have. The best way in which I can

signal that is by the appointment of Lady Smith, because anybody who knows her will know that there is no prospect of the Government doing anything that it should not do in relation to the inquiry. She is a judge of 15 years' standing who has a strong pedigree on issues of domestic violence and tribunal conduct. I hope that that convinces people that the inquiry is strongly led. As I said, I have heard nothing to the contrary since Lady Smith's appointment.

I appointed Lady Smith within a month of the vacancy arising, which I think was much more quickly than anybody expected. The inquiry has continued its work with the minimum of interruption. It must be able to conduct its work. Obviously, I do not account for or give explanations for the inquiry. If the committee wishes satisfaction on that point, I am sure that it can ask the inquiry.

The committee has had a letter from Mr Alan Draper on behalf of In Care Abuse Survivors about a number of issues. One of the points that he makes is:

"It is clear from recent pronouncements from Lady Smith that there have been no discussions with her about the remit of the inquiry which she described as fixed."

I am afraid that that statement is incorrect. I have discussed extending the remit with Lady Smith. I ask the committee to understand that, although I appreciate that strong things are said, some of them are not accurate.

I said to people that I would look at the extension of the remit and I am taking steps to address the point. I have seen survivor groups—Johann Lamont was at one of the meetings that I had with them. Subsequently, I have seen survivor groups individually and I have seen individuals. I will see another individual on Tuesday and I will again see survivor groups on Wednesday to continue my discussions on those questions.

I take the issue seriously, but I have to be mindful of a number of questions that relate to the remit. I would not narrow the inquiry's scope, so I would be extending it, which would inevitably extend the inquiry's length. I have to be mindful of the views of survivors who want the exercise to be proceeded with and who do not want it to be longer than it needs to be, because they want progress on the questions.

The dilemmas are not easy. Ultimately, the issue comes down to the unavoidable point that the length of the inquiry will be extended if I decide to extend the remit. That is a significant issue with which I am wrestling.

The question of redress is being actively explored. I have said that to survivor groups and I am looking at the issue carefully. I have to look at

all the details of how that might be taken forward, and I am doing that.

Finally, Johann Lamont raised the issue of press coverage of the survivor Scotland fund, which Mr Gray raised at First Minister's question time. The Government takes that seriously. I have put in train measures to satisfy myself that the arrangements are appropriate.

The survivor Scotland arrangements were not a creation of the Government; they were a product of an interactive process that was led outside the Government. The Government was part of it, but it was driven by external parties and survivor groups. It created the arrangements that we are implementing, which are supporting a range of individuals with practical assistance. About 80 individuals are being supported practically through the survivor Scotland fund.

I have read the material that was in *The Herald*. I want to satisfy myself that we have appropriate arrangements in place and that the criticisms are not valid. That work is not yet complete. The discussions that I have asked officials to undertake are going on, and they are being reported to me so that I can be satisfied that the external process that created the survivor Scotland approach created a valid and appropriate way to proceed that will give people the support that they require.

Johann Lamont: I appreciate much of what you said and I recognise that you take the matter seriously. At the meeting that we attended, survivors expressed support for the previous chair and remained concerned about the fact that she had been removed. We need to examine that in more detail.

I hear what you say about changing the remit meaning extending the inquiry's length, but part of the problem is that we have reduced the number of panel members by one, so there will now be two, rather than three. I am not sure whether that fits either.

On survivors, I should declare an interest as a member of the proposed cross-party group on adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse. There is a live petition to the Public Petitions Committee, which I convene, to express concern not so much about whether there is funding as about the model that is being used to deliver support to people. The petitioners have made representations to ministers in the past, and they believe that the approach does not properly meet survivors' needs.

I simply ask the cabinet secretary to be alive to that issue. It is not just a question of whether there is a pot of money that people can access; it is about the way in which that money will be spent and having a different kind of model—signposting

people and so on. We do not have the time to go into that in detail now.

