



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Education and Skills Committee

Wednesday 16 December 2020

Session 5



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EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE

32nd Meeting 2020, Session 5

CONVENER

*Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP)

*Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP)

*Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab)

*Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con)

*Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green)

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

*Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)

*Alex Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)

*Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con) (Committee Substitute)

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

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Gary Cocker

LOCATION

Virtual Meeting

Scottish Parliament

Education and Skills Committee

Wednesday 16 December 2020

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:00]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Clare Adamson): Good morning, and a very warm welcome to the 32nd meeting in 2020 of the Education and Skills Committee. We have apologies from Jamie Halcro Johnston; Oliver Mundell is attending as a substitute. Alex Neil will have to leave at 10 o'clock. I remind everyone to turn their mobile phones and other devices to silent for the duration of the meeting.

Our first agenda item is a decision on whether to take agenda item 3 in private. Does any member object to our doing so?

As no member has indicated otherwise, we agree to take agenda item 3 in private.

Budget 2021-22

09:00

The Convener: Agenda item 2 is an evidence session on the draft budget for 2021-22. I again welcome to the committee the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, John Swinney MSP, and invite him to make a brief opening statement.

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): Thank you, convener, and good morning. I welcome the opportunity to give evidence to the committee on my priorities for the forthcoming Scottish budget.

When I gave evidence to the committee in September on schools opening, I recognised the significant impact that the Covid pandemic had had on our children and young people and that that would continue for some time to come. The Government has reprioritised and invested additional resources throughout the pandemic to respond to the needs of children and young people and the organisations that support them in their care and learning.

We have supported our universities and colleges with more than £90 million of additional funding, which has been invested to support research activity, estates maintenance and additional university entrants. We have also provided emergency funding to increase the discretionary hardship funds that are available to support students.

We have invested £60 million in the development of a young person's guarantee, and we are providing an additional £155 million over the next two years to support education recovery in schools. That includes £75 million to recruit additional teachers and £5 million to recruit additional teaching assistants. By the end of November, 1,423 additional teachers and 246 support staff had been recruited through that mechanism.

The Covid-19 children and families collective leadership group has ensured that action has been taken at the national and local levels to support vulnerable children and young people and their families. The £100 million winter plan will make an additional £23.5 million available to support families through those services.

We have maintained our investment in the expansion of early learning and childcare while allowing local authorities the flexibility to deploy 1,140 hours funding to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic. We will deliver the expanded entitlement across Scotland from August 2021.

The need to continue to mitigate the impacts of Covid on our children and young people will feature prominently in our budget priorities for 2021-22. It remains the defining mission of the Government to improve the life chances of our children and young people through excellence and equity in education. The committee will appreciate that I cannot yet confirm any specific details of the spending decisions that will underpin the 2021-22 budget, but I can assure members that those decisions will reflect my priority to improve outcomes for all children and young people in Scotland.

I am very happy to answer the committee's questions.

The Convener: Thank you very much, cabinet secretary.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): I will go straight into funding issues to set the scene and get a feel for what the cabinet secretary's budgetary asks of the Cabinet Secretary for Finance might be.

I will start with our university sector. We know that the Scottish Funding Council's figures report a £176 million deficit—it is described as a "substantial deficit"—in that sector for this financial year. In its submission to the committee, Universities Scotland said:

"Current funding is inadequate for the quality of experience that students deserve."

Do you agree or disagree with that statement? If you disagree with it, will you explain why?

John Swinney: The university sector is, and has been, strongly and well supported financially by the Government, and the resources that we put in place are designed to ensure that our universities are able to perform in the world-class fashion that many of them are able to. Those resources increased in the past financial year. In the course of the Covid pandemic, we have put additional resources into our universities, as I set out in my opening statement. Obviously, maintaining a sustainable approach to university funding is critical to ensuring that the universities can continue to perform strongly. There is a strong funding record for the universities, and I want to make sure that that is maintained in the period to come.

Jamie Greene: So, essentially, you disagree that the current funding levels are inadequate, and you would say that the deficit is not an issue for the universities. They say to us that the average funding per student has been cut by £750 and that it is below that for other higher education institutions in other parts of the United Kingdom. That is added to the effect of Covid and the events of the past nine months, which we all understand

and which have dramatically reduced the cross-subsidy income that the universities have had.

