OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Education and Skills Committee

Wednesday 8 May 2019

Session 5

The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Wednesday 8 May 2019

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EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE
15th Meeting 2019, Session 5

CONVENER

*Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
*Jenny Gilruth (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
*Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab)
Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green)
*Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
*Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
*Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD)
*Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Larry Flanagan (Educational Institute of Scotland)
Alison Harris (Central Scotland) (Con) (Committee Substitute)
Marjorie Kerr (Scottish Association of Geography Teachers)
Catriona MacPhee (Comann Luchd-Teagaisg Àrd Sgoiltean)
Francisco Valdera-Gil (Scottish Council of Deans of Education)
Tess Watson (Association for Science Education)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Roz Thomson

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Education and Skills Committee

Wednesday 8 May 2019

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:30]

Subject Choices Inquiry

The Convener (Clare Adamson): Good morning, and welcome to the 15th meeting of the Education and Skills Committee in 2019. We have received apologies from Ross Greer and Oliver Mundell; Alison Harris has joined us as substitute for Oliver. I ask everyone please to turn their mobile phones to silent mode during the course of the meeting.

Our first agenda item is the third evidence session in the committee's subject choices inquiry. I am delighted to welcome Larry Flanagan, who is the general secretary of the Educational Institute of Scotland; Marjorie Kerr, who is the president of the Scottish Association of Geography Teachers; Catriona MacPhee, who is the chair of the Gaelic Secondary Teachers Association; Tess Watson, who is the field officer for the Association for Science Education; and Francisco Valdera-Gil, who is a representative of the Scottish Council of Deans of Education modern languages sub-group. I wish you all a very warm welcome.

I will open by asking you to give a bit of a flavour—I know that we have received submissions—of your experience of the new curriculum.

Catriona MacPhee (Comann Luchd-Teagaisg Àrd Sgoiltean): Madainn mhath. Is mise Catriona Nic a' Phì agus tha mi an seo gus riochdachadh tidsearan Gàidhlig ann an sgoiltean bho air feadh na dùthcha: eadar na h-eileanan agus bailtean mòra, sgoiltean beaga le dìreach an aon tidsear annta gu làn-sgoiltean 3-18. Leis an sin, tha na trioblaidean a tha againn gu math diofraichte uaireannan.

Tha mi glè thaingeil a bhith an seo an-diugh agus an cothrom fhaighinn mo chànan fhìn a bhruidhinn; ach air sgàth 's nach eil Gàidhlig aig gach duine - gu mì-fhortanach - canaidh mi an còrr sa Bheurla gus an tuig sibh mo bheachdan mar a dh'iarrainn fhìn.

Catriona MacPhee repeated her speech in English:

Good morning. I am here to represent Gaelic teachers in schools throughout the country—from island communities to the big cities, and from smaller schools that have just one Gaelic teacher to full three-to-18 Gaelic schools, whose problems are quite different. I am very grateful to have the opportunity to be here today, speaking my own language, but because many here do not have Gaelic—unfortunately—the rest of my responses will be in English so that my opinions come across as I would like.

I will summarise our position by saying that, despite the problems that we have, we are, almost without exception, in agreement that the narrowing of subject choices in many Scottish schools has had a profoundly negative effect on the uptake of Gaelic, especially—but not exclusively—among new Gaelic learners. The figures prove that: in the past five years, the number of Gaelic learners has reduced by 57 per cent.

The situation needs urgent intervention to protect the Gaelic language itself, Gaelic education and—which is most relevant today—the right of Scotland's young people to learn Gaelic in their schools. Gaelic might be the smallest subject here today, but we are by no means small in terms of our importance to history, culture and identity. In that sense, we are so much more than a school subject or an option on a form. It is crucial to us that changes are made for the better, after this inquiry.

Francisco Valdera-Gil (Scottish Council of Deans of Education): Buenos días. No voy a hablar en español. Do not worry, I am not going to speak in Spanish.

I was a teacher of Spanish and French at Dalkeith high school, not far from here, and I work in teacher education at the University of Glasgow. I am here representing modern languages teachers, on behalf of the SCDE's modern languages sub-group.

The committee has already heard evidence on the detrimental effect on modern languages teaching of the narrowing of course choices. We believe that that is an unintended consequence of the policy. If you look back to 2008, at the consultation on the new qualifications, you will see that that was predicted back then: some councils anticipated that that would happen to modern languages teaching, with the reduction of course choices in the fourth year. I cite evidence from a 2018 paper that says:

> "By European Union comparisons, United Kingdom provisions for modern foreign language is poor, with only 5 per cent of students studying two or more languages, compared to the EU average of 51 per cent (Eurostat, 2016), and the highest percentage of students in upper secondary education (57 per cent) who do not learn a language at all."

That is about the UK, but you have already seen evidence that in Scotland there has been a 65 per cent reduction in the uptake of languages in secondary 4. As Catriona MacPhee has said, this

is about positioning ourselves as an outward-looking nation, in the light of the dangers of Brexit. This is not just about the number of subjects that pupils take in S4; it is about the wider implications of building interculturality in our nation. We are not saying that modern languages are the only subjects in the curriculum that have that, but languages are a tangible expression of identity and show people's approach to others, which is really important.

I am thankful to the committee for inviting me to represent the views of modern languages teachers, because morale is low among them.

Marjorie Kerr (Scottish Association of Geography Teachers): I am the president of the SAGT, which is an entirely voluntary charitable organisation with a membership of about 600 geography teachers throughout Scotland. I have been a geography teacher for 38 years and have seen many changes in the curriculum during that time. I started off teaching O grade, saw in the changes and moved to standard grade, and I was part of the curriculum for excellence design process as a member of the geography curriculum design group. I have done a two-year secondment at Education Scotland, where I was social subjects development officer, and I am at the moment principal teacher of geography in a school in Dundee, so I feel that I have a broad knowledge of subject choice.

When the SAGT heard about the subject choice inquiry, we did as we have done previously and conducted a survey. Members have probably read the results of our survey. It was not done at a good time of the year for teachers, who were setting and marking preliminary examinations, so we had only 85 responses, which is very low compared with the number of responses that we would normally get to a survey. However, we felt that it was still worth while to submit it for the committee's perusal.

The main recommendations that we made include a return to a consistent two, two, two model across the country. In particular, we are concerned about variation in the Scottish Qualifications Authority exams and want removal of the geography assignment. The assignment takes up too much teaching time, reduces learning time, causes teacher and pupil stress, is open to abuse and varies widely in the level of demand.

We would also like there to be a requirement to keep breadth in education up to S4 of at least seven or eight subjects, and we are very keen to see teaching of subjects from S1 onwards being led by subject specialists to ensure rigour, challenge and progression.

Tess Watson (Association for Science Education): The ASE is a large body in England with a smaller membership in Scotland. I have been in post for only just over a year, so I am still finding my feet. I am involved in talks with a number of other learning societies, including the Royal Society of Biology, the Royal Society of Chemistry and the Institute of Physics. We regularly meet at the Royal Society of Edinburgh to discuss strategies and advice for panels such as the committee.

I will give you a little bit of my background. I have been working in education for 20 years. I am a biology teacher and have been seconded twice—first to Moray House to work on a project on distance learning for Gypsy Traveller young people, children in hospital and children of people in the armed forces, to allow them to access their learning anytime, anywhere. I subsequently did a postgraduate degree in digital education at Moray House before returning to the classroom. I gave up a permanent job in order to pursue freelance work. I am with the ASE for 0.2 of a week, although that varies. I am in my second year of teaching at Moray House in the course for the professional graduate diploma in science. I also teach in schools throughout East Lothian when I am not at Moray House or doing ASE work.

I am, obviously, very passionate about science, technology, engineering and mathematics subjects. I feel that the two biggest themes in education just now are STEM and sustainability. There is a lot of discussion about attracting and retaining science teachers, so I will be feeding in on that, from the ASE. A lot of what the committee will hear from me today might duplicate what William Hardie from the RSE, who was on a previous panel, said. My understanding is that I can give you my views as appropriate with either my Moray House hat or my schoolteacher hat on.

Larry Flanagan (Educational Institute of Scotland): Good morning, colleagues. I am the general secretary of the EIS. I was a classroom teacher for 33 years. Having been a principal teacher of English, I will be speaking in Scots for the remainder of the session.

I have paid attention to previous meetings: earlier this morning we again heard the phrase "unintended consequences". It is true that there have been some, but that was not unforeseen.

Some of us have been warning that where we are now with the senior phase is well short of the ambition of CFE. The ambition that was articulated was about maintaining breadth across the senior phase of education and creating space for depth in learning. That was because one of the criticisms of our previous system was that we got kids through exams but did not give them depth of understanding linked to the skills for the 21st century that the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development was advocating that

the jurisdiction should engage with. In particular, the ambition was that there should be parity of esteem between vocational and academic education. If those are the yardsticks, where we are at the moment falls well short and we are dealing with a system that is still in transition.

When CFE was first developed and the senior phase in particular was being looked at, we were conscious that standard grade had been a well-trusted system. It is interesting that all the professional associations in the consultation on the new qualifications advocated retaining, upgrading and refreshing standard grades, but that was not among the options, so we moved to a new qualifications system.

Standard grades were introduced in the 1980s as certification for all. One of the key issues had been that the demographic was such that the majority of students left school after fourth year, so standard grade was a huge success over the 20 years. As you have heard at previous meetings, we now have a demographic in which is about 90 per cent of our pupils stay on until fifth year.