I turn to the final point that I ask you to reflect on. You say that you do not do things outwith your area of responsibility, and you have a responsibility for probity around the financing of the inquiry. Will you confirm that you do not see your role in those terms as inhibiting the inquiry's ability to go with certain ways of getting evidence and support to people and understanding properly what has happened? It is one thing to be financially sensible and another to use the remit to say that an approach cannot be taken under the inquiry.

John Swinney: I wish to make three points on what Johann Lamont said. The first is that, as a matter of fact, the chair resigned from office in July. The chair was not removed by the Government; she resigned from office.

Johann Lamont: She was not very happy, was she?

John Swinney: As a matter of fact, the chair resigned from her post.

The second point is on the question that Johann Lamont asked about the issues that have been raised over how the survivor Scotland fund is organised. I want to satisfy myself about that. The issue is not that there is a pot of money around and it can support people; I want to be satisfied that the process that created survivor Scotland is delivering what is appropriate in the circumstances.

I stress that the survivor Scotland approach was created by an interactive process, which the Government was involved in, although we did not say, "This is what it's going to be." I appreciate that that is how a lot of things happen. There was a lot of interaction and, if my memory serves me right, the Equality and Human Rights Commission supported us in taking that forward. I want to satisfy myself on that.

I will consider the petition issues that Johann Lamont raised. I suspect that they will form part of the discussion into the bargain.

On the final point, which was about the financial arrangements, the requests for authorisation or approval of financial measures, which are required under the Inquiries Act 2005 to come from the inquiry to the Government, have been approved in all circumstances. None has been rejected by the Government.

11:45

We might have asked some questions. We might have said, "Does it need to be on that basis? What about this basis?" However, all the

requests have ultimately been accepted. I think that Johann Lamont and the committee will understand that the Government has—the 2005 act provides for this—a legitimate right to ask questions to satisfy ourselves that the financial arrangements are being taken forward properly. That is the subject of the letter that I wrote to the committee—it gave further detail on that financial provision, which I hope is of help to the committee.

The Convener: Thank you very much. We will move on to the last theme, which is early years provision, and we will start with Colin Beattie.

Colin Beattie: We have been looking at flexibility and choice for parents in early years provision. The document from COSLA is not great, but it highlights the fact that there is wide diversity in the views of parents and local authorities about what flexibility and choice could entail. Clearly, there is a possibility that the issue could become very complex. How do you see that being taken forward?

John Swinney: In “A Blueprint for 2020: Expansion of Early Learning and Childcare in Scotland”, which was published during the October recess, the Government set out many of the options around those challenges, under the four principles of quality, flexibility, accessibility and affordability. We need to be mindful of those four principles in designing the roll-out of early learning and childcare, so that we ensure quality of intervention for the benefit of young people and support them in their development. We must also ensure that other factors—accessibility of services to parents and families and flexible arrangements—work in all circumstances. Those principles will underpin the discussion that we have on how to roll out the policy to make sure that we satisfactorily address the needs of children and families.

Colin Beattie: Clearly, the question of affordability comes to the fore when you look at the options that COSLA has examined, and the potential for additional costs. Will it be left to councils to determine the mix through which they deliver the service?

John Swinney: That is a material point in the arrangements that we will take forward. Parliament will have to consider how the principles of quality, flexibility, accessibility and affordability will be laid out. There is a wide range of existing provision and of different ways in which local authorities take forward that existing provision. Some authorities work very much using their own capacity, but others work in partnership with a range of other organisations. I think that it is in such models that we will see answers based on the four principles that I have set out.

Gillian Martin: When representatives of COSLA were here I asked, in relation to flexibility, whether there is a correlation between low take-up of the existing childcare places that are provided by local authorities and reluctance of those local authorities to use childminders. We have not received a response on that in the document that Colin Beattie just referenced. Flexibility will be key in delivering the 1,140 hours. I want to know your view on that.

John Swinney: That is one of the material issues that we must consider. If we are to fulfil that commitment in principle, we also have to make sure that it can be fulfilled against the four principles that I have set out. Undoubtedly, the role of childminders and other providers will be part of that discussion. We have undertaken this on an open basis so that we can have a wider conversation and get the best input possible in order to determine how we might design an approach that satisfies those principles.

