# Education and Skills Committee

**Wednesday 18 April 2018**

The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

# Wednesday 18 April 2018

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# EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE
## 11th Meeting 2018, Session 5

### CONVENER

*James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)

### DEPUTY CONVENER

*Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab)

### COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*George Adam (Paisley) (SNP)
*Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab)
*Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green)
*Richard Lochhead (Moray) (SNP)
*Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
*Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
*Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
*Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD)
*Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

*attended

### THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

John Dickie (Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland)
Kevin Lowden (Robert Owen Centre for Educational Change)
Danielle Mason (Education Endowment Foundation)
Dr Jim McCormick (Joseph Rowntree Foundation)

### CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Roz Thomson

### LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

# Scottish Parliament

## Education and Skills Committee

*Wednesday 18 April 2018*

*[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:01]*

## Decision on Taking Business in Private

**The Convener (James Dornan):** Welcome to the 11th meeting in 2018 of the Education and Skills Committee. I remind everyone to turn their mobile phones and other devices on to silent for the duration of the meeting.

The first item is a decision on whether to take in private agenda items 3 and 4, which are a review of the evidence heard today and consideration of our work programme. Is everyone content to take those items in private?

**Members** *indicated agreement.*

**The Convener:** Are members also content to take in private future reviews of evidence in our inquiry on the attainment and achievement of school-aged children experiencing poverty?

**Members** *indicated agreement.*

## Attainment and Achievement of School-Aged Children Experiencing Poverty

10:02

**The Convener:** The next item is an evidence session on the attainment and achievement of school-aged children experiencing poverty. This is the first evidence session of our inquiry, and before I start I want to put on record our thanks to everyone who has contributed written evidence. Some of the evidence is arresting, and it is really important that the voices of young people, parents, teachers and community workers are heard in Parliament. We will be hearing more from those people in the coming weeks.

I welcome to the meeting John Dickie, director of the Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland; Kevin Lowden, research officer at the Robert Owen centre for educational change; Danielle Mason, head of research at the Education Endowment Foundation; and Dr Jim McCormick, associate director in Scotland of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

If members of the panel want to respond to a question, please indicate to me or the clerks and I will call you to speak. Before inviting questions from my colleagues, I would like to ask the panel members for their thoughts on two points. We have received evidence from lots of people that poverty is a major factor contributing to the attainment gap, and the fact that children are coming to school hungry and do not look as if they have had a good night's sleep seems to relate to poverty. Why do you think that we have had a rise in such factors that seem to be impacting on school attainment levels? I have a number of other questions about interventions, but would anyone like to answer that question first?

**Dr Jim McCormick (Joseph Rowntree Foundation):** We may go on to talk about progress and achievements that are being made by children from low-income households, and it is important to say that those achievements are against the odds and against a heavy headwind, in the sense that we know that child poverty is now rising again, after 20 years of progress. We now have enough data over a number of years to tell us that we have passed a turning point.

One framing point to bear in mind, along with many others, is that although there are things that can be done in the education system and in how schools relate to families and communities, we have to be careful that we are improving the quality of education as well as attending to the income risks and shocks that families face, which show up in food poverty and food insecurity, for

example. We should resist the temptation that we have seen in other parts of the UK to say that it is one or the other. Both have to be in play if we are to make more progress over the next few years with the attainment challenge.

**Danielle Mason (Education Endowment Foundation):** I agree absolutely with that. When I was thinking about what evidence would be most useful to give you, I thought about the distinction between, on the one hand, reducing and alleviating the daily impact of poverty for children, which can be from the very large to the very small, and, on the other hand, a specific focus on narrowing the attainment gap between poorer children and the rest.

We do not necessarily need the same types of interventions for those two different things. A really simple example is introducing swipe cards for school meals in schools, removing the stigma for children who receive free school meals. That can have a big impact on a child's experience of school, but it is not likely to improve their attainment. It might make a difference at the margins, but it is unlikely to have a significant impact.

The alleviation of poverty and narrowing the attainment gap are obviously closely linked and are both extremely important but, at EEF, we are narrowly focused on the narrowing of the gap. That is about improving the quality of teaching and learning in the classroom, even when we take into consideration the wider issues. So, we have funded some projects that aim to raise attainment by alleviating the material impacts of poverty. We funded some breakfast clubs and a number of projects that aim to raise attainment by engaging with parents. In those cases there have been effective projects.

However, for narrowing the attainment gap—I stress again that alleviating poverty and narrowing the attainment gap are equally important—it is about providing high-quality teaching for children in disadvantaged areas, high-quality early years provision so that we tackle the gap, which we know opens really early, and targeted, evidence-based interventions in the classroom for children who are falling behind. Those are the measures that will really impact on the attainment gap. I qualify that by saying that that assumes that poverty does not prevent children from being in school in the first place.

It can be done. I do not have the figures for Scotland, but we did some analysis of English data recently and we saw that around 10 per cent of schools in England had an average attainment level for their disadvantaged children that was higher than the average for all children throughout the country. Those are not just a few really posh schools with a tiny number of poor kids. Some of

them are schools in areas of high disadvantage with large numbers disadvantaged children. It can be done and that should give us all cause for optimism.

**John Dickie (Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland):** I pretty much echo what Jim McCormick and Danielle Mason said. If we are serious about ending the poverty attainment gap in the long term, we need to tackle the underlying poverty that drives it.

As Jim McCormick said, levels of child poverty in Scotland and throughout the UK are increasing. The projections are for substantial increases in the years ahead. That refers not only to increases in the day-to-day grinding poverty of just not having enough money to live on. An increasing number of families are being left in acute income crisis as well, primarily as a result of failures in our social security system—sanctioning and problems in the system leaving people with little or no money.

In the worst cases, that translates into children ending up at school hungry and, in some cases, children not getting to school at all because of the costs of doing so in the first place. More widely, it translates into children missing out on significant aspects of the school day, such as school trips and school activities. School also puts additional pressures on families that already have low incomes by charging for course materials and course activities. There is a range of ways in which children are missing out on core parts of the school day.

In the long term, we need to tackle the underlying poverty. That is why we welcome the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017. It sets clear targets for eradicating child poverty by 2030 and provides for a delivery plan that sets out meaningful actions that will take us in that direction.

At the same time, as others have said, there are actions that can be taken within schools and—a good news story—lots of schools and local authorities are already taking action to reduce and remove the barriers to full participation at school that too many children face in Scotland.

**The Convener:** We will be coming on to all those issues in the course of this session.

**Kevin Lowden (Robert Owen Centre for Educational Change):** I would reiterate and support everything that has been said. The fact that schools really can make a difference comes out quite thoroughly in the briefing document that was circulated. A lot of our research has shown that for that to happen, however, schools and teachers need a lot of support and the conditions have to be right. Although we might have key proven interventions or pedagogical approaches that make a difference and help children from

disadvantaged areas, particular attention and focus is needed on teachers' skills, the leadership and ethos in the school, the school's ability to work in partnership with other agencies to enhance what happens in the school and make it more holistic, and the school's ability to engage with other agencies to take that value-added impact beyond the classroom.

**Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab):** I am interested in a point that I know we will deal with in more detail later. Families are more impoverished, so the cost of the school day is a real challenge, but is the cost of being at school rising, as well? Anecdotally, we have heard that teachers are now bringing in materials that would in the past have been provided by the local authority. Have you done any work to look at what children are now expected to pay for, which they may not have been expected to pay for in the past? We can come at that from two angles—what we are asking of families who are on a low income, and whether we are asking more of them because schools themselves are under pressure. Is there any evidence on that?