The qualifications system that we had in place—with the standard grade, intermediate grade, higher grade and the higher still programme—was a confused landscape for many of the students who were staying on at school. Quite often, students in S5 were doing intermediate 1 and intermediate 2, which was a repeat of the standard grade qualification that they already had; it was just a different way of assessing them.

Part of what drove our system at that point was that it was obsessed with qualifications, because they were the benchmark against which schools were judged. The primary function of a teacher who had any kind of certificate class was to get the pupils through the qualifications with the best possible results.

The SQA had tariff points, and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education would come in and ask for the school's results and would judge it on those results. That led to a shallower learning experience for our young people. The senior phase was meant to open up a different approach, in which we would view the learning as being of equal value to the qualification. That is why the ideas of breadth and depth and parity of esteem became the benchmarks. We are absolutely not there; colleagues from the subject specialisms, in particular, will articulate the threat to their subjects from the current arrangements.

09:45

We have to consider whether we still have the same ambition for the senior phase, and, if so, how we will get there. Will we abandon what is being done and go back to the old system, which was largely a two-plus-two-plus-two system. If we go back to that, we will do a disservice, because we will not have addressed the kind of learning that needs to take place in order for our young people to be equipped for the century in which they live.

My last point is just to say that CFE was not meant to be about a change to qualifications. It was meant to be a pedagogical change about the how we facilitate learning for our young people and was predicated on the idea that young people must have more than just qualifications and need a skill set that makes them resilient in an ever-changing market in the 21st century. That is where the space for depth in learning was meant to be pitched, but implementation of the senior phase has left us some way short of achieving that ambition. In considering subject choice, we must also look at the broader objectives and put subject choice in that framework.

I will leave it there. I am sure that there will be specific questions to answer.

The Convener: Thank you. I invite members to ask questions.

Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab): I have found everything that has been said already very interesting, but one area in which I am interested is the dilemma highlighted by Larry Flanagan about fourth year. For a generation of teachers who taught non-certificate classes and who therefore got no resources—basically, they got nothing—standard grade was a liberation. That was not really because of the credit kids, but because of the kids who were doing foundation and general level and who were now being treated sufficiently seriously to get an external examination. I hear what you have said about the logic with regard to the change in that respect, but do you agree that there is concern about the lack of an external examination for a lot of young people and the consequences for the resources that they will get?

Secondly, we heard last week that 75 per cent of looked-after children leave at the end of fourth year. I think that, unless we go along with the Tory position that everybody has to stay in school until they are 18, there will always be young people who will want to make that choice either actively or perhaps because of their circumstances. How do we ensure that there is something in the system—something, say, like the best of what standard grade did—to externally validate young people who will be leaving at fourth year? After all, there will be young people who will stay on—in some circumstances, to sixth year—but will end up not doing terribly much that will progress and deepen their understanding.

Larry Flanagan: As far as the senior phase is concerned, significant subject choice is supposed to happen in S3. However, that is not the reality. The majority of schools still do subject choice in S2, which means that they are still leaning towards standard grade post-16 qualifications instead of thinking about broad general education in the senior phase. At the point where subject choice is supposed to happen, there is supposed to be an S3 profile. That area was hugely contested when CFE was being developed; in fact, some people had never heard of it. However, it is supposed to set out a three-year pathway for a young person at age 15, whether or not that young person is leaving school; in other words, schools are responsible for having a pathway for young people up to the age of 18. A young person who leaves school at 16 might well be out of school in fourth year and be doing college courses instead, but they must still have a pathway through to 18 that is predicated on the idea of a positive destination.

I understand your point, though, and I have to say that there is still a debate around national 4 and whether there should be an external qualification in that respect. However, the fact is that, for a lot of the young people who leave, that qualification will not necessarily best suit their career intentions. Many of the courses that are offered in colleges are SQA courses and, as a result, do not have external qualifications; they are internally validated by the college and then that college validation process is moderated by the SQA. I would also point out that there is no external exam for apprenticeships. What might be the best pathway for a young person leaving school at 16 should not have an external examination artificially attached to it.

That is not to say that there is no debate around N4—the issue has simply been parked for the past 18 months. Opinion among our members is divided, with a lot of people thinking that an external exam would give N4 added validity in the eyes of parents and pupils. I certainly think that N4 must have at least two pass levels; a minimal pass, which is the current arrangement, is general grade 4, whereas before we had general grade 3 and general grade 4, which were quite different. If you had grade 4, you did an int 1, whereas if you had grade 3, you did an int 2. However, a threshold pass in N4 is not a good preparation for N5, and we have been arguing that there should be at least bi-level validation at N4. There is still a debate over whether that should be an external exam or some kind of external validation of an internal process, but I think that we have to take that forward.

What I would guard against is the idea that the pathway for all young people should be N4 or equivalent, N5 or equivalent, higher and then advanced higher. We support, for the majority of pupils, the idea of schools focusing on exit qualifications and working towards ensuring that there are depth and breadth around them. However, that cannot be universal, because a lot of young people will benefit from step-by-step approaches around qualifications. There has to be some flexibility.

Our challenge at the moment is that there is, for different reasons, a whole range of practice across the system and a reluctance to impose a pattern on schools, as that would seem to be taking the decision out of their hands. However, some clearer direction needs to be given, because schools have, by and large, been attached to the qualifications pathway model, and there has been no drive from anyone to move them away from that. Up until its recent reboot, Education Scotland shied away from the question; for the five years in which it was introducing these new qualifications, you could not get Education Scotland to say, “You should think about bypassing.” It just let the system run as it had done, and that is one of the reasons why we are at this crossroads. We have to think about how we move forward, but I do not think that we will do that by moving back to previous standard grade practice, despite the fact that it has probably been our most successful qualification in the past 40 years.

Johann Lamont: I am still wrestling with this question of equity. Something changed in schools when they had to start taking youngsters who were doing foundation and general level seriously and putting resources into them. For a start, those young people got to go on study leave. They might have known themselves that others had different abilities, but, to me, that sense of being part of the same experience seems very important. I do not know whether you share my concerns in this respect, but some of the evidence that we have had suggests that those who are most disadvantaged are even more disadvantaged as a result what is happening in the process, whether or not it is intended.

Indeed, that is why I have flagged up the issue of looked-after children and the fact that 75 per cent of them are leaving in fourth year. That is happening not because they think that it would be more appropriate for them to do a vocational course or go to college, but because of their circumstances. No matter what their academic ability is, they are just not able to make the decision to stay on. Is that an issue, and, if so, how do we address that challenge? People who are going to get five highers will get them anyway, and, as far as those in the middle are concerned, there are all sorts of arguments about depth. How do we deal with that group of young people who, I think, are not being served well by the process? I am a bit worried and concerned that there is almost what you might call a human resources

model of convenience coming through. These bits of the system are not really addressing the needs of a group that might not number all that many but which is, I think, particularly important, so how do we create space in the curriculum to allow them to do other things? How do you manage that to ensure that the approach is genuinely being driven by educational need, interest and ability instead of some kind of management process?

Larry Flanagan: That is an issue. N4 is interesting, because it is kind of on the cusp of the expected norm. The minimal requirement is for people to be at level 3 by the end of S3, while the ambition is for most people to be at the N4 equivalent or CFE level 4. However, below N4, we have N1, N2 and N3, none of which has external exams. In the old system, we had access 1, 2 and 3, and they did not have external exams either. They were all designed to meet the needs of students for whom external exams were an added pressure and could have debarred them from a qualification.

Around N4, there is a kind of dual-target group. There are people for whom N4 is a stepping stone to N5, and there are people for whom N4 is the plateau of their school achievement and who are looking to map into other qualifications. I am not seeking to diminish this debate, because I think that it is a very real one. I do not think that N4, as it currently stands and operates, is a good progression route to N5; however, if it is used as an exit qualification for young people going on to different pathways, it can be made to work. I just do not think that the absence of an external exam should be the default criticism; the issue should really be the young people's assessment needs.

At the moment, we are trying to deal with quite a wide range of requirements with regard to what N4 is doing. Our current model does not straddle the two ambitions, which is why I think these discussions are quite important; indeed, I think that there is a meeting to revisit N4 coming up in a couple of weeks' time. For some young people, N4 is almost an incidental stepping stone that does not prepare them well; the reason why a lot of N4 candidates do not get their N5 is that they are borderline N4 passes rather than aspiring N5 passes. That is one of the wicked issues that we still have to resolve around how these qualifications work.

Johann Lamont: What do we do about groups such as looked-after children? Most young people will stay on to sixth year, but how do we address those young people in the system who are disadvantaged already?

Larry Flanagan: There is a wide range of ability among looked-after and accommodated children, with kids who are perfectly capable of getting their highers, whether or not they choose to.

Johann Lamont: But 75 per cent of them are leaving in fourth year.

Larry Flanagan: Yes, and quite often they do so not necessarily because of dissatisfaction with school, but because of personal circumstance. Schools have a responsibility to set out a three-year pathway for those young people. If N5, for example, is an appropriate qualification on that pathway, they should be looking to make sure that those young people are going to college to achieve that. The question that we should be asking is: if N4 is appropriate, what is the next step? After all, there is no point in saying that there should be an external exam for N4 if it makes no difference to the young person's next step. The issues around looked-after and accommodated children are less to do with the qualifications system and more to do with the social circumstance in which we support young people, some of whom, although capable of making their own decisions at 16, will still be very vulnerable right through to the age of 18, when they are less supported by the system.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): I have a brief question on that subject. We know that some pupils in less-advantaged areas are being offered only five subjects at higher. What is your view on that? Do you not think that that limits their life chances?