Tavish Scott: I have a question about the requirement for 20,000 extra staff to deliver the policy, which I think is the Government’s own extrapolated figure and is, by any standards, very significant. When will the Government be in a position to provide the committee with its plan as to how those 20,000 staff will be recruited, given that the timescale is—I think everyone accepts—pretty tight for delivery of such a large number of people into the system?

John Swinney: The number that I have in front of me is 14,000. I am not nit-picking—it is just a little bit different from 20,000. It is still a big number. Once we have been through the consultation exercise and have learned lessons from the pilot work that will commence shortly, we will be in a position in the course of 2017 to set out some of the detailed arrangements that will be put in place to ensure that that happens.

Even without that detail, however, Tavish Scott has raised a fair point. It is pretty obvious that we will need more people, so we need to put in place the mechanisms and measures that will enable us to support that.

I will go back to one of Tavish Scott’s earlier questions about the UHI. This is a perfect opportunity for us to develop new skills in localities such as the one that he represents, where UHI can play a significant role in delivering that benefit.

Ross Thomson: In evidence to the committee when we looked at expansion of early years provision, Claire Schofield from the National Day Nurseries Association advised members that as we expand to

“1,140 hours of provision, there are a number of different challenges. The number of hours and the flexibility are a

challenge”.—[*Official Report, Education and Skills Committee*, 5 October 2016; c 13.]

It is clear from the evidence that one of the key elements is flexibility.

It is welcome that the Scottish Government announced a childcare account as part of the consultation. However, at the moment there is very little information on what that means and how it would work. Can you outline to the committee how you envisage a childcare account working—in particular, in relation to flexibility?

John Swinney: When the Government consults on provisions, we put ideas out there to get the reactions of individuals and organisations. The detail that comes back helps us to come to an informed judgment about the design of particular policy interventions.

We are in a position where these questions are under consideration and assessment. Without offering a definitive conclusion, I say that the childcare account will be a measure through which parents will be able to choose where provision would best be deployed to suit their interests. To take Gillian Martin’s point about childminders, it might also involve a range of different provision to meet those needs. It is a practical manifestation of one element of the flexibility principle that I have set out as part of the process. We will gain feedback from the consultation exercise and decide accordingly.

The Convener: You will be delighted to know that I have one question left for you. As they say, “I’ve started so I’ll finish”. We have heard from COSLA at committee on the underspend by local authorities on early years provision. I was quite surprised to hear that, despite its protestations, COSLA does not have a mechanism to show how much money was being spent on early years provision by each local authority. I do not see how COSLA could say that it is clearly meeting its targets if it does not know how much money it is spending.

COSLA also told us that it would give the committee an immediate response containing figures from each local authority, which we never got. Are you aware that COSLA did not have to hand the figures from local authorities? Did you think that somebody would be responsible for collating the figures within COSLA? Were you surprised that that was not happening? Is there anything that we can do to make sure that somebody will do that work?

John Swinney: The information that informed the report to which you refer, convener, was gathered from the local financial return for 2014-15, the provisional outturn data for 2015-16, and budget estimates for 2016-17, all of which are supplied by local authorities. Production of the

report was overseen by a working group that included COSLA and local authorities, so I am at a bit of a loss to understand how there can be a problem with the data because they were provided for formulation of the report by local government.

The Convener: The position that COSLA took was that it spent money in other ways to fulfil its requirements. That was the information that we were hoping to get. So far, however, it has not been forthcoming.

John Swinney: I do not think that I can say any more about it, convener. We have, with local government, undertaken the financial review in order to assess how the funds that the Government has made available directly for payment for the 600 hours of childcare have been utilised. The data have been provided by local government and the report has been formulated under the auspices of a steering group in which local authorities have been participants, so I am at a loss to understand how the information is not the correct information.

The Convener: Thank you very much for that. I thank you, Aileen McKechnie and Fiona Robertson for your perseverance and for such a good meeting this morning.

11:56

Meeting continued in private until 12:16.

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