**John Dickie:** The in-depth work that CPAG has done in schools has been over the past four or five years, so we do not have the specific information to provide that baseline. There is a sense that there are increasing demands because the costs of curricular material and activities are being passed on to families. Some of those issues have existed for a long time, but the pressure on families has increased because too many families now have incomes that leave them struggling to meet other costs. However, other witnesses may have more evidence on the long-term trends of the costs of school.

**The Convener:** We will be coming back to those issues later, but Richard Lochhead wants to say something.

**Richard Lochhead (Moray) (SNP):** I have a general question to John Dickie about what he said. It is also perhaps for Jim McCormick. John Dickie began to speak about factors outside the classroom that can impact on poverty, and other speakers have spoken about factors inside the school that can deal with poverty. My fear about the debate around educational attainment is that we just talk about schools and teachers, whereas other factors influence educational attainment. Can you elaborate on where we are in 2018 with the factors outwith the school that are impacting on children's ability to learn?

**John Dickie:** It is both. There is no question that families are under increased and increasing pressure. That is primarily as a result of cuts in the benefits, tax credits and financial support available, alongside stagnating wages. Low-income families have faced a real squeeze on

their incomes and more and more have been pushed below the poverty line. All the projections are that that will continue, as cuts to the financial support available to families kick in and accumulate.

There is no question that that puts real pressures on families and makes it more difficult for parents to ensure that their children are able to participate fully at school. It is worth saying that parents—and children themselves—go to extraordinary lengths to get the most out of the school day despite all the barriers that they are facing, including the financial ones. Perhaps we will come on later to the resilience and ingenuity of children and parents in trying to do that.

There is no question that families are under increased financial pressure. Dressing for school, getting to school, being able to participate fully at school and being able to build on what happens in school, in terms of the home environment and learning opportunities outside school, all have costs attached to them, and families face those costs in a situation in which an increasing number of them are being pushed below the poverty line.

10:15

**Dr McCormick:** We have worked with a number of academics at the London School of Economics and elsewhere in recent years to look at international evidence and bring it back to the UK and Scotland.

The important point is to contextualise the role of those external forces, not least how poverty acts as a pathway away from attainment. When you boil down lots of complex evidence, it seems pretty clear that there are two main pathways. One is that poverty just creates more stress in families. It creates anxiety and damages mental health, particularly maternal mental health. When you factor in resources such as housing, if security and quality are also limited it can create an environment in which it is very hard for children, especially older kids coming up to exams, to stay on track with their learning. There is also less money to invest in equipment, opportunities and trips, as John Dickie has said.

Achieving the kind of targets that we have in Scotland would have been much easier against the backdrop of the recent past, when child poverty was falling. Having said that, there are nonetheless some big variations in attainment, depending on which measure you take, controlling for area-based deprivation. That is to say that how your fortunes look in terms of attainment really depends where you go to school in Scotland. We should talk about that, but the big picture is that those external forces make it much tougher to

achieve good outcomes, even if things are going in the right direction with the school system.

**Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** Dr McCormick, I would like to pick up on an interesting point that you have just raised about the variability across Scotland. Your written submission states:

"While the number and characteristics of deprived areas varies across local authorities, this comparison suggests that attainment varies substantially within deprived areas. The reasons for this are not fully understood".

Is that because there is an absence of the relevant data that we need to understand that variability, or is it just that we are not interpreting it correctly?

**Dr McCormick:** I will try to say something about the detail. Colleagues who are more expert in explaining what we know about the causal factors may also be able to contribute.

In Scotland, our primary focus is the Scottish index of multiple deprivation, which is an area-based measure. It is helpful, but quite a blunt instrument, as members of the Parliament and of this committee have observed before, because most families in poverty do not live in those areas, and even within those areas most people are not in poverty. The index is therefore a broad measure.

Accepting that note of caution, we have taken one indicator from the Improvement Service, which is a really useful local government benchmarking framework, and have looked at the number of pupils getting five passes at national level 5—a more demanding target than getting at least one pass, which is one of the measures that the Government uses.

That indicator shows that attainment level of the best-performing authorities is well over double that of the least well-performing authorities. The best-performing authorities are some of the usual suspects, and we looked at children who live in deprived areas within those authorities. There is also quite an interesting mix of west of Scotland local authorities with high rates of child poverty that are doing relatively well on that measure. At the other end of the spectrum, performing less well, where the odds of attaining that level are less than one in three, there is a mix of city and very rural authorities, and it is hard to see what they have in common.

It may not be a satisfying answer to your question, but that suggests to us that it is absolutely to do with how schools organise and collaborate, and that it is likely to do with how they relate to families and communities. It may be about resourcing, but it may have as much to do with how resources are deployed within schools as it does with absolute levels of resourcing. It is also to do with not just having good data—we are getting increasingly good data—but how data is used.

A know-how question is used in schools to spot children who are off track. For example, in rural authorities there might be schools with a small number of children on free school meals who—in the past, at least—could be almost invisible in those school systems. We do not have the excuse of not knowing.

The challenges are employing the data well, targeting our resources well and ensuring that children who really should be attaining more get back on track. Data is important, but we must go beyond the SIMD as a measure, which I think is what the national improvement framework aspires to do.

**Kevin Lowden:** I will pick up on what Jim McCormick has said, which is exactly what we have seen when we have worked with schools. As well as researching and evaluating what they are doing, we help teachers through research to do what they do better in order to tackle inequality. It is about the ability to buck the trend almost, to deploy resources, to enhance teacher skills and to work with partner organisations. We need to ensure that the conditions that foster that approach are known within the system. When they are known, we need to know how collaboratives of schools put those conditions in place, embed them and sustain them. To support working in the way in which Jim McCormick has talked about, in trying to offset some of the external poverty factors, we need to be quite agile, shall we say, in the current environment.

Part of the problem is about resources, but teachers often tell us that the lack of teacher cover, for example, really impacts on the ability of teachers to get together to plan collaboratively and improve their skills. We need to look at what we need to build that infrastructure in order to do what Jim McCormick has talked about.

**Liz Smith:** It strikes me that the data question is extremely important, because to formulate a successful policy we need to know exactly what the data is telling us. Could you be more specific about individual local authorities and say whether you think that they are using the same data across the board, or whether different local authorities are using different data? Is it possible that that is a problem?

**Kevin Lowden:** Yes. Stimulated by the attainment challenge and the pupil equity fund, local authorities have revisited the matter. There is still variation in the data that is collected and how it is used and fed back to teachers. However, there has been progress across Scotland generally.

Local authority data teams and data officers are using more sophisticated methods to look at some

of the factors that we have talked about. They think about what variables they need to gather data on in terms of attainment and the individual circumstances of the child. Recently, we worked with a local authority whose data collection is now adding layers—the data includes what intervention a child is receiving and what their home environment is like. That information is collected over time, so that data stream will become very rich.

The skill is then in how that data is used. How does it filter down to the classroom and the teacher? There has been progress, but it is patchy. Local authorities can learn from each other through local authority officers talking about their data collection and usage.

**Liz Smith:** Are all local authorities looking to organisations such as your own to help with data collection, or are some authorities more advanced in picking up better qualitative data?

**Kevin Lowden:** It varies for a range of reasons, including those that relate to a local authority's resources and capacity. Another part of the strategy is ensuring that awareness about what helps to improve the use of data, and how that data translates into effective approaches, gets out and ripples across the system.

**Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP):** I will pick up on a few things that people have said. I cannot remember who talked about getting the best teachers to the schools that most need them. That is very difficult when there is a culture in which some schools have a reputation of not achieving or it being difficult to work in them. Jim McCormick talked about a "headwind" of poverty. How can you address that reputational issue of encouraging the best teachers to apply for jobs in areas that have the most challenges when we have a culture and, perhaps, an inspections regime that makes it look as though those schools are failing? How can we make it attractive for teachers to look at those challenges and think that they want to work in, and make a difference to, those areas?