Larry Flanagan: Very few schools will offer more than five subject choices at higher, because higher in the previous system and, for most schools, in this system is a one-year course. You cannot fit more than five times 160 hours into a school year, so, if schools are offering six highers over one year, they are creating an impossible burden on young people.

10:00

Rona Mackay: Sorry—I understand why you are saying that. I did not frame the question properly. That is the senior phase limitation of their choices; it is not necessarily just about higher.

Larry Flanagan: No, and that is ridiculously narrow. Offering only six subjects in S4 is narrow as well. The issue is how schools can overcome that. They can overcome it by going back to a two-plus-two-plus-two model or they can do what some schools are already doing and plan a two-year course across S4 and S5. Over S4 and S5, someone will have eight columns—sorry, I was a school timetabler, so you will have to suffer this—and they can do eight subjects—I would say not eight qualifications but eight subjects. That is one of the ways in which it was intended that breadth would be maintained. If someone does eight subjects across two years, they will have more than 160 hours in which to complete the course.

I think that the number of schools that are doing that is just into double figures. Primarily because the change from standard grade to N4 and N5 happened over a summer, most schools simply replaced standard grade with N4 and N5 and maintained their curriculum timetables, because that was the only way in which schools and pupils could cope with it. We got off to a bad start in terms of looking at curricular structures, and it is only now that the SQA, Education Scotland and the Scottish Government are saying the same thing about exit qualifications and looking at a three-year experience. I think that that is the way forward, rather than reverting to a model that was designed for a different age.

Francisco Valdera-Gil: I want to respond to Johann Lamont's question about looked-after and accommodated children being disadvantaged in school. I, too, have many hats and, for a year, I was the acting deputy for pupil support.

Larry Flanagan has talked about the range of practices, the clear direction and every school doing what it can, but some schools have alternative curriculums because their pupils have a lot of social and emotional problems. They are looked after within the school in another way, to help them to stay in school. It is about looking at what those young people need at that time to support them. In the school at which I taught, we had about 200 students following an alternative curriculum path from second year, which was delivered in conjunction with social work. So, there are schools around the country that would take a different approach.

The issue is linked to what Larry Flanagan was talking about and what your inquiry is partly about—multilevel teaching. When classes cover N3, N4 and N5, there are pressures on a team. Very often, pupils and management choose courses on the basis of attainment, which has an impact on teachers, who often concentrate more on N5 students, with not so much resource being put into N3 and N4. Just before I went to university, I had classes at N4, N5, higher and advanced higher all in the same column. So, there are teachers who are preparing four classes for the one class, and that has an effect on the children who are more disadvantaged.

Johann Lamont: We will explore this question in more depth later, but do you think that that is a particular issue for modern languages?

Francisco Valdera-Gil: It has been a particular issue for modern languages since modern languages stopped being compulsory in fourth year. In the school at which I taught, we had seven fourth-year classes in 2013. Attainment was very good at 14 and 15, and parents got letters advising that their son or daughter take an N5 in French. Now, however, there is maybe one class in one column, with students from S4, S5 and S6 doing N4, N5 or higher in the same column. The dilemma is in balancing the range of choice and what a school can do with its resource and teachers. In some subjects, the impact of that is that a lot of different levels are taught in the same class.

Johann Lamont: Is that increasingly the norm? Is the issue not just about managing the shortage of teachers but about freeing up space in the curriculum? Has it now become accepted that we can have multilevel classes in French, which is creating space elsewhere for other subject choices?

Francisco Valdera-Gil: I think that it has come to that since languages stopped being compulsory. Also, if someone is taking only five, six or seven subjects, the one that is most likely to be dropped in S4—statistics from SCILT, Scotland's national centre for languages, put the figure at 65 per cent—is modern languages. That is the dilemma that I had as a teacher. If three kids want to do N4, teachers will say, "Okay, I will take them," because they know that, otherwise, those children are not going to study the language. The issue has been the narrowing of choice, with students being able to take fewer subjects.

Marjorie Kerr: We have talked a little bit about how the N4 course is not certificated. We feel that one of the issues is the fact that parents are not yet being educated enough about the courses that are being provided. We find that, in some schools, when pupils are asked to do N4, the parents will not accept it for the reason that there is no qualification. That is because people have still not got sorted out in their heads how the new qualifications work. They think that there ought to be an examination at the end, because that is what employers want.

There is still a fair bit of education to be done—not of teachers, who know what they are doing, but of parents. For instance, in my school, we have pupils who get maybe 20 per cent in the prelim exam, and we see that they will not manage to pass an N5 examination, yet the parents want them to sit for that qualification.

Johann Lamont: To give them confidence, would the solution be to externalise the N4 exam?

Marjorie Kerr: Yes, definitely. I think that something has to be done about it to make it a more realistic qualification. The whole thing about the BGE and senior phase is that they were done the wrong way round. People thought it was a good idea to start in S1 and change the curriculum up the way, but that meant that we were changing things for first, second and third year before we knew what the new qualifications were going to be, so people did not really know what was ahead.

That made things extremely difficult, and we are now working in a system in which people are having to change their BGE to relate to what is in the senior phase. That is causing a problem because we just cannot get away from constantly having to change things every year.

Tess Watson: I want to go back to the point Johann Lamont raised about looked-after and accommodated children. My gut feeling is that, as those youngsters are in school for only eight out of 24 hours a day, there is only so much that we, as practitioners, can do. Early intervention is the key. I have seen youngsters go through secondary school, and, if there has been early intervention at primary school, the success rate in getting them to stay on and gain further qualifications is far higher.

Johann Lamont: I understand that. Of course, we want all young people to achieve their full potential. Nevertheless, the statistics show that 75 per cent of young people who are looked after end up leaving in fourth year. I suppose that my question was whether the way in which the current curriculum is set up is compounding the problem and reinforcing the inequality that they face. If the system is predicated on everybody being in school for three years but we have established that there is a significant group of young people who will not be there for three years, whether or not we want them to be, do we not make it worse for them by having a system that does not acknowledge that they are going to go at the end of fourth year?

Tess Watson: I do not know how to answer that question, because I do not have an answer to that.

Johann Lamont: I genuinely accept that it goes far beyond just the curriculum. I suppose that my question—I think we have probably rehearsed it fully—was just whether what we are doing is amplifying some of the inequalities when there are things that we could do to diminish them.

Larry Flanagan: The three-year plan for young people is a significant improvement on the previous system because, under standard grade, a lot of those kids would have left at the end of fourth year and, as soon as they were out the door, the school would have been finished with them. That should not be the case now. The school should have an interest in those young people for the next three years of their lives and should try to ensure that they are on a pathway to a sustained positive destination.

I understand the problem that you are highlighting, but I do not think that the qualifications system is making it worse. In fact, there is potential within the system for a better arrangement than we had previously. In the past, a lot of these young people would not have left with higher-level standard grades—they would have left with foundation awards and, as soon as they were out of the school, the school would have been finished with them. That is not supposed to be the situation now, so there is at least scope for looking at the issue more positively.

Johann Lamont: I had not realised that. We might be able to look at how schools meet their responsibilities to young people who have left. That might be something we could take further. Thank you.

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): My question follows on from that. I am interested in a number of things that Larry Flanagan said: CFE was a change not to the qualifications but to the curriculum; it did not necessarily mean that the qualifications should change, but we chose to change them—or the Government at the time did; standard grade was the most successful qualification for 40 years, which is kind of heart-warming for the three or four of us in the room who were involved in developing standard grade, and I think that it is true; the EIS and other professional associations' advice at the time was not to change standard grade, but to refresh and renew it.

We also know that the change that has been made to qualifications—we have heard the evidence this morning and on other days—is having unintended consequences, including potentially squeezing some subjects out of the curriculum and out of schools altogether. I understand why people want to say that we should move forward, not back, but is what Larry Flanagan has said not a pretty powerful argument for just saying, "We have made a mistake here and we should go back to something that worked so well"? Certainly, at the round table that the committee held with teachers in Fife, that was generally the view that they took.

Larry Flanagan: I suppose that it depends on whether you think that a solution from the 1980s is appropriate in 2020. We are all on board with the fact that, in the 21st century, our young people are facing challenges beyond school that we did not face when we were at school. What underpinned the idea of curricular reform was the fact that we had to have 21st century skills. It is a bit clumsy to describe the skills like that, but the idea was that it is not enough just to have qualifications. Young people will not be in jobs for life; they will have to be adaptable and resilient. Our system was predicated on qualifications and it was being criticised for not delivering on the broader agenda. We had universities saying, "Kids are coming up here with eight A passes and they do not know how to learn" and running first-year remedial courses to try to get learning skills into kids. That was the context.

At the time of the standard grade discussion, I was still in a school; I was an EIS convener. I was going to a lot of meetings, and a lot of our

members were unconvinced by the whole thing. I was saying that the ambition of CFE could be achieved if the qualifications were left as they were, but how we taught was changed. If we did that, we would end up closer to the ambition than if we changed the qualifications but kept teaching in the same way. We have changed the qualifications, but in the upper secondary school we pretty much still teach in the same way. We are still teaching kids to get through qualifications and all of the broader agenda is being squeezed out.

10:15

If an N5 class is doing a course in one year, then you have the two-term dash to N5 that we used to criticise around higher. Getting through the course content in a single year is a significant challenge for teachers and pupils. Teachers start not teaching to the test, but they do focus on the assessment, because if those kids spend a year in your class and none of them pass their N5, somebody will chap your door and ask what is going on. That is why our system is still geared towards a qualification framework and that bigger ambition is lost.