Universities have some very specific asks of you. Their main ask is that they get a level of funding per student that pays 100 per cent of the cost of teaching. We know that the level of funding is currently below that. Will the Government have plans to raise the levels of funding per student?

John Swinney: At the outset, I have to make it clear, as I did in my opening statement, that I will, no doubt, have to return on numerous occasions in this session to the fact that the Government has not yet set a budget. I cannot give a definitive answer on where we will end up on many of those questions, given the timing of this session and the timing of the budget.

With that caveat, I can say that we are working with the university sector on ensuring that sustainable funding is in place for the future. Making sure that that is the case is a clear policy priority of the Government. I do not think that it will be a surprise to the committee to hear that the Government faces funding asks from a range of organisations that exceed the resources that are normally available. We enter into dialogue with the institutions, organisations and budget holders on that question. I have long experience of that from my previous incarnation as a finance secretary for many years. Hearing funding asks that go beyond what is currently provided is not unfamiliar to me.

An important point is that universities are entirely independent of Government. They attract a lot of public funding, but they attract funding from other sources, as well. Our approach to university funding has always reflected the fact that a range of different funding streams go into universities, and not all of them can be neatly compartmentalised in relation to certain individual activities and propositions. There is a huge amount of cross-activity between research and teaching, so the drawing of hard lines between individual sectors and compartments is rather difficult.

We will have a discussion in the round with the universities about those questions—we always do—and we will look to ensure that we produce the most sustainable package that we can to support university funding.

Jamie Greene: I appreciate that the universities are independent of Government, but they are affected by Government policy decisions. The primary decision is the settlement of funding that is agreed with the funding council on what is paid in subsidy by the Government for the tuition of students. They are hugely affected by policy decisions that are made by Governments at a political level in that respect, so the Government has an added responsibility to approach that.

There is one area of tertiary education that has less flexibility in its ability to raise revenue—that is our college sector, of course. That sector is probably almost entirely dependent on direct public funding and is unable to raise funds in the same way that other higher education institutions can. We know that there was an operating deficit of £9 million in the 2019-20 financial year. That operating deficit is forecast to be £15 million this year. That forecast has come down a bit, from £25 million, since we previously met, cabinet secretary, but that is largely down to cost savings that have been made and income that has been saved with the job retention scheme, because many college staff have been on furlough. Obviously, however, that will not last for ever, and the colleges are already making cuts at a vital time. Liquidity is the biggest challenge that our college sector faces. What will the budget do to address that deficit, given the colleges' reliance on public money?

John Swinney: Fundamentally, I want to make sure that all colleges do not face any of the liquidity challenges that Mr Greene has described, because it is vital that our college sector is able to make its way through what I recognise are difficult times at the moment. The Scottish Funding Council is actively engaging with the college sector and individual colleges to make sure that the colleges can be supported through any operational difficulties that might arise simply because of Covid and the impact that it might have on the flow of resources into individual colleges. I assure the committee that the SFC performs an active monitoring role in relation to the sustainability of individual colleges and institutions.

We have been identifying particular resources that can be deployed in the college sector to meet specific purposes. The college sector is heavily involved in the activity around the young person's guarantee and in the national transition training fund and the flexible workforce development fund. From those three activities, we expect that at least £20 million of additional resources will go into the college sector, which will support outcomes for young people and students who are working through that sector. Obviously, that will also help to support the sustainability of colleges.

There is a combination of ensuring that there is very close attention to the sustainability of individual colleges where they might face liquidity challenges of the type to which Mr Greene referred and funding to support the delivery of educational opportunities in a time when we clearly face some significant challenges in the labour market and in economic activity in general.

Jamie Greene: Absolutely. There is nothing to disagree with there, cabinet secretary. However, the problem is that, if the colleges are making cuts, including to staff and lecturers, that inevitably

leads to a loss of training places and courses as colleges shrink. Surely this is the time to invest in our colleges, reduce their deficit, get them back into a positive balance, and reverse the staff cuts that they are having to make. They are making cuts not through choice but through necessity, because they are running out of cash in the bank—it is as simple as that. Surely at a time when we need to get people retrained and reskilled, we should support our college sector rather than watch it on its knees.