**Danielle Mason:** There is some evidence—not from the UK but from the US—about financial incentives for teachers to move to schools in more disadvantaged areas, which are perceived as more challenging. That evidence has shown that incentive transfer schemes have had an impact on children's attainment. There is not much evidence from the UK on that but, at the EEF, we are starting to test interventions and examining teacher retention in disadvantaged schools. The evidence from that will come online in the next couple of years.

So, there are potential ways to encourage good teachers to move to the most disadvantaged schools. There is also a lot of good-quality evidence on the best type of continuing professional development for teachers. It is not just about encouraging a specific group of teachers into a different set of schools but about building the skills and capacity of the teachers who are already in those schools. There is a good base of evidence about the type of CPD that works. We are talking about longer-term interventions that are relevant to teachers' day-to-day expertise and build a strong relationship between peers who are doing the training and the trainer. There is increasingly an evidence base on the types of interventions that take that sort of training, deliver it to schools and create an impact on pupils.

The things that we have tested at the EEF include metacognitive approaches to teaching. Metacognition is sometimes referred to as "learning to learn". It is about teachers having a better understanding and being able to equip pupils with strategies to plan, monitor and evaluate their work so that they think about how they learn. There is good evidence that, when teachers have a good knowledge of how to do that, there is an impact on students. Teachers can be taught to deliver high-quality feedback—good questioning of pupils that builds cognitive skills. Again, we see an impact on pupils from that.

There is an evidence base on transferring teachers and an evidence base on how to build high-quality CPD. If we can build that into reforms, we can have more high-quality teachers teaching our most disadvantaged pupils. As I said, there is a much wider issue that the quality of the pedagogy and the interaction between the teacher and the pupil is where we get to the heart of improving attainment.

**Gillian Martin:** I can think of schools in my area in which there is no continuity of leadership because headteachers stay in them for a while and then move on to another school because they find that the stress is too great or the challenge is too big in them. That creates an unstable situation, which will not improve the school. How do we address that?

**Danielle Mason:** School-to-school support, which has been mentioned, is really important. When we have done research, it has come out time and again that schools want to listen to other schools. They want to take their expertise from other schools more than from evidence-based organisations such as ours, universities or local authority guidance. Therefore, we first of all need school-to-school support to deal with some of those stresses and then we need to build the expertise on what works within schools.

We have just set up a network of 23 research schools south of the border. The idea is that they will develop interventions, support and training for

heads and teachers and share them among schools.

**Kevin Lowden:** That is exactly what the Robert Owen centre for educational change has been doing over the past eight years. It has been working with local authorities and schools to build capacity locally.

One strategy could be to try to attract teachers into disadvantaged areas. The question is whether there are sufficient teachers even if we could attract them to those areas.

As we have heard, the more sustainable model is to build clusters and collaboratives of schools in which the whole culture and approach is to focus on building quality teaching. When we have worked with programmes to do what Danielle Mason talked about, we have found that teachers have been enthused. They find that, as their practice improves, attainment improves, their motivation goes up and that has a reinforcing effect. If we can sustain that, build the capacity in collaboratives of schools to focus on quality teaching and work in partnership with other organisations to tackle other facets of poverty that influence attainment, there seems to be a lot of strong evidence in Scotland already that that approach works.

10:30

**Gillian Martin:** The second part of my theme is about a school's reputation being based on an inspection result, for example. We have talked about low-performing local authorities. Such phrases can put practitioners off—they can demoralise a teacher.

**Kevin Lowden:** They certainly can demoralise. Where schools are struggling—to use that term—that puts an onus on the inspectorate, Education Scotland and the Government to consider the most appropriate way to deal with that and how to couch that so that the approach is seen as a form of support rather than overt criticism that demoralises the local workforce. The message is about how we help those schools in those areas—some of those schools might be in challenging areas, but they might not be—to improve.

There is a lot of literature and research evidence about how to do that. We have a track record in Scotland of doing that in certain areas and, as Danielle Mason said, there is evidence from further afield. We know how to do it; it is about putting the commitment and resources into that sort of system. Seeing change in a realistic timescale is important for a lot of what we have been talking about. The dividends and impact on attainment of building that school system and wider systems might take a little bit longer to see, but there is evidence that that will happen.

**Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD):** Dr McCormick started by saying that child poverty is now rising in Scotland after 20 years. The direction of travel for Government policy on funding our schools is towards direct funding. We do not know how far that will go, but that is certainly the current direction of travel. Is there any evidence that that is the right way to go?

**Danielle Mason:** In England, there has been a move towards more direct funding to schools. There is no evidence that I am aware of and would want to point to about which is a better system but, if schools have more direct funding, that provides the opportunity to make the very best of headteacher and teacher expertise. When schools are thinking about how to spend resources that they have received directly from Government, we set out a school improvement cycle so—

**Tavish Scott:** Yes, but I am interested in the evidence. I understand that what you are now describing is best practice or things that you are promoting to schools, but the committee is looking at the evidence to support a direction of travel on funding, and we are now discussing poverty. Do you have any evidence for that, as opposed to just giving us examples? I am sure that they are very good examples.

**Danielle Mason:** No, I am not aware of evidence on the comparative—

**Tavish Scott:** You started by saying that the direction of travel in England has gone down the route of funding schools directly, but there is no evidence that says that that tackles child poverty.

**Danielle Mason:** I am not aware of the comparative evidence.

**Tavish Scott:** I do not know where to get it. That is what I am asking about. You are not aware of any evidence.

Some panel members have mentioned pupil equity funding and attainment. I took the point that some of you made at the start that attainment funding, which, of course, does not go to every school in Scotland—far from it; many schools do not get any of that at all—is linked and therefore related to child poverty, but is not the same thing. Do you believe that pupil equity funding is the right way to go in tackling child poverty, or is it linked and related to child poverty, but not directly?

**Dr McCormick:** I see that as something that we build towards with different layers, to improve our ability to understand what is happening and support better practice. We began back in 2015-16 with a number of authorities with the highest rates of child poverty, based on the SIMD. We were critical of that, because we thought that it was a blunt way of trying to identify underlying need and opportunities to provide support. Then along came

the pupil equity fund, which is better because it has some kind of household measure of free school meal registrations, which is different from entitlement and take-up. That is another partial way of doing it.

We would like other factors to be added to the picture. We know, for example, that we are now making progress in Scotland in understanding the risks that looked-after children experience across all sorts of outcomes—not least educational outcomes—so one could argue that we should be doing more to weight towards good interventions that work well for that particular group of children and young people who have those experiences. There is probably more that we could say about disability and additional support for learning.

I do not want to make it overly complex but, if we want to identify the need and opportunity to intervene as accurately as possible, it would be good to see the national improvement framework taking a thoughtful approach over time to how we measure and support people. We have to do that on a geographical basis, as well as understand what it looks like at the school level, because local authorities are important in terms of accountability in evening out performance differences over time—at least in theory. As we have heard already, the school level is also important in terms of ownership of the issue, knowing the catchment area and deploying resources appropriately in that context. We are definitely not there yet, but we are on a journey towards a better place.

**Tavish Scott:** You have all persuasively argued that youth work, child psychology services, the national health service in respect of the clinical needs of children, mental health services and a range of other services that are all funded by Government but are broadly funded through local government are essential in addressing the underlying causes of poverty. Correct me if I am wrong, but I think that that is broadly what you have said. All those schools depend on those services, do they not? My argument is that, if we go down a route of directly funding schools from the centre, that money will not go so much to local government, which has to take a broader view of providing those other services that you have all argued are every bit as essential in tackling poverty issues. Is that a fair argument, or am I just wrong?