Someone made a point about parents' ambitions. At my old school, nobody sits exams in S4. Pupils do eight subjects across S4 and S5, and every year there has to be a meeting with parents to explain why that is happening. Teachers talk about depth and breadth of learning and the fact that kids can get six highers rather than five, without needing to drop art or music or languages and without focusing only on five subjects, and they have managed to persuade the parents. The majority of parents, however, still think in terms of their own experience, which was about qualifications. It is really tempting to say, "Aye, let's just go back and pretend it didnae happen," but it has happened and, if we went back to that previous system, we would end up in a poorer place.

One of the huge criticisms that I make of the SQA is that it was charged with designing the best of standard grade into the new qualifications. The best of standard grade was that no one fell through the net. Kids sat foundation and general, or general and credit, across grades 1 to 7, and they all got a qualification. That is why it was certification for all. Part of the reason why schools are reluctant to embrace the two-year courses is because you have to make sure you put kids into the right course, so that they get the right qualification at the end of it. Otherwise, as happened in Hermitage, kids will sit higher exams and if they do not pass they will have nothing to show, because the SQA did not design fall-back into the system. N4, N5 and higher are all discrete qualifications and if you sit the wrong one, you could end up with nothing, which is why a lot of schools like to get money in the bank in S4, so that kids get their N5 done and at least they have that to fall back on.

Iain Gray: I will come back to that in a second, but I am quite interested in hearing how tempted the rest of the panel are to say, "Let us go back to standard grade."

Catriona MacPhee: I would not be much tempted, although I do think that it worked. I agree with Larry Flanagan whole-heartedly that the world is not the same and that we would be doing our young people a disservice if we went back to a system in which we used different skills, abilities and experiences by far. Although it is tempting, it would be unfair to them, because they are not the young people of 20 years ago.

I will return to something that Francisco Valdera-Gil mentioned about dropping down to five subjects and how the impact of that is very often to squeeze out languages. Another issue with that is the word "viability": across schools, subjects are being told that if they do not have a threshold number of pupils, the subject can no longer be selected and it is put to one side. The danger is that smaller subjects are marginalised and only bigger subjects with lots of uptake are taken on.

I know that it happens for other languages, but Gaelic in particular is in a critical position and we really need every single child who wishes to take Gaelic to have that opportunity. Teachers from three schools have contacted me in the past week, concerned that their schools have said that the number of learners opting for Gaelic did not reach the threshold needed for that subject. Over those three schools, that is approximately 20 children. Last year, only 107 children did N5 Gaelic; even 20 children in three schools could make a huge difference. If we look across the country, even a couple of pupils here or there having the opportunity to study Gaelic could turn our situation around. It is wrong to ignore that and not to make sure that there is something in place to monitor schools stopping the provision of something, especially Gaelic, just because they feel that the numbers are not viable. For Gaelic itself, our numbers are unfortunately not great right now and we do not have the luxury of waiting until we have 20 people waiting to do our subject, or sometimes even 10. Intervention is needed and it would be very welcome if that happened.

Tess Watson: I do not know whether my colleagues would agree, but it can happen that youngsters are shoehorned into subjects that were not their first choices. Then you have youngsters who have no enthusiasm for the subject and you end up with a situation that is not positive. It is worth noting that that does happen. Does that

happen in other schools? Yes, people are nodding.

Iain Gray: The evidence of geography teachers is pretty strong. They would like to go back to what we had before, would they not?

Marjorie Kerr: We would not necessarily go back to the old standard grade system. One of the things is that we are being asked to be far more creative in the classroom. We are being asked to do things like co-operative learning and to teach the pupils skills so that they are more able to be part of society. Larry Flanagan mentioned the two-term dash. It is very difficult to do all the things that we are being asked to do in that time. We are trying to teach the pupils what is in the national 5 geography qualification and we are also being asked to try to do that in a different way—it is how we want to teach, but I think that a lot of different things are on the table.

Iain Gray: Let us go back to that two-term dash. In the committee's round-table focus groups in Fife the other day, Alasdair Allan and I sat at a table with a dozen or so teachers. It sounded as though every school that they taught in had a different curricular structure. A lot of them were experiencing the effects that we have been concerned about, including a reduction in the breadth of the curriculum.

Larry Flanagan made a case for a model that allowed a broad curriculum to continue, but that was with the new qualifications. Our problem is that, when Education Scotland gave evidence on the curriculum, it said, "The curricular structure in the school is up to the school. That's empowering schools." The apparent result of that approach is that decisions have been made that have narrowed the curriculum.

You said that only a handful of schools—maybe fewer than double figures—have found a curricular structure that works while maintaining the breadth of subjects. Therefore, should Education Scotland, or someone, say, "This is the curriculum, this is how it works and this is how you have to deliver it in your school," so that the unintended consequences do not happen?

Larry Flanagan: I think that Education Scotland is in a different place now from where it was a couple of years ago with that kind of messaging. We have argued with Education Scotland over the length of its existence, and up until its recent reboot, that it was failing to lead on curriculum architecture and timetable structures. We were not suggesting that every school should have to do the same thing. For example, it would be totally inappropriate for a scheme school in Glasgow in which half the kids leave at the end of fourth year to have two-year courses across S4 and S5. If a school has a different mix, it might have to have a mixture of two-year courses and one-year courses.

At Hillhead high school, because of the situation with the kids leaving at the end of fourth year, the school would offer five subjects, because five qualification routes can be fitted into one year. That is not that different from what used to happen. Although eight standard grades were the norm, lots of kids had moderated timetables, particularly looked-after and accommodated children, because of their attendance pattern and behavioural issues in certain classes. There was always flexibility in the system.

If the question is whether I think that we could impose a system on schools and say what we want from them—

Iain Gray: That would be tempting.

Larry Flanagan: It is really tempting—get behind me, Satan!—but that would be moving in the wrong direction. You cannot say that we will have an empowered school system with greater professional autonomy at school level and then dictate exactly what happens. I genuinely think that, collectively, the Scottish Government, SQA and Education Scotland have not sent a coherent message on the ambitions for the senior phase over the past few years, and we have had to spend a lot of time dealing with the fallout of the qualifications.

The last time that I was here, we talked about assessment overload for teachers and young people in trying to do six, seven or eight N5s in one year. Units have been removed to address that situation. The number of units in the two-year system were perfectly fine, so one of the ironies is that we have taken some of those away.

There is probably a debate to be had about what the best system is. Two plus two plus two is a kind of shorthand. A lot of schools are doing BGE in S3 while having an eye to what the senior phase is looking at. It should not be the case that, at the end of S3, pupils go into the senior phase—there should be a conscious transition from S3, so that pupils are prepared pupils for the senior phase. That might mean making sure that there is informed choice.

Science, languages, history and geography have suffered as a result of presenting candidates for six qualifications in S4. There was a debate last week in Parliament about subject choice. To be clear, pupils did not have free choice under standard grade. They had to do English, maths and a science; they had to do history, geography or modern studies; and they normally had to do art, drama or music, whether they liked those subjects or not. They then had a wee bit of choice around second sciences. We used to be quite prescriptive across standard grade about the limit

of pupil choice—and all that is predicated on staffing.

I do not think anyone on this panel would defend multilevel teaching in any subject area. Why does that happen? I will take physics as an example. A school wanting to run advanced higher physics might put the kids from advanced higher in with the higher class, because no timetabler will timetable a class and a teacher for five pupils. In the same way, a school might do higher N5 with another class, because that is the only way that it can get to a viable class size.

Some of that is down to teacher availability in certain subjects. Home economics has been wiped out not because pupils are not choosing it, but because schools cannae get home economics teachers for love nor money. In other cases, it is down to the school having to make choices about how it allocates its staffing pro rata to the number of pupils. Most timetablers will not put a subject on the timetable unless there will be a minimum of 10 pupils in that class, otherwise they will lose staffing elsewhere and that cuts the provision.

In a grand sense, all that is about resources, but the issue of resources and class size has not come out because of the senior phase—it was there before with intermediates and highers, and we had to have viable class sizes to run them.

I know that Ross Greer is not here, but he has raised the issue of schools that serve areas of multiple deprivation having fewer choices. That is absolutely true, but it was as true before the senior phase as it is now, because of the class sizes in those schools. The stay-on rate is lower in those schools, so there are fewer pupils, which dictates the subject choice that can be offered.

Catriona MacPhee: I reiterate what Larry Flanagan has said about staffing. At the moment, staffing is one of the biggest issues that concerns all our members, but in different ways. Some schools have not replaced teachers for countless lengths of time. There are children sitting Gaelic not being taught by specialist Gaelic teachers.

Staffing is a huge issue that needs to be looked at. Staff need to be trained in Gaelic-medium education or we must have Gaelic learners teaching. As the years go by, fewer people will leave school with Gaelic, so we will have a smaller skill set. We need to make sure that any gaps in staffing or lack of teacher training is looked at. We have to have staff, and schools and authorities must employ teachers the minute that there is a gap.

10:30

Jenny Gilruth (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP): I highlight to members that, in a prior life, I used to work with Marjorie Kerr at Education Scotland.

I want to go back to Larry Flanagan's point about the ambitions for curriculum for excellence being missed. Marjorie Kerr's SAGT submission mentions

"A return to a ... 2+2+2 model".

Last week, Seamus Searson, who is the general secretary of the Scottish Secondary Teachers Association, tweeted that it was

"Time for 2 year courses".

That sounds to me like a return to standard grade.

Larry Flanagan's submission says:

"The EIS is of the view that the structure of the Senior Phase is mostly unchanged"

We have had that discussion already this morning.