John Swinney: I would not characterise the situation as anything like that. In my answer a moment ago, I set out the additional resources that the Government is putting into the college sector with exactly the objective of doing what Mr Greene put to me in his question. We want to ensure that there are educational opportunities for students in the college sector through our investment in the young person's guarantee, the national transition training fund and the flexible workforce development fund. Those resources are going into the college sector to address exactly what Mr Greene put to me as the challenge. I am completely in agreement with that. I want to make sure that there are opportunities where the labour market is likely to tighten. We have not seen the harshest of that tightening yet. The labour market figures yesterday indicated that that is not yet happening, but there is every possibility that it will happen. We therefore want to ensure that the educational opportunities are there.

A combination of the two issues that I talked about earlier—funding that is focused on the creation of educational opportunities that will meet the needs of individual students, plus the attention and, if necessary, intervention of the Scottish Funding Council, to ensure that colleges are sustainable—is an important part of our relationship with the college sector. We want to ensure that colleges in all geographical areas of the country can be accessed by their local population and labour markets, so that people have the opportunities to which they are entitled.

Jamie Greene: Thank you.

09:15

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): I want to pursue Jamie Greene's line of questioning a little further. In submissions to the committee, Colleges Scotland said:

"By the end of 2020/21, it is estimated that 33% of colleges will be operating with less than five days cash".

Universities Scotland said that

"six universities will have less than two months of cash reserves by the end of the year".

You have talked a lot about sustainability, cabinet secretary, and about additional money such as the young person's guarantee, but there is an existential crisis in parts of our tertiary education sector. How will the budget ensure that we move towards sustainability?

John Swinney: There are three foundations in that regard. First, there is the Government's consistent provision of strong levels of funding to the university and college sector, which has been assured and sustained over many years. Secondly, there is the nature of the interventions for colleges and universities that the Government has made on a number of occasions during the pandemic—I talked about some of them in response to Mr Greene, and they include the provision of an additional £75 million to support research activity in universities during the difficulties that they are experiencing and the provision of capital to support the undertaking of essential maintenance in the university and college estate. Thirdly, there is our maintenance of active dialogue and a willingness to support institutions as they navigate their way through the challenges.

It is the role of the Scottish Funding Council to monitor the issue, and the Government engages closely with it on those questions while properly respecting the parameters of statute in that respect, to ensure that we are doing all that we can to support our institutions. If the committee has looked at the scale of the financial challenge that institutions estimated they would face—going back over several months—you will be aware that it has reduced significantly from what was anticipated. The Government has put in new and additional investment to support activity in the tertiary education sector, and we will maintain the dialogue to ensure that we are doing all that we can to support it.

Iain Gray: When we consider the evidence from Universities Scotland, for example, surely we can see that it is not true that the Government has provided sustained “strong levels of funding” over the years. On the core and very welcome Government policy of free tuition for Scottish students in Scottish universities, for example, Universities Scotland points out that the funding from the Government does not cover the cost of the students' learning.

Universities Scotland's calculations show that the gap has grown over the years. As Jamie Greene said, the funding is now £750 per student lower than it was some five years ago. It is more than £2,000 per student lower than the funding for students in English universities. If free tuition for Scottish students is a central Scottish Government policy—as it is and has been for a very long time—is the cabinet secretary not duty bound to

fully fund the engagement in university for each student? Do you not have an obligation, especially in times such as these, to fully fund your policy?

John Swinney: The Government is strongly funding our institutions.

Iain Gray: You are not fully funding them.

John Swinney: Last year, investment in the university sector increased by 2 per cent from the previous year to £1.14 billion. As I indicated to the committee in my earlier answers, funding for universities comes from a range of sources, and the Government is a substantial funder of activity in the universities sector. In addition, during the pandemic, the Government has provided additional resources to support the sector, in recognition of the financial challenges that institutions face. When all of that is taken in the round, it represents a strong funding settlement that enables our universities to do the vital work that they undertake and to attract investment to Scotland, as they do. A range of factors have to be taken into account in relation to the Government's strongly founded commitment to fund the university sector sustainably.

Iain Gray: The additional support that has been provided for universities is for additional places, every one of which carries a cost to the universities, because the Government is not funding them fully. The support is also for research, which is funded at about 80 per cent of its full cost, so the cabinet secretary will understand why the sector feels that it is not really being supported.

In the past, when the committee has discussed the fact that student places are not fully funded by the Scottish Government, the cabinet secretary has made the point that universities have other sources of income, but those sources are largely fees from overseas students and income from student accommodation, for example. All those income streams are now in jeopardy because of the pandemic, so do you agree that, of all years, the budget year that we are considering now is the one in which, finally, the Government should