**Kevin Lowden:** I go back to something that was mentioned earlier, when you asked whether PEF works. I think that it is far too early to say. We need a national evaluation, just as there has been with the attainment challenge. That is one level at which we must address the issue.

Drawing on my experience of working closely with schools in different contexts where PEF is deployed, I can say that, as a mechanism, it really depends on how able the school is and how well the headteacher and leadership understand how best to use it. Headteachers would have the autonomy to deploy it to bring in such services and they understand what works so, if leadership teams and teachers are savvy enough to know that, they could work to deploy funding in that way.

Our experience is that the provision is far more patchy. Money comes into schools and it is not always best used. It varies, and the issue goes back to whether there is local authority guidance and whether the school is already working in partnership. There is a patchwork use of PEF without there being a universal understanding of how best to use those resources.

**Tavish Scott:** Your earlier observation was that, where schools collaborate and the culture is greatly improved by that, that feeds through into success both in tackling and reducing poverty and in respect of the attainment gap.

**Kevin Lowden:** That certainly helps. Those partnerships can be with people such as ourselves who work in academic research or with local organisations and local authorities that can pool that knowledge, but what is important is that the knowledge not just about pedagogy but about how to use resources and how headteachers can deploy resources to get the best impact moves across the system.

**Tavish Scott:** Is the headteacher the right person to do that?

**Kevin Lowden:** That is the key question.

**Tavish Scott:** Okay. Thank you.

**George Adam (Paisley) (SNP):** I want to take us back to Richard Lochhead's original question about the external factors that cause the attainment gap, or that do not help as we seek to reduce it. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has said that the benefit freeze

"is the single biggest policy driver behind the ... rise in poverty",

and that it hits families in and out of work. Will Jim McCormick reflect on the impact of the benefit freeze on the attainment gap?

The Child Poverty Action Group was involved with the Child Poverty (Scotland) Bill. John Dickie, you said that the child poverty delivery plans could make a big difference. Will you expand on that and tell us how those plans relate to the issue that we are discussing today?

**Dr McCormick:** On the dominant drivers of child poverty in Scotland, in particular the increase that we are likely to see—all things being equal—by the end of this decade, which John Dickie mentioned, the most consistent finding from the evidence is that aspects of UK social security

policy are the single biggest reason for the increase, followed by what is happening at the bottom end of the jobs market.

Both issues are in play, not least what is happening in the context of insecurity at work. We know that much of the increase in poverty is affecting working families, not just out-of-work families. It is to do with social security and the labour market. In particular, when we consider what Governments do directly, the benefit freeze, which I think is to be reviewed in a year or two, has already caused great damage in the context of poverty rates.

You asked how that translates into children's experiences at school and their life chances. There is a very broad dampening effect on how families function and their ability to participate in and engage with different systems, including education. I go back to what I said earlier: the picture varies geographically and depends in part on what education systems are doing, how well the housing system is operating and the kind of additional support that is available locally. Someone might have access to excellent welfare rights advice and support. They might have a high-quality housing options service on their doorstep. The way in which risks translate into life chances varies, and local services that can mitigate impacts really matter.

**John Dickie:** As I said, the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017 gives Scotland what the rest of the UK no longer has: a clear set of targets aimed at eradicating child poverty by 2030 and an accountability mechanism, because the Government must report to Parliament on progress against the child poverty delivery plans. In addition, for the first time in Scotland, it puts legal responsibilities on local authorities and health boards to produce local action reports about what can be done at local level to tackle child poverty. There is scope in those reports to think about the role of schools and education in reducing costs.

Another positive thing about the 2017 act, the delivery plans and the approach that is being taken is the very clear focus on action to increase the incomes of low-income families and reduce the key costs that they face, because it is by doing that that we will achieve the targets.

At a local level, one way of reducing costs, clearly, is to reduce costs at school. There is also a role for schools in ensuring that the families they work with are accessing the full range of support that they need, including financial support. Education-based financial support includes school clothing grants and free school meals, and the first delivery plan makes reference to action that will help to make payment of such grants automatic, to make access to education-related benefits easier and to ensure higher take-up.

However, there is also scope to build on that and to consider what other supports such families might be missing out on. There are examples of good practice in Scotland whereby school and family development workers are working with families to ensure that they get not only school clothing grants and free school meals but universal credit as it is rolled out or the other financial supports to which they are entitled.

There is a real role for local action reports in teasing out the action that can be taken locally to maximise incomes and remove cost barriers. There is also the wider, longer-term issue of ensuring that all children are able to access the learning opportunities that will ensure that they are more likely to be able to earn enough to support them and their children in the future and thereby help us to sustain a Scotland free of child poverty beyond 2030.

10:45

**Johann Lamont:** I want to ask about two issues. One concerns the SIMD and the other is about local authorities. I hear what you say about the choices that are being made on precarious work and the impact of that. There is a lack of willingness to address what we define as positive destinations, which can be poor working experiences for people. You are also absolutely right to identify the benefits system as an issue for child poverty.

Have you done any analysis of the impact that the disproportionate cuts to local government have had on the ability of the agencies that want to address poverty and support young people to do so? It is all very well to say that a young person should have access to a grant, but local authorities are under massive pressure. Has any work been done on the choices that local authorities are making in the context of a lack of resources?

**Dr McCormick:** Over the past four or five years, we have worked with the University of Glasgow and others to develop a practical toolkit for local authorities that, for any budget outlook, helps them to work out the best way to protect low-income people and places as far as possible. That was co-produced with four or five local authorities in Britain, including Renfrewshire Council and some of the larger city councils in England, which faced quite different budget reductions over that period. There was a real budget reduction in the Scottish example, but it was much lower than in Newcastle, Coventry or the other parts of England that were included in the work.

In the past couple of years, different councils in Scotland, including not only councils in urban

areas but Highland Council, have used that toolkit. Ideally, they should use it proactively to identify how to assist people and improve their situation but, as a minimum, they should use it to limit the damage that can be done when budgets fall.

That takes us back to the point about data and knowing how to deploy resources when they are under pressure, which really matters. The financial support that can be available through grants and other types of support, and the in-kind value of high-quality services, have a much bigger value for low-income communities than they do for everyone else. The ability to run the numbers mindfully when drawing up draft budgets and to know with some degree of accuracy what the impact of different budget choices will be has not affected the budget settlement, but it has allowed councils to use what is available to them more thoughtfully than in previous spending rounds.

**Kevin Lowden:** We have seen what John Dickie talked about on the ground. The issue goes back to the patchy distribution of the skills and knowledge that are needed to use the often dwindling resources to best effect. I mentioned infrastructure—that might be local advisers in the education system or local support workers. In our research work with schools, we have noticed that the cuts have definitely had an effect on that availability.

It is harder to look at what the effect is on attainment in schools, but the feedback from school teachers and headteachers is that the reduction in the available infrastructure is very much affecting their ability to tackle the attainment challenge.

**Johann Lamont:** I am struck by the fact that we were doing some of the things that you describe 25 years ago. Strathclyde Regional Council was very radical in a lot of the work that it did. However, I know from speaking to people that the supports that were in school have gone. People are talking about young people with additional support needs who are not being appropriately supported. My concern is that although we recognise that there is a systemic problem, we talk about individual solutions. We say that if only there was a Mr Chips in every school, everything would be fine, when in fact what is needed is a systemic approach; it should not just be about the quality of individuals.