Do you think that, previously, there might have been a cultural resistance in the secondary teaching population to changing how we do things from standard grade because it was thought that curriculum for excellence was perhaps more suited to primary?

Larry Flanagan: I think that Seamus Searson's comment is about two-year courses across S4 and S5, because I have had that discussion with the SSTA.

There was cultural resistance because, as I said earlier, teachers had become used to a system whereby they were validated on the basis of how well their kids did in terms of qualifications. We have had two decades of the SQA league tables on the number of highers pupils were getting and information about the transition from standard grades into highers.

Our whole system was geared towards pupils achieving qualifications. When we switched to a new system, we literally went from the new qualifications arriving in school post-Easter to implementation in August. No one spent any time discussing with schools what the change was, so the whole focus of schools was on how to minimise the required change in order to deliver the new qualifications and ensure that pupils were not disadvantaged by being the first cohort.

I described the model that we had in Hillhead high school. At one point, over half the schools in Glasgow were asking me to speak to them about our model. In the end, we were the only school that followed that model, because the timetable was such that the only way schools could cope was, by and large, to stick with their current curriculum architecture and just change the qualifications.

Teachers worked really hard over those first three years to make sure that young people were

not disadvantaged, because when we had previously introduced highers, young people were disadvantaged by the change.

Collectively, we did not take the time to get out the message to schools. The point was made earlier about when BGE came in. I think that I read a Scottish Parliament information centre report that mentioned that CFE was introduced in 2010. No, it was not—2010 was when the qualifications changed; CFE was introduced well before that. I had changed how I taught my higher because CFE came in long before the qualifications changed.

We really missed an opportunity. Why did that happen? I do not want to fall out with anybody, but it was because of the political noise around the qualifications. We were pressing Michael Russell, who was the education secretary at the time, for a year's delay in introducing the qualifications. There had already been a year's delay a couple of years before that. To put it bluntly, Michael Russell had got a kicking about the initial delay. The CFE management board, with the exception of myself, unanimously recommended that we should proceed with the timetable. The SQA said that it had delivered the qualifications, which it had—they were there on the shelf. None of the political parties would support a delay. Tavish Scott flirted with it, but, in the end, did not go with it.

Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD): I was not persuaded.

Larry Flanagan: There was no political will to delay, so schools then had to cope with, "Goodbye standard grade, hello N4 and N5."

It is honestly only now that a bit of heat has been taken out of the system that we are addressing that missed opportunity. We are at a stage where we need to decide whether we still have big ambitions for CFE and how we move towards them.

We made a mistake collectively as a system in the way that we introduced N4 and N5. That has created some of the issues that are being faced about subject choice restrictions. Such restrictions were not built into the system, which is why I said that they were unintended. However, they were not unforeseen.

People talk about a notional 160 hours of learning time per subject. For a timetabler in a school, 160 hours is not notional. If I timetabled 100 hours for a maths higher class, there would be a delegation at my door saying, "We cannot deliver this in 100 hours."

The number of hours needed to deliver a course is 160 hours. You cannot even fit six subjects of 160 hours each into one year. The only reason that some schools are able to do that is because they are starting some courses in the middle of May—kids are finishing their exams one day and they are starting their new course the next day. That is the only way that, technically, they can offer six courses of 160 hours each.

The situation is clearly unsatisfactory. We need to decide—I think that this was the gist of Liz Smith's motion for last week's parliamentary debate on subject choice—how we move forward. Kicking one another over how we got there will not be that helpful. We need to think about what the next step is and how we get there.

Sorry, I am sounding very preachy this morning. [*Laughter*.]

Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Fàilte dhan Phàrlamaid Ms Nic a' Phì. Bruidhnidh mise sa Bheurla airson an aon adhbhar a bh' agaibhse.

Following is the translation:

Welcome to the Parliament, Ms MacPhee. For the same reason as you stated, I will speak in English, too.

I have a question about one of the issues that you raised, Ms MacPhee. I want to separate out a couple of different things. You talked about the impact of subject choice issues on Gaelic for learners and Gaelic for fluent speakers, but you have also talked about the impact more widely on education through the medium of Gaelic. What impact have the issues on subject choice had on Gaelic-medium education specifically?

Catriona MacPhee: Are you asking about Gaelic for fluent speakers or subjects through the medium of Gaelic?

Dr Allan: I mean subjects through the medium of Gaelic.

Catriona MacPhee: We need staff who are willing to teach the subjects. A number of schools offer Gaelic-medium education and it is tremendously successful, although they are few and far between. Gaelic-medium education adds to children's fluency. It almost works in partnership. If children have the opportunity to study geography, history, modern studies, maths and sciences through the medium of Gaelic, that will obviously increase their fluency as well as their knowledge all round. However, there is a huge dearth of teachers who are not only able but willing to teach their subject through Gaelic, and that has another impact. We will not have large numbers opting to do those subjects, so we need to start somewhere small. The Glasgow Gaelic school started small and has done a tremendous job. We need to allow those things to happen rather than wait for huge numbers to come, because they will not come.

The option forms or the options in schools are having a strangling effect on the language and Gaelic learners and on Gaelic-medium education, although those are quite different issues. The issue is probably having more of an effect on Gaelic learners than on Gaelic-medium education because, in Gaelic-medium education, there is more of an investment by the parents or children in seeing things through, although some decide not to see things through, which is another issue. With Gaelic learners, Gaelic is an option that people choose, as with modern languages such as French or German, and if it is not on the form, people will not choose it. The same will apply if it appears only once on the form or if the numbers are not large enough.

Does that answer the question?

Dr Allan: Yes. You talked about options and forms. I am in the rather eccentric position that, when I was in second year at school, I drew an extra column on my choices form and wrote in "Gaelic", but it was not available.

Catriona MacPhee: Good for you.

Dr Allan: You mentioned what is almost a workforce planning issue. How quickly would there be a visible impact on some of the problems that you have described with workforce planning for the future for the availability of Gaelic-medium teachers were something not done about the acute problem that we now face with Gaelic?

Catriona MacPhee: It would be almost instant, dare I say it. We need more teachers, but there are teachers out there. There are teachers who are available for jobs if they were advertised. The more remote areas tend to suffer more when people are off sick, because there is not so much supply cover in those areas. However, a tremendous effort has been made to boost the numbers coming out of teacher training, and that has resulted in a turnaround. We have teachers out there, but we need to have them in classes actually teaching children. Until that happens, they cannot impart their knowledge and develop Gaelic in that way. It could be instantaneous if everything worked together and things worked to plan and we had a teacher in front of every class and for every child who wants to learn Gaelic.

Dr Allan: My next question is perhaps also for Ms MacPhee, but it is certainly for Mr Valdera-Gil. You talked about the fact that we clearly cannot go back to the past but, without putting words in your mouth, you pointed to your concerns about the lack of the compulsory nature of languages in school. Where does the solution lie? Are you advocating something around subject choice or are you advocating something around compulsory subjects?

Francisco Valdera-Gil: I would not advocate compulsion. I would advocate making a place in the curriculum for it to happen. If there were more than five or six course choices, a modern language could still be a viable solution for many students who want to study it. We need to think about the fact that 95 per cent of our European counterparts study a modern language in the equivalent of a senior phase and our students do not. If we want to say that the senior phase has breadth, modern languages need to be there.

For me, there are two big issues. One is about a lack of understanding. Although policies such as the CFE principles and practice paper and, at European level, the "Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment" are clear about the role that modern languages play in literacy, that is not totally understood by the profession. I work in teacher education and I work with teachers delivering the one plus two model, and I can see that the most deprived schools in Glasgow are the ones that tend not to do modern languages, which is a double-whammy for children. There are 4,000 words in English that come from French, and it is through learning a language that our students are exposed to that. There is that issue of literacy.

Larry Flanagan and Catriona MacPhee have talked about the lack of alignment of curriculum, assessment and pedagogy. That is an issue not only for Scotland; it is an issue for every nation, so it is not just us. Thinking of our qualifications in the senior phase, if we look at France or Spain, we find that they teach languages through content and language integrated learning. Interdisciplinary learning is one of the contexts of learning for curriculum for excellence but, once we get into the senior phase, that is forgotten. IDL maybe happens in first to third year—or maybe not—but it is not happening in the senior phase.

There is no reason why a modern language could not be part of another qualification or part of science, geography, art or any other subject. I also have an SQA hat, because I am the principal assessor for higher Spanish. The SQA has done that for the baccalaureates. Those are taken by a small minority of students, but we could build on that. There are other ways of enabling young people in S4 to S6 to take a language. There is a job to be done, but there are other ways if the curriculum in S4 cannot be changed.

Dr Allan: My final question is again for you, Mr Valdera-Gil. One issue that has been raised in the past with us, or that has certainly been raised publicly, is the question of people who drop a language in second or third year and then take it up in fifth or sixth year. What are the issues around that?

10:45

Francisco Valdera-Gil: There is a notion in the four nations of the UK that people are just bad at languages. There is also the myth that a language is more difficult than another subject. It is not but, whether we like it or not, that is a myth that people live with and that makes them not take the subject.

Some students might come back, but the reality is that many do not. I have provided statistics. In 2011 and 2012, there were 28,000 students doing standard grade French and we have 6,000 or 7,000 now. There is no reason why students could not come back in S5 and S6 to do a national 5 or a higher, but they do not. Unless something is done in the system to try to get students back, it will not happen. The reality is that, once students drop a language, not many come back to do it, although that is not to say that they cannot come back. The assumption is that you have to have that progression of national 4, national 5, higher and advanced higher. Some students can crash a higher course without having done a national 5, but that does not happen very often. There is work to be done in schools to convince the population and manage their expectations that languages can be done, but the system has not allowed for it either. It is a combination of both.