I have a question about the SIMD, because Dr McCormick is not the first person to say that it is a very blunt instrument that does not address where young people are impoverished. Do your figures suggest that the outcomes are better for a disadvantaged young person who is living in a relatively well-off area and that, therefore, the SIMD is a good measure? By contrast, if a young person who is from a family in good work that is

not impoverished and who is strongly supported by their family is in an area where there is an intensity of poverty, which impacts on local services such as the doctor's surgery and the school, that will impact on them even though their family circumstances are relatively supportive. Have you done any work on that? Is it fair for me to say that the SIMD is not a blunt instrument if we are looking at systemic problems to do with poverty and the impact of poverty on communities, even when individual families are not in poverty?

**Dr McCormick:** I will have a go at that one. It is a really great question and a good challenge back. The SIMD is really helpful in identifying what Johann Lamont has just said about the variations across what we are calling deprived areas. To some degree, that maps on to places doing well or not doing well. In that sense, it is helpful.

It is less helpful in one sense, though, which is that, when we look at how children growing up in deprived areas are faring, there is a risk that we take that as a kind of shorthand for low-income families or families living in poverty. There is some correlation, but it all depends on where you are. In rural Scotland, the correlation is very weak indeed, but in urban areas it is much stronger. It is interesting to look at the indicator that I have focused in on—level 5 passes. West Dunbartonshire, Inverclyde, North Ayrshire and North Lanarkshire are really bucking the trend and beating the odds, at least on that indicator.

**Johann Lamont:** Do you mean that they are bucking the trend in contrast with, say, Glasgow? Are they bucking the trend in the area around them—it could be argued, for example, that Glasgow draws the challenge to it because it is a city, and the areas around it perhaps do not have quite the same pressure—or are they bucking the trend across Scotland or beyond?

**Dr McCormick:** If, for the purpose of illustration, we look at the top quarter of authorities with the highest rates of child poverty, which is where we began the attainment challenge, we see that they are distributed differently. However, Glasgow is actually above average on the level 5 passes indicator, too. It is really striking that an area such as North Ayrshire, which has been struggling for such a long time with the economy, participation rates in the job market and so on, and which has a very high rate of child poverty, is nonetheless faring better than some relatively affluent parts of Scotland.

The strain on transport, housing and welfare support is a material factor. It is interesting and perhaps surprising that some authorities appear to be doing better on that measure, taking a three-year running average. They are clearly doing something that other authorities could be learning

from, as long as the comparisons are fair and appropriate.

I take encouragement from the fact that, despite all the factors that I have mentioned and without suggesting that this provides an indication of what will happen in future, authorities that do not have their challenges to seek are managing to perform beyond the level that we might expect on paper. In contrast, some authorities ought to be faring better than they are.

Despite the long-term nature of change, it is also encouraging that some of the authorities that have been struggling with the level 5 passes indicator have started to improve quite quickly. That may or may not be a trend, but there are many signs of hope that we can take away, even in relation to that narrow measure of attainment.

**Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP):** In Danielle Mason's opening answer, she said that 10 per cent of schools in England are managing to achieve what we are trying to do. The obvious question is, what are they doing?

**Danielle Mason:** It comes back to a focus on what is happening inside the classroom, and it links nicely with what Jim McCormick said. It is not about setting the wider issues of deprivation in opposition to what a school can do. Both are important. There is clearly a set of things that a school can do around teaching and learning that make a difference for children, even if they experience other unacceptable impacts of poverty.

The evidence suggests that the best things that schools can do are those that impact on the relationship between the teacher and the pupil in the classroom. I do not have evidence of what those successful schools are doing that is different from what other schools are doing, but we have good, high-quality evidence that a range of things can help. Those include high-quality feedback; metacognition or understanding the process of learning for both the pupil and the teacher; making good use of collaborative learning and peer tutoring; well-structured, targeted interventions; always focusing on pupil needs and, when pupils start to fall behind, providing well-targeted catch-up; and good deployment of teaching assistants in the classroom to target individual pupils' needs rather than general classroom needs.

It is also important that there is no one-size-fits-all approach. As Kevin Lowden said, it is about headteachers and other senior leaders having the ability to diagnose what is needed in a particular school and to deliver that.

**Ruth Maguire:** We have had a weight of evidence about the cost of a school day and its impact on families. I would like to hear more of the panel's reflections on that.

I was particularly struck by Unison's point, in its written submission to the committee, that a pupil who has had the opportunity to see a play as well as read about it or read it out loud will better interpret it and therefore produce better work. Johann Lamont touched on the extent to which education is not free if parents and families have to provide additional things so that their kids can get the most out of the education that they participate in.

**John Dickie:** The reality is that, too often, education is not free. What is offered in school is not free, as pupils and families are charged for it, including for course materials. The work that we have done across Scotland suggests that there is a real issue over charging for materials in home economics, technical subjects, art and design and drama. As part of the curriculum, the pupils are not just reading plays but going to see them, and the costs are excluding young people from being able to do that.

There is real evidence that young people's subject choices are being influenced by cost. Young people themselves say that cost has an impact, and teachers say that they have witnessed the impact on subject choices. That is one area where charging creates barriers.

The good news is that some schools and local authorities have made the decision to scrap charges, and teachers report increased participation in those subjects, with increased enthusiasm and motivation. Taking away the charge has already made a difference to young people's participation.

11:00

**The Convener:** Sorry, but can I ask a question? Is charging for CFE stuff common?

**John Dickie:** Yes. We have done significant work in Glasgow, Dundee and other local authority areas, and pupils are being charged for materials such as ingredients for home economics lessons and materials for art and design as well as for trips to the theatre as part of English and drama courses.

The extent to which schools try to identify pupils who might need additional support or who are just being left behind varies greatly. The reality is that pupils and teachers themselves say that pupils are making subject choices on the basis of cost.

That brings us back to the overall funding package. Where schools attempt to reduce or remove costs, kids complain that all they ever get to bake is the cheapest thing, when they know that kids in other schools, where there is more of a mix and more resources are available, are doing more interesting things in class.

There is no question about it: pupils and families are being charged. There are two points to make about that. A direct result is that children are missing out on subjects and are not able to participate—or their ability to enjoy participating in subjects is diminishing, because they know that their participation is causing stress for their families. Charging is also reducing the disposable income that is available to families to enable them to meet all their other needs—to pay the bills, buy food and all the rest of it—and to sustain their home.

Course materials are being charged for—that is the most direct cost. The other big cost is school trips, particularly the primary 7 residential trip that local authorities across Scotland organise. The cost of the trip is well over £300 in some cases— the charge varies, but there is a charge—and there is evidence that children are being left behind and are not participating in the school trip.

We surveyed schools in one local authority area and found that, on average, three or four pupils in every P7 class were not participating in the P7 residential trip. When we hear young pupils describe how big a part of P7 the trip is, we can imagine what a big impact being left behind must have on the young people's sense of what school and education have to offer. We do not have a direct measure of the impact of that on attainment in the long term, but it is hard to believe that it does not have an impact.

There is a question to be asked, not at school or local authority level but at a national level, about what we mean when we talk about a free education system. It is interesting that the Scottish Parliament information centre's report flags up that there is legislative underpinning for free education when, in fact, education is not free. We must ask what we need to put in place to ensure that there is a clear understanding of the core curriculum in Scotland, wherever a pupil lives, and what schools should offer to every young person so that there is no financial barrier and core education is free to all pupils.

**Kevin Lowden:** The issue has particular relevance in the light of the research literature on what works. Some of the strategies that impact on more disadvantaged students and help to close the attainment gap involve what are called enrichment opportunities and experiences, whereby students who are disadvantaged get the opportunity to experience things that they would not normally experience, such as culture, museums and outdoor experiences. There is research evidence that enrichment opportunities have an impact, which makes it all the more crucial that they are part of the repertoire that schools, local authorities and Government use in tackling the issues that we are talking about. If the

cost of the school day impacts on schools' ability to provide enrichment opportunities, that is a key issue.

**Ruth Maguire:** I have seen that at first hand in my area, North Ayrshire. I should mention the professional learning academy, which is probably having an impact in relation to the good results that North Ayrshire is achieving. In the context of activities for young people, there are also strong Duke of Edinburgh's award groups, and youth work is going on. We can see the good that that does for young people.

John Dickie said that free education is legislatively underpinned. Do we need to be doing more, in policy terms, at a national level to ensure that education is properly free and that everyone has the same opportunities?

**Kevin Lowden:** If you read the education policy documents and the major policy strategies, you will find that they are very coherent. They interlink and take a holistic approach. At a systems level, I could not argue with a lot of that; the challenge is in translating it into reality and operationalising it at a school and a local level. The funding and resources that are needed to do that require scrutiny.

Can we see alignment between the policy that is designed to achieve our objectives and the system and resources that are out there? There is an argument that there might be a mismatch in that regard. If we are serious about translating our policies into action to meet the targets that we have been talking about, we must go back and look at the system and the pressures that it is under, and we must consider what needs to change to make that happen.

**John Dickie:** There is a role for a greater national steer and for a review of what charging for school activities and trips is acceptable, so that there is a clear understanding of what is and is not acceptable. If the P7 residential trip is a core part of primary education—and it is—it could be made absolutely clear at a national level that it is unacceptable that any child should miss out on the trip because of financial barriers. Local authorities and schools could be supported, in whatever way that needs to happen, to ensure that children do not miss out. I think that we need national direction on that.

There is also a role for the school support and inspection regime. Financial barriers to learning and participation should be an explicit and intrinsic part of the process of inspection and support for schools, so that schools are held to account on the issue and are supported. It is about getting the balance right. There are lots of good examples of things that individual schools are doing—and sharing with other schools—but there should also

be accountability at a national level to ensure that no pupil misses out, wherever they go to school in Scotland, because they cannot afford to participate in what the school is offering.

**Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green):** John Dickie talked about income maximisation, which is key. At the start of the meeting, the point was made that poverty is a challenge that children arrive at school with. Although a huge amount can be done within the school environment, all that activity is largely to mitigate and compensate for the effects of poverty. A whole-system approach is needed to tackle the poverty itself.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation's submission contains a lot of compelling evidence on the impact of income maximisation. Will the panel talk about the role of schools in facilitating a whole-system approach that ensures that income-maximisation projects reach the families that they need to reach?

**John Dickie:** As I said, individual schools can do more to promote and ensure that their pupils access school clothing grants, free school meals and education maintenance allowances—the support that is already there but that is not being fully taken up.

I know from my own experience that it can be hard to find information about entitlement to free school meals and school clothing grants. The promotion of such support is often left to the discretion of individual teachers and staff members or the website. Schools could be far more proactive in ensuring that pupils take up their entitlements.

It is interesting that PEF, because it is based on free school meal entitlement, has driven an increased focus on schools ensuring that children register for free school meals. However, that should be happening anyway, and schools should be promoting school clothing grants and education maintenance allowances, too.

Staff in schools and family support development workers in Dundee, for example, are supporting families to maximise their incomes on top of their specific education-related income supports. There is therefore a role for schools in ensuring that the families of the children with whom they work get all the financial support to which they are entitled in order that the children are fully able to participate in the school day. It is about linking schools as a mainstream universal service with wider income maximisation and local money advice and welfare rights projects. There is the potential to develop those links, and individual schools in different local authority areas are doing that. It is about learning what works most effectively, given that it is a difficult thing to do, because teachers and head teachers do not necessarily want to have

conversations about individuals' finances. It is about finding the best language and the best way of engaging with parents on the issues that they face and that might be preventing their children from fully participating at school, then offering support to ensure that they get the financial support to which they are entitled.

**Kevin Lowden:** A very good example of that has been working over the past four or five years. We have been evaluating the families first programme in Renfrewshire, which has embedded workers for a range of services working with schools, including specialists giving income advice and energy advice. They liaise with parents, who are often in challenging circumstances, to see what their entitlement is and to offer support and advocacy so that they can access that entitlement. That has made a huge difference to the moneys that are claimed, and the impact of that funding has been to get people out of chaos and serious situations that affect whole families as well as their children's education, thereby turning situations around.

Schools often do not have the necessary advice at hand, but they can work closely with embedded services and workers through place-based approaches, which we have found to be very effective.

**Dr McCormick:** The evidence internationally and in the UK shows clearly and consistently over decades that increasing the resources for low-income families by driving down costs and boosting income has positive effects on children's cognition, attainment and so on. Schools therefore have a stake in that stuff, and it is not just a nice thing to do around the margins. If we get it right, it will have a direct impact on schools' core mission.

To add to what Kevin Lowden said, we have learned that to do that well we should stop passing vulnerable families from pillar to post to get the support that they need. The more that we can provide that support by using co-location models in which the location might be the school, the better it is. Nevertheless, for the majority of families and not just for low-income families, it is pretty daunting to cross the threshold of secondary schools and have the kind of conversations that we have been describing. The co-location models might involve schools, but they should certainly involve primary care, given what we have seen in Glasgow, Edinburgh and Dundee, and there might be other settings as well. Wherever people go in their daily lives, we should design confidential, high-quality gateways that will gain them quick access to the financial and non-financial support that they need. That stuff works and is cost effective, and it gets people the support that they need at the right time.

We are therefore in a good place in terms of knowing how to design those interventions well so that they work for the families that we are talking about.

**Ross Greer:** It seems that PEF is an ideal way to facilitate the approach that has been described and to ensure that schools are involved in it. I take on board that we are not yet in a place to evaluate that approach fully. However, from what you have seen so far, do you think that schools are being supported to take that kind of approach? Anecdotal evidence indicates that local authorities are taking such an approach and that it is working well, because they can ensure that the schools that need to facilitate it are doing so.

Going back to Tavish Scott's point, the question is whether the direction of travel is towards individual schools taking the approach that we have described. Are schools being supported and provided with the knowledge that is required to take that approach? It is often knowledge that teachers or headteachers will not naturally have to hand.

11:15

**Kevin Lowden:** That is exactly the issue. It depends on the knowledge of the school team, and that varies. In a secondary school, it might involve the pastoral team as well as the school leadership team. When there has been a history of a school working locally with those services, there is often a knowledge base about who can help, but the landscape of those support agencies is often in flux—with the cuts, a lot of services that schools would traditionally have reached out to are no longer there or are greatly reduced. Where support exists, we often find that there is a need for co-ordination in raising awareness of it. Teachers do not always know that those services exist or how best to use them. As we have heard from Jim McCormick, we know that setting up those co-located services to align them with what schools do and to be more holistic is, perhaps, the best way, rather than schools having to look around and think about where to find the support.

**The Convener:** Ross, are you suggesting that some local authorities are instructing headteachers in how to use their PEF money?

**Ross Greer:** No, I am talking about local authorities that have not done it through PEF but have separately initiated and facilitated income maximisation across their schools. The point is that, although some schools are using PEF to do that, because they know that it is an option, there are schools that have PEF money where the headteacher does not know that income maximisation would be an effective way to spend

that money, because no one has advised them of that.