Larry Flanagan: I am interested in the question about pupils who drop a language in second or third year. That should not happen. Pupils are not supposed to drop languages until they get to the senior phase. One of the debates about the six subject choices in S4 is that, up until the end of S3, pupils should be studying 11, 12 or 13 subjects. Instead of going to eight subjects under standard grade, they are supposed to maintain all their subjects across S1, S2 and S3, with some refinement. For example, in science, they might move from general science to looking at physics or chemistry specifically. Some refinement is allowed in S2, but languages should not be dropped.

Across S1, S2 and S3, the experiences and outcomes apply across the board, except for where there is some degree of specialism with a view to the senior phase. Whether it is French, Spanish or whatever, all pupils should be experiencing that at least up to the end of S3, which should be level 3 or level 4. The idea is that, at the end of S3, pupils should have sufficient grounding so that, somewhere in the senior phase, they can revisit the subject and will at least have a foundation for that.

Catriona MacPhee: Fran Valdera-Gil talked about young people dropping languages. That happens especially with Gaelic learners, and it can be at any point. However, quite a few pupils who have been doing Gaelic-medium education or Gaelic for fluent speakers come back in at a later point.

On Larry Flanagan's point, the problem is that the system is quite different across the nation. Some schools allow pupils to opt after S2, although they are still officially doing the BGE, and some schools carry on with the whole BGE until the end of S3. Other schools allow early presentation, so pupils do their N5 exam at the end of S3. That is great for those young people, and schools allow it only if the young people can do it. However, it means that we have a system that is varied across the country and, as young people then opt for the senior phase, it is not a level playing field.

Tess Watson: My experience in the past couple of years in a school where a science teacher was off long-term sick was that there were no temporary science teachers to come in and cover. Obviously, the accredited classes must be taken by the chemists, but the BGE timetable had all the third year cohort on it and the uptake for the third year cohort in chemistry going into fourth year was low—I think that the school did not even have enough to run a class of 20. That was because of the experience that the youngsters had. It was through no fault of their own and it was not the department's fault. It was just because of the circumstances and the fact that there are not enough science teachers.

Tavish Scott: If it is any consolation, Francisco, my son's nine year-old class can all pronounce the Christian names and surnames of the Barcelona first team immaculately, as they were doing last night—they can also sing "You'll Never Walk Alone", but not in Spanish.

I want to ask Tess Watson a general question, but if she has specific detail, that would be helpful. This is about narrowing choice. I take all the rest of the panel's observations about the wider themes of what is going on, but do you have a sense of what is happening in the teaching of science in the senior phase? What are the implications of narrowing choice? Is there an impact on the choices and, therefore, the future direction of young people? You said that you have a passion for making sure that young people can take science.

Tess Watson: There is definitely an impact. I do not want to name the school involved, but I know of a school with a fantastic department in which the youngsters are taught by subject specialists: a biology class at an accredited stage will have a biologist, a chemistry class will have a chemistry teacher, and so on for physics and other subjects. There have to be subject specialists. I am not quite sure whether I am answering your question, but it is quite prevalent in a number of schools that, because they cannot get a subject specialist for physics and chemistry, first-year to third-year pupils in the BGE will be taken by a non-subject

specialist or, if there is no science teacher, will just have general cover. That experience is directly affecting the pick-up of subjects such as chemistry.

Tavish Scott: Do you think that fewer girls and boys who want to take a science discipline are able to go into the senior phase now than was the case some years back? Has that narrowing of choice made it more difficult to pursue a science career?

Tess Watson: Yes, absolutely—probably more so with maths, physics and technologies.

Tavish Scott: Why are we failing in spite of the very sensible collegiate cross-party support for STEM subjects and getting more women into science and so on? Do we not have enough teachers? What is your diagnosis of what is the main problem?

Tess Watson: I do not think that everyone will agree with me on this, but I think that the main problem is the shortage of teachers and the difficulty in attracting and retaining individuals in the profession.

Tavish Scott: Is that the most significant issue?

Tess Watson: Last year, I had 13 PGE biology students at Moray House, who have all successfully gone on to do their newly qualified teacher year. Once they have done their NQT year, five of them are off to hit the international circuit, and I think that that is probably quite telling. This is probably not for a discussion today, but a lot of the conversations that I enter into in the staffroom are about opting for a four-day week with longer hours, but that is probably another debate for another day.

Tavish Scott: I am very interested in the take that it is about two, two, two versus what we now have. That is not necessarily the issue. You think that there are other pressures that are causing teacher shortages in your disciplines.

Tess Watson: Why do we have teacher shortages? I have had two mature students leave the PGE programme this year; they were incredibly capable, but it was not for them. The pressures and having to perform meant that it was not for them. That is quite telling. Honestly, if I, with the experience that I have now, having had two young children, were to go and do a postgraduate diploma in education now, there is no way I could cope with the course. It is very intense. It is very successful and it prepares students for the profession as best we can, and our evaluations have been good, but that is just indicative of the profession. Teachers are tired.

Tavish Scott: Thank you.

I am trying not to put words in your mouth, but I think that the panel has argued in favour of moving forward, not going back. I get that. There must be two or three aspects to that argument that we should see as a committee. What are the two or three aspects—maybe there are more—to improving the situation so that the narrow focus we have had in this inquiry on subject choice starts to be addressed? How do we make sure that the rationale for the senior phase that Larry Flanagan articulated in his opening remarks is enhanced?

Larry Flanagan: The starting point would be to decide whether we still believe in the ambition of breadth and depth and parity of esteem. If those are the outcomes that we desire, we have to think how we achieve that. We do not achieve it if the bulk of our system is on a stepladder of qualifications. I can imagine that, for a pupil doing six subjects at N5 with the two-term dash and the focus on the qualification, to be followed by five of those six subjects in S5, it is not a great learning experience. The message there is all about the qualifications. It is a big jump for Scottish education to start talking about exit qualifications and it will be quite a contested area. I know that a lot of our members would sympathise with the idea that we should have certification in S4 and we should look at starting the courses earlier. I think that that boat has sailed. If we look at where we are, we can recognise that that is not a good learning experience for young people and start to think about how we move it forward.

However, to go back to the points that Johann Lamont made earlier, there will be young people in our system for whom the stepladder approach to getting qualifications is entirely the way they should do it, so they are getting success early. That is asking for quite a lot of flexibility in our system, which is what the empowering schools agenda is meant to be about. What has been missing is a clearer articulation of the objectives of the senior phase and what we want to see involved in it. It is appalling that we have young people who are not being exposed to a foreign language beyond S3; how that can be equipping those young people for the modern world is beyond me. I am not saying that we have to make it compulsory, but we have to have a strong message to the effect that schools that are meeting the needs of young people will clearly be addressing the importance of language in the 21st century. There have to be messages there and then schools can say, “Well, this is what we are being asked to do.”

Standard grade made certain subjects compulsory, so a certain range of subjects had to be done. Rather than saying that it should be compulsory, we should be saying, “This is what we expect our system to deliver for young people; if

you are doing a variation on that, that is fine, but justify it in terms of the needs of your pupils." It would be great if we could get a consensus around the objectives and then say to the system, "This is what we want you to deliver."

It requires buy-in from all organisations, including the SQA. The SQA will tell you that it offers a vast array of qualifications beyond N5 and N6. If you go to colleges, you will see those being deployed in colleges, but that is not so much the case in schools yet unless there is a college-school link-up. However, we have to explore that idea, so that languages can be done in more ways than just doing an N5 or a higher. A crash course in Spanish in sixth year used to be one of the most popular choices, because acquiring that language suited the holiday aspirations of young people, which was a valid interest. Some of the things that we offer do not have to be linked to qualifications necessarily, but that is where we are at the moment.

It is about reaffirming the objectives, creating legitimate demands around the core areas that we think should be in the curriculum and then saying to schools, "This is what we expect you to deliver—have your story ready if you are doing something different." If schools have a narrative around why they are doing something different, that is fine.

This is a big change. There was a reference to early presentation. When we started doing CFE in the secondary school, we had a huge movement towards kids starting qualifications in S2 and sitting their standard grades in S3. A kid who was at school for six years spent five years doing qualifications and one year getting used to the big school. We are trying to move totally away from that, so that means putting the focus on qualifications at the exit point and thinking in those terms.

The SQA could do more to do ensure there is better fall-back in the system. That is one of the barriers, as the safety nets are not there to make sure that nobody is disadvantaged. I do not want to advocate more changes from the SQA but that is certainly an area that needs to be looked at.

11:00

Marjorie Kerr: We have talked a lot today about curriculum architecture and course choice, but one of the things that we have not really touched on, which we feel quite strongly about in geography, is the way schools are organised now. Our members are quite passionate about the loss of principal teachers of geography. As a cost-cutting exercise, many local authorities have gone over to faculties. Some are social subjects faculties that have history, geography, modern studies, and religious, moral and philosophical education all in one faculty. The head of faculty may not be from your subject. If their subject is not geography, let us say—that is my subject—instinctively the head of faculty is not going to give the time to geography that they are to history or modern studies, or whatever their subject is.

Sometimes we find then that, if the head of faculty is from history, there are more history teachers, because that is what becomes more popular, and some subjects are pushed out. Francisco Valdera-Gil talked about having a non-specialist. Some schools go over to integrated social subjects, which we do not advocate. We feel that geography teachers should be teaching their subject, which is geography, but if there is only one geography teacher in the faculty and there are five history teachers or whatever it is, that is what you have to do.

I am interested to hear that the STEM subjects are struggling for teachers. We have tried for a number of years to have geography included in STEM, because geography is partly a science subject. There are two parts to geography: human geography and physical geography. We have not been allowed to be part of that.

In the new regional improvement collaboratives, for instance, there will be development officers in literacy, numeracy, STEM and information and communication technology. There is also a focus on one plus two languages. Social subjects get nothing. Social subjects have been completely pushed to the side and left out. In Education Scotland now, we have one person who is supposedly developing the whole of the social subjects curriculum for the whole of Scotland. We definitely feel that we are being marginalised, not just by course choice but by the way the system is operating at the moment.

Francisco Valdera-Gil: With my initial teacher education hat on, I would say the same as Marjorie Kerr: not having faculties and not having principal teachers has an effect on the support for student teachers when they are out in placements. We have looked at the idea of having a better safety net in the system for modern languages. That exists for national 4 and national 5, but it has not helped the case of modern languages. Even if that was there, there would need to be something more radical—and I like Larry Flanagan's idea of reaffirming objectives and what is expected.

I am part of a research group in Wales that is looking at the national qualifications and assessment there. The question when we started working with teachers was what we want an educated Welsh person to look like by the time they leave school when they are 16. Yes, there will be some students who leave at 16 and others who leave at 18, but I would say that a modern

language should be part of that. It should not be just something that a small minority is doing; research shows that the make-up of that minority of students who are doing a modern language is linked to the social status of the students. That is more dangerous for our future as a nation as well.

To go back to Dr Allan's question, it was envisaged in 2010 or 2011 that the one-plus-two policy—it is written in the policy—could have a knock-on effect on the uptake of modern languages, but that has not been realised. It was thought back then that future teachers would be asked to have the equivalent of a higher in a language to go into the teaching profession. We asked for a higher English and national 5 maths. Other European counterparts ask for students in their initial teacher education courses to have the equivalent of a higher in a language—common European framework of reference level B. That had to be dropped. It is not to say that it could not happen in the future, but we are further away from the realisation of that because of what is happening in the senior phase.

Tess Watson: I completely echo the comments of Marjorie Kerr and Francisco Valdera-Gil, in particular about the restructuring of jobs and the way that schools have their hierarchy. When I started teaching, each science had a principal teacher and your principal teacher was a teacher of biology, physics or chemistry. There would usually also be an assistant principal teacher in science, which was a fantastic little post dealing with first and second-year science. There was then a move to the post of curriculum leader. There was a lot of unrest in a lot of schools because, inevitably, if you had three principal teachers, they would want to conserve salary but only one of them would get the science job.

To echo what Francisco Valdera-Gil said about student teachers, I think that I must have been in around 40 schools in two years, and the support that student teachers get is very varied. For teachers who are young in their careers, it is not a particularly positive outlook. They are learning about the profession in a hands-on way and, at their first placement, they are being given the placement late by the student placement system with the General Teaching Council or they have not been allocated a mentor. Those are the two things that are recurring and it creates a lot of anxiety—and a lot of anxiety for me, because I get worried for them. That may be something that we can address.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Mr Flanagan said something very interesting about the very small number of schools that use the fourth and fifth years as a two-year progression. Can you clarify what happens in these schools? Do the young people, at the end of S3, decide whether they are going to do a two-year higher and sit it in S5 or take a national 5 or other course? Is that understanding correct?

Larry Flanagan: That will vary from school to school. In the school that I am familiar with—Hillhead high school—the final decision about whether to do N5 or higher would normally be made at the end of S4. It depends on the subject, obviously, but based on their S3 CFE outcomes, the pupil would go into an N4 course, straight N5 course or N5/higher course.

The school was very keen to evidence, over the course of S4, what the best qualification for the young person to go to would be. For example, it introduced an S4 mini exam diet so that there is concrete evidence to persuade parents about what courses and qualifications the young person should sit. The school errs on the side of caution, so it does not do aspirational presentations—the pupil is presented for courses and qualifications that the school is confident that he or she will pass. So far, no one has fallen through the net. A parent might say that they want their child to do a higher, but the school can say firmly that there is no evidence that the child can achieve the higher, so they will be doing N5.

Liz Smith: I have two other questions about that model. Is it correct that youngsters who do a national 5 qualification can put together their fifth and sixth years to do a higher over two years?

Larry Flanagan: Yes. There is a lot of flexibility in the system. After the first three years, the norm is that most pupils after S3 do a two-year course. Because the school will also be catering for sixth-year pupils, some of whom will be doing highers, it will also will be running one-year courses for N5 and higher, so there could be an S4 pupil in with S6 pupils on a one-year course: the option would exist within the timetable if there was a particularly brilliant student who wanted to do highers in S4, for example. The bulk of pupils do two-year courses, but that is not an absolute given—it depends on the ability of the student. One-year courses are part of the mix in the three years of the senior phase.

Liz Smith: Did I pick you up correctly that those few schools that I asked about offer a seven or eight column structure?

Larry Flanagan: Most of them use eight columns, which is the old standard grade structure. Generally, that means five or six qualification courses and two columns for college courses, short module courses, alternative qualifications such as the Duke of Edinburgh's award and Prince's Trust courses, interdisciplinary learning projects, community link-up and modern apprenticeships. Breadth is not about doing eight qualifications: it is about broad experience.

Liz Smith: Let us assume that we are trying to move on the good aspects of the change. All political parties bought in to the philosophy behind curriculum for excellence. We want to ensure that there is breadth, and we want to make things more flexible and increase the subject choices so that we do not discriminate against languages or STEM. Is use of the model in those few schools worth considering in order to improve the situation, and to avoid what seems to me to be the complete disconnect between the BGE and the senior phase in many schools?

Larry Flanagan: Two-year courses are absolutely the way forward. It does not have to be a prescriptive arrangement. The school's pupil cohort might require a mixed economy; for example, quite a number of schools offer two-year courses for straight higher candidates who bypass N5, but they do not offer it to all pupils. This is why the empowering schools agenda is important; what is offered has to be tailored to the needs of the school's pupils. A scheme school in Glasgow might or might not go for bypassing. Under the old system, Govan high school, for example, used to put all its post-S3 pupils in short one-year courses: it was focused on maximising the qualifications of those young people, most of whom were going to leave either at 16 in the summer or at 16 at Christmas. It used a particular model for the pupils from the community that it serves.

Liz Smith: I entirely accept that. Flexibility is right, but it seems that the system that the schools that I asked about are operating offers greater choice among the core subjects and does not discriminate against pupils who might otherwise feel that they have to drop science or languages. In the six-subject scenario, that is what is happening, according to the evidence that the committee has heard.

11:15

Larry Flanagan: Frankly, there are only two choices. Either the school offers eight columns across S3 and S4 or it offers eight columns across S4 and S5. If we are going to have S4 presentations as the norm, we are not going to get beyond six subjects. Those that are doing seven or eight are either cheating S3 or they are cheating S4. That is all about the problems of the two-term dash and assessment.

Subjects such as geography, history, sciences and languages will be squeezed out if the school goes down to five or six choices early in the programme. That is why I favour the two-year S4 and S5 course, because the pupils are staying on. Using S4 and S5, we can retain subject choice in a much more meaningful way than we can with the hybrid system that we have at the moment, which was born of the practical need to make changes without damaging pupils' outcomes.

Liz Smith: That suggestion would achieve many of the objectives that we all agree on, including allowing greater choice and offering greater individual attention within the curriculum, which is not always the case in some of the restricted scenarios that exist. I think that that is where we should be going.

Larry Flanagan: That is the Finnish system.

Tess Watson: I add—I am sure that members are familiar with this—that, in national 5 qualifications, the pupil can sit units only and be credited for that on their final certificate.

Alison Harris (Central Scotland) (Con): A couple of weeks ago, I asked a panel whether multilevel teaching can be sustained while maintaining strong educational standards. The answer was a resounding no. I know that we have touched on the matter already this morning, but I put the same question to the panel. What do you say, in the light of the evidence from the Scottish Council of Deans of Education and what we have heard from Francisco Valdera-Gil this morning, about teachers having to teach national 4, national 5, higher and advanced higher in one class?

Marjorie Kerr: SQA qualifications are definitely not aligned to be taught in that way. If national 5 and higher are being taught in the same geography class, the kids who are doing the higher get the teacher's attention, and the teacher will spend most time teaching them. The teacher will perhaps have to make up individual booklets for the national 5 pupils so that they can work on the parts of the course that are not aligned. We find that our national 5 pupils, in particular, are definitely disadvantaged if they end up in a class in which the higher is also being taught, because the courses do not match up.

Francisco Valdera-Gil: I am going to be a little bit controversial. In languages, the qualifications do align. You are teaching pupils to listen, talk, read and write and can differentiate the levels of outcomes. It can be done. There are advantages to having higher or advanced higher students in the same class as N5 students, which is the rationale for some schools putting S4, S5 and S6 students together under a social constructivist idea of learners learning from each other.

However, that requires an amount of preparation time that teachers do not have, and it requires greater pedagogical understanding of teaching languages and how to make that work. I would say that it does not work in the majority of cases, because, once some students get the N3 or N4 qualifications, we have ticked the box, so then we concentrate more on the students who will have exams in May, which sends totally the wrong

message to the students in the class who are doing national 3 and national 4. For languages, multilevel teaching could work, but it is not always best for the students.