**The Convener:** Okay. That is not what I have found, but I just wanted clarification. Thank you.

**Danielle Mason:** It is worth reiterating that the things that we are talking about, such as spending money, resources and time in and around schools on income maximisation and poverty alleviation, are necessary but not sufficient. Tackling the barriers to learning and parental engagement through such measures is necessary, but not enough. We also have to focus on good teaching and interventions in the classroom to make the most of the situation that is created once children have enough to eat in the morning and are not being stigmatised for certain things or missing out on trips. We need the focus to be on learning, additionally, in order to get the attainment outcomes that we want.

**John Dickie:** There are examples of individual schools using PEF money to reduce or remove costs for school trips or ingredients for home economics, for example, or investing in breakfast clubs to ensure that children have something to eat before they start their school day. That is great and it needs to be supported, but more guidance and support is needed for schools to ensure that such things are not subject to an individual funding stream or just individual bits of good practice but become the norm in schools across Scotland. Schools need to be reflecting, reviewing and removing any financial barrier to participation all the time.

**The Convener:** Ross Greer will move on to the topic of parental engagement now.

**Ross Greer:** Thank you, convener. Quite a bit of interesting evidence has been submitted about the impact on attainment of parental engagement. I want to look at the specific example of homework. Something that has come up a number of times is that, where parents lack confidence to engage with their children's homework, there is a significant knock-on effect on the attainment of those children, and there is a very clear link with poverty. Can you expand on that impact?

Does the evidence show a difference between the impact on children and families who are in poverty but not living in an area of deprivation—so the school is generally a high-achieving school and not in a deprived area—compared with the impact in an area of deprivation where the challenges are common for a number of families in the community? Does that have any effect on the levels of parental engagement with issues such as homework?

**Danielle Mason:** I do not know of any evidence on that specific distinction. Parental engagement is obviously a crucial factor. Other members of the

panel will know as much as or more than I do about the importance of the impact that it has.

Despite the strong evidence that we have on the impact of parental engagement, the evidence on how to use parental engagement to improve attainment is much weaker. We have tested some interventions that aim to bring parents into schools or to involve them in sessions in other places to improve engagement with their children's learning or to teach specific parenting skills to do with learning. In our experience, from the high-quality trials that we have done so far, those interventions tend not to be particularly effective. There is a challenge to do with engaging the parents whom we want to reach, and there is a challenge to do with the types of interventions that will be effective. It is difficult for schools to find good ways of achieving good parental engagement.

On the other hand, we have tested an intervention that involved parents being texted with prompts to encourage them to engage with their children's homework or upcoming tests. We have done only one trial of that, but we found that it was very low cost, involved very little resource and had an impact on attainment and attendance. Therefore, there are some things that schools can try in an effort to increase engagement.

I have an interesting point to add on homework. In addition to factors such as the parental background, parental attainment and the ability of parents to support their children in doing homework, there are material issues. For example, children who share their bedroom with a number of siblings might not have anywhere quiet to do homework; other children might have caring responsibilities because of the nature of their family. Such material issues have an impact on the effectiveness of homework, just as parental ability issues do.

**Kevin Lowden:** I reiterate that. When we talk about parental engagement, that covers a wide spectrum. We need to think about what we mean by meaningful and effective parental engagement. Some schools find that, in order to achieve that, it is necessary first to build relationships with parents. Where relationships have successfully been built up with parents who might be reticent about approaching the school, for whatever reason, the process of involving those parents in their children's learning is often a lot more effective and productive from the point of view of outcomes.

**Dr McCormick:** I agree—I am not sure that there is evidence that specifically links poverty, place and attainment in that way, but we can say something about the intermediate outcomes that are on the pathway to attainment gains if other things are in place. Those prior conditions that must be got right really matter. I can think of schools where there is a problem with boys in first and second year not turning up to school and getting into trouble. There is a real issue with the transitions that take place in the P7 to S2 period, although that is perhaps for another day.

In the past, schools have taken a bilateral approach that has involved working family by family and saying, "There's a problem here. Can we work with you to sort it out?" They have not got very far with that, but the breakthrough comes when the problem is socialised. That involves telling such families that they are not alone and that other families are in the same boat and asking how we can bring them together, work with them and empower them on a peer-to-peer basis. It is a case of making the whole process less scary and changing the power dynamics. There are particular power dynamics at play when it comes to how schools interact with families, especially when things are going off track. Although that way of working is in the category of "promising" rather than "proven", there are some interesting signals in there about culture and power sharing that really matter for families generally, but especially for families who are having a tough time in terms of poverty.

The other example that I would give is that, when schools provide study support—as they increasingly do—during the Easter holidays, after school or at homework clubs, teachers often have in mind the kind of children they want to turn up to get the extra support. When those children do not turn up, we can either say that they did not turn up so they must not be interested, or we can ask ourselves what we can do to reduce the barriers. We could ask whether it would help if we were able to support their travel home later in the day, or if we fed those kids, or if we approached them as a peer group, inviting them with their friends, not just individually.

There are all sorts of things that can be done at that granular level. It is not enough just to provide an opportunity; we have to ask how we can make that opportunity genuinely accessible. When we do that well at the school level—and it needs local authority support to do it consistently—we get better outcomes. We need to be much more mindful of how those opportunities are experienced by families, and make it more of an invitation than a passive opportunity to be involved in the education of their child.

**Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab):** My question follows on from that point. If you picked any handful of schools across Scotland and visited them to ask about the level of parental engagement, every single school would say that there are parents who are engaged with the school and parents who are not. It is not a new issue. I remember that, when my sons were at

school, I used to see the same group of parents all the time, and there were other parents who never attended the school. There are a number of reasons for the lack of parental engagement, and it is not just because of poverty and deprivation.

That is an important point to make. You cannot point the finger at parents who come from a deprived area and say, "That's the reason you're not engaging with the school." However, if you think that it is the school's responsibility to improve that engagement, what should the schools be doing? It is an issue that has been going on for a long time. If there is a link between parental engagement and attainment, surely schools should be doing more, so what should they be doing?

**Dr McCormick:** The earlier we do it, the better, but my example is from later in the school year. We looked at how aspirations form among teenagers going to schools in different kinds of catchment areas, in Glasgow and in other parts of the UK, because we were trying to understand the shorthand that is out there about poverty of ambition and aspiration, but we found that the evidence was weak. What we actually found was that all kinds of families from all kinds of backgrounds start off with high aspirations for their children. The reasons why they go off track are something to do with having connections, knowledge and know-how about turning those aspirations for their children into reality.

The example from Glasgow is that, if your aspiration is to become a mechanic, or go into the professions, or whatever it happens to be, those families who have connections and understand how to get their children good-quality work experience at 16 are far more likely to be controlling for qualifications to achieve those career choices in later life than those who lack those connections. What schools can do is try to even up that disparity by focusing on building know-how in the school, improving the quality and consistency of careers advice—which, frankly, is very patchy, all these years after we first knew that there was a problem—and recognising that, given that parents have those aspirations, we need to engage with them earlier and more consistently about the scary moments of subject choices, exams and before children leave school. Too often, we are leaving on their own families who really need support to navigate that complex landscape, and schools could consistently do better.

**Mary Fee:** Should schools have a continuing and on-going dialogue with parents?

**Dr McCormick:** Absolutely. We too easily fall back on representative structures, which by definition involve only a small number of families in the life of the school.

My experience is that I am asked to get involved with my daughter's high school when there is a problem or when the school wants money. That is not good enough. We need to have many different invitations from schools to be involved in improving all sorts of things, as well as more relational approaches when things are going off track, in ways that make families feel that they can be part of the solution.

11:30

The hopeful thing is that we have really good evidence from the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland from three or four years ago on what happens when we build a culture of participation in schools. That approach, when it is done well, really works and makes a difference. I cannot tell you about the link to attainment, but I can certainly tell you about the links to the intermediate outcomes on family confidence and good choices. When there is a link to good-quality careers advice and good, consistent and early work experience, that really makes a difference to confidence and motivation.