Catriona MacPhee: I echo Francisco Valdera-Gil: multilevel teaching adds to workload and planning. Unfortunately, most of the Gaelic teachers, especially in remote areas, have to accept that because they want to teach children. If somebody wants to come, you will take them in; you are not going to refuse them. However, multilevel teaching should not be done for reasons of budget. With very careful planning it can work, but it requires a huge amount of work. Certainly it can work for languages, but it is not something that we would advise. The advice would be that teachers should try not to accept multilevel teaching at all, but when you are faced with somebody at your door who wants to do the language, you let them in. It happens, unfortunately, but it is not what we would like to see.

Tess Watson: In the sciences, certainly, the continuity of the courses has improved since intermediate 1 and 2, which were completely separate courses. In my experience of bi-level teaching, teachers are literally spinning two plates at one time, with regard to the workload, the preparing and the resources.

The biggest problem that I have encountered is the shoehorning of students into the class. They might be national 4 students who do not actually want to be there, and that has an impact on the children who do want to be there. Money is tight, and that is the way it is. I do not know how you deal with that other than to recruit more teachers.

Larry Flanagan: There are very few pedagogical advantages to multilevel qualification teaching. That is separate from mixed-ability teaching in the BGE, and the single cheapest way of narrowing the attainment gap would be to have more effective mixed-ability teaching. The challenge in the qualification routes is that, particularly in content-heavy subjects, you do not have the skills crossover that you might have in languages, or even in English. You have content that has to be covered. You are effectively running two courses in the same classroom with two or three cohorts of teachers. That creates a workload agenda for teachers to deal with just to be able to cope. Inevitably, it also alters the dynamic in the classroom, because you give one set of pupils some work to do while you teach the other set, and vice versa. Inevitably, if you do not have an even balance, the majority will see themselves as the class and the minority will feel that they are being tucked in at the end.

It is maybe slightly different at advanced higher, because at that level, one of the outcomes is that there is more independent learning on the part of the student. I would run an advanced higher English class in my higher English class, because, by and large, students are working on their own and it is not teacher-led learning.

If I was to cite one of the biggest complaints that we have had from members about the senior phase, it would be the explosion in multilevel classes, with all the attendant problems that brings. A lot of the problems are to do with workload, and a lot of them are about the manageability of the class and the fact that, by and large, it is a poorer experience for all the students in the classroom.

I do not think anyone would advocate multilevel classes. It is simply a pragmatic response to the limited resources that schools have to run the courses.

Alison Harris: I think that you are really saying the same as what the other panel said. Although I understand what you are saying with regard to languages, the theory is one thing, but the practical aspects of it are not—

Francisco Valdera-Gil: Multilevel teaching would not be the choice of most teachers, but if you have two students who want to do it, you are not going to say no to them, because you are thinking of them.

Alison Harris: Yes. I am still hearing the same thing.

I was going to ask a question about the impact of teacher staffing levels and whether that has an impact on the frequency of using multilevel classes, but I think that you have all answered that. With the way things are with teacher staffing, do you see a growing need for using multilevel classes?

Catriona MacPhee: Preferably not.

Alison Harris: I knew that you would say, “Preferably not.”

Catriona MacPhee: There should never be a need.

Johann Lamont: To what extent is the explosion of multilevel classes a response to necessity? Has it become an opportunity for some headteachers? Larry Flanagan talked about “scheme schools”, which is a term that I might recognise from the past, although for a lot of the schools the issue may be about disadvantage. There is a challenge in a school where there is a smaller top end, although more youngsters are staying on than did in my day.

Are headteachers taking the opportunity to corral small subjects into a place where they have to have multilevel classes, which frees up other bits? Are there headteachers who really do not

see why a teacher should be sitting with a class of 10 when somebody else is sitting with a class of 20 or 30?

Is there an opportunistic thing that is driving geography, history and modern studies together, and if one of them does not survive it does not really matter and it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy? Is the reality that there are not enough teachers in STEM? Are you concerned that the former may be driving a lot of the decisions around the curriculum?

Larry Flanagan: One of the unfortunate aspects of CFE is that it was introduced at a time of significant austerity. Some of the issues that people associate with CFE are actually to do with budgets. I think that 99.9 per cent of headteachers would be happy to run classes if they had the staff for them, but most local authorities have cut their staffing formulas over the period of austerity. Most staffing formulas operate on the basis of core staffing and then a multiple of the number of pupils, with some additions around deprivation. If a headteacher has fewer teachers, they are going to try to cut their courses. However, they might be keen to retain certain subjects.

Multilevel teaching does not always come from headteachers; sometimes it will come from subject PTs—where they still exist. A physics PT might say, "I will run these two courses," because they want to offer the options, but in a lot of schools there will be only one or two physics teachers. It is very much a pragmatic response to, primarily, the financial pressures that have been in the system for the past few years.

There is a specific issue around the recruitment and retention of teachers in maths and the sciences, because a lot of graduates in those areas have had better career prospects outwith teaching. We have addressed the pay element, but there are still issues around workload and so forth that undermine teaching as an attractive profession. If we want to stop the graduates going into the international market, where they get better resources and better pay, we need to address some of those outstanding issues.

Johann Lamont: I suppose that I want to look at that in terms of equity. Way back in the day, it was not a golden castle on the hill, but we had principal teachers of geography and principal teachers of German. Rationally, from a budgeting point of view, we can see why people might have wanted to collapse those together. Is there a danger that in some schools that are already disadvantaged, that collapse is more extreme?

Larry Flanagan: Absolutely.

Johann Lamont: What do you do about the young person who is more than capable of coping with a spread of academic subjects and doing five highers but is in a school that, as you described, has other pressures because young people are disadvantaged? The equity argument really disturbs me. If you are living in some areas in Glasgow and you need to get five highers, the solution will be to go to a college. Consortiums are not new—I accept that. In other schools, that solution is not required because, in fact, 30 youngsters will be working at A-grade level in higher. That issue is not new, but what is the response to that, in terms of equity? What happens if a young person ends up in a school where not only do they not get the breadth, because the headteacher is making a judgment about whether someone gets to do geography or history, but there are fewer young people who are operating at their level of ability?

11:30

Larry Flanagan: First, I think that faculties have been a disaster for subjects in the secondary school, and yet there are still some councils, such as Dundee City Council, that think they are a good thing and are about to introduce them.

The report on career pathways for teachers is due out shortly. The career pathways panel is looking at recreating posts around pedagogical leadership so that subjects have champions in schools, which is important in relation to their place in the curriculum.

On equity, we have to ensure that schools that serve areas of multiple deprivation have the additional finance that they need to offer the same range of options as other schools. That does not mean that they will be able to offer everything, because no school can offer everything, but they should not curtail pupil's choices simply because they do not have the resources for extra teachers. If it means that they are running smaller classes because of the size of the school, we should be looking to support that.

One of the issues around pupil equity funding, a factor for which is whether a school serves areas of multiple deprivation, is that it does not really impact significantly on a school's staffing. Quite a lot of it goes on additional support for learning needs, or on additional pupil support assistance. Most schools would not be able to put in two or three extra teachers with PEF money. If we go back—as we both do—to the days of the regions, one thing that Strathclyde region was quite good at doing was directing resource to areas of deprivation so that schools were able to maintain a full range of options. There is a challenge today because the regions had an economy of scale that the 32 authorities do not have. With regard to the way that schools are staffed, the deprivation factor has to be enhanced to ensure that the equity issue can be addressed.

Johann Lamont: Do we need a model of areas of priority treatment in which PEF money, rather than being used for extras, would explicitly be used for more teaching staff and resource in schools that serve areas of multiple deprivation?

Larry Flanagan: I would take the pupil equity fund out of the discussion, because of its nature. Councils should be looking at their staffing formulas and what weight they give to deprivation, and how they staff their schools. It is about core funding for the school's staffing structure. I know that we have PEF commitment for the next couple of years, but PEF is not core funding, and schools should not be reliant on PEF for what should be a core service.

Johann Lamont: I suppose that what I meant was that, if the Government wants to direct resource towards needs in that way, would it be better to stop the PEF process and say, "This is about core funding, and it has to be actively used within deprived communities"?

Larry Flanagan: Do I think that the Government should ring fence funding for education and tell the councils? Maybe let me take the fifth on that one.

Johann Lamont: I was talking about the funding streams that authorities are accessing. Currently the Government has money that is badged as PEF and cannot be used for core business, which it might easily direct towards local authorities' core budgets with the expectation, if not compulsion, that it should be spent on education.

Larry Flanagan: Yes. Not that long ago we had a major fight and we got the Scottish Government to commit to protecting teacher numbers. It ring fenced the money for the teacher numbers and then had a major fight with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, which was unhappy at the ring fencing being put in place. Without that ring fencing we would have lost teachers.

There is a big political debate between local authorities' autonomy around their own budgets and the funding for education. There is no easy solution to that. I think that councils should be in charge of their staffing formulas, but the funding that they get should be sufficient to ensure that they can address issues of deprivation in their staffing arrangements.

Catriona MacPhee: The discussion has digressed a bit into funding, which I was not going to go into, but Johann Lamont was asking about the solutions for schools where maybe there are just one or two teachers in a department. That is a particular problem in smaller schools that have just one teacher in a department. A new route that has been taken is the virtual learning academy, whereby, if a school has a small number of pupils, it can hook up with other schools that are delivering a subject. That has been a solution for a number of schools. How viable that is across the board, I do not know, because I am not an expert on it, but it certainly has been a solution for a number of schools.

The Convener: I thank all the panel members for their attendance, which has been very helpful. The next session in the inquiry will be on 15 May.

11:35

Meeting continued in private until 11:46.

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