**Mary Fee:** I have one brief question before I let in the other panel members. How much of an impact does a parent's experience of school have on their relationship with their child's school?

**Danielle Mason:** I do not have the quantitative evidence on that, but anecdotal evidence from our projects is that the parents' experience is important and that is a big barrier to engaging precisely the group of parents who we might want to engage in tackling attainment. That goes back to Jim McCormick's point about making it as easy as possible for parents to engage.

**Kevin Lowden:** We know from research in adult education that childhood experiences of education form adults' perception of education. It does not devalue their vision of the utility of education, but their confidence to approach schools is definitely affected, and that then passes on to how they engage with schools. To go back to the theme of relationship building with the local community, what really works is when headteachers and teachers get the message across to the local community that their door is always open and invite parents to come in, as far as they can, even though headteachers are very busy. Over time, the message gets out to the community that the headteacher will sit down and talk to people. It is about building up a relationship with the community. It is easier for primary schools to do that and much more difficult for secondary schools, given the structures there, although perhaps not impossible. Building relationships with parents over time is key.

**John Dickie:** I can give a couple of examples from our work of ways to engage parents who perhaps have not traditionally been involved with school or who have not engaged with their children's education directly. We have been involved in a couple of participatory budgeting exercises, in which a pot of money has been set aside for a school to use to reduce financial barriers to participation and parents and children have been involved in deciding what the key issues are and what the money should be spent on. One of those exercises was in Glasgow and there is an on-going one in Midlothian. I do not have the long-term data on that, but it is a potential way of bringing parents in to make real choices about how money is spent, which might make school more accessible for their young people and boost participation.

We do a lot of work in schools with pupils and teachers, and one issue that has come up is that the pressure from parent councils to have trips and activities and to hold fundraising activities creates financial pressures on pupils and makes things difficult for young people. We have therefore developed, with parent councils, a toolkit to support parent councils to consider how they can engage a more diverse group of parents in their activities and to reflect on and think through how their work and the things that they do might impact on children from lower income families. That toolkit, which has been jointly produced with the National Parent Forum of Scotland, aims to support parents, and it is something that we can build on.

**The Convener:** A few members still want to ask questions and we have a very tight timescale. Ruth Maguire can ask a very brief question.

**Ruth Maguire:** Parental engagement is a term that makes me shudder a wee bit sometimes. Do you acknowledge that although some parents might not be on the parent council or in and out of the school, they contribute to their children's education by reading to them and talking about their activities each day and that we should value that contribution? It is not just the set examples that maybe spring to mind about being on the parent council and lobbying for trips or whatever—adding value to their children's education can be done in other ways as well.

**The Convener:** Short answers, please.

**Danielle Mason:** You will not be surprised to hear that I think that the most important type of parental engagement is the engagement with learning, rather than being on the school council or at the school gate.

**John Dickie:** I have examples of schools supporting that type of engagement and getting good feedback. They provide home lending packs

through the school holidays. They engage parents and they get good feedback from parents about that. They provide support books for the parents as well as materials for the young people. They also provide material for parents on particular subjects; a maths support book was one example that a school mentioned. Again, there was positive feedback from parents and teachers saying that they have seen an increased level of engagement in those particular subjects as a result.

**Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con):** A number of the points that I was going to raise have already come up, so I will try to keep this a bit shorter. You talk about the importance of that teaching and learning relationship. My experience from speaking to teachers within my constituency is that a huge amount of their time is taken up with activities that are not teaching or learning based. Is that something that you come across nationally and in research?

**Danielle Mason:** Absolutely. It is a big problem and it comes up when you speak to teachers. A good example is marking and marking practices. Something that has become common practice is triple impact marking, where a teacher marks a book, the child responds to the marking and then the teacher responds. It is a way of demonstrating that you have had interaction with the pupil and given them feedback that is incredibly resource intensive, with very little evidence behind it.

Marking is a particular example where people are doing very resource intensive things with very little evidence of impact. Schools should not be spending time and resources on things that have not been shown to be effective, just because they feel that there is pressure to do so; they should be focusing on the areas that we know are cost effective.

**Oliver Mundell:** How do you break that cycle? Do you have any practical advice?

**Danielle Mason:** Watchdogs and the like can be clear about the fact that—to take the marking example—the important thing is not illustrating that you have done the marking; it is giving good feedback to the children. That could have been oral feedback in the classroom.

We need to remove pressure on schools to be seen to be doing certain things that are not evidence based and we need to get good evidence to heads, teachers, and local authorities on the most effective way to spend teacher time and resources.

**Kevin Lowden:** In a Scottish context, that guidance and that steer would come from Education Scotland and from the Government. If it is not seen as some sort of accountability measure, only then do teachers feel safe to change their approach. If the message from

leadership—whether it is from the school, local authority or Education Scotland—is that this is what you should be doing to maximise the impact on learning, teachers will do that.

In schools where you have very strong leadership, they may resist certain pressures, but in the absence of such environments, the only uniform way to change things is to have that steer come down from senior leadership.

**Oliver Mundell:** Thank you. The other thing that I want to go back to is area-based deprivation and the differing links. Is there a case for rurality being used as an indicator of likely attainment? Is the evidence or the correlation strong enough to start looking at that?

**Kevin Lowden:** We lack generalisable research, but through working on programmes and pilot programmes in different areas, we have been made very aware over the decades of the particular challenges of schools in rural areas in relation to accessing resources and services that other schools might be able to use to promote the learning of all learners, not just those in attainment challenge areas. Those challenges are persistent. They need particular attention, and they should certainly be factored into the strategy. The focus of what we are talking about—the attainment and achievement of school-aged children experiencing poverty—is a compounding factor for schools in rural areas and small schools.

**Dr McCormick:** There are distinctive and diverse features across rural parts of Scotland—organising activity, transport, broadband and so on. We can learn from other parts of the world that have similar challenges.

Predominantly rural local authorities are spread out in terms of how they are faring on some of the indicators. Some of the trajectories for changes over time look quite different. For some but not all rural authorities, there is the challenge in their schools of small numbers of children living in pockets of deprivation or dispersed groups of families who are getting by on a low income.

When there is a lack of visibility or scale, it is more important to understand the data and that whatever measures are used are non-stigmatising. There are different kinds of risks and opportunities in rural areas. It probably means that we need the regional improvement collaboratives to focus on rural experiences and lessons learned, so that appropriate comparisons are made and clusters found. Inappropriate lessons from cities will not work in Dumfries and Galloway or the Borders.

**Ross Greer:** Much of the discussion this morning has focused on schools, how we improve the outcomes for children and on parental engagement. We are also aware, however, of the evidence of the massive difference that experience in the early years makes to a child. The PEF money has been focused on schools and the emphasis on parental engagement is in relation to the child's learning at school. How do we use the early years to mitigate the effects of poverty on a child's life? How do we improve outcomes at the pre-school level?

**Kevin Lowden:** The Scottish Government policy environment recognises that at the moment. Much of the infrastructure has been focused on early years. It comes back to how the policy is operationalised locally. Is the skills base in the early years aware of the evidence of what works and is it built into a continuum?

There must be progression from early years into primary and into the senior phase and beyond. We must see the three-to-18 curriculum and beyond as a reality and look at how that is reflected in the system. The policy-speak and the policy documentation is there and the guidance is there to address a lot of what Ross Greer spoke about. It has to be made real and uniform across Scotland.

**The Convener:** I thank the witnesses for their attendance. It was a useful opening session for our inquiry.

11:44
*Meeting continued in private until 11:59.*

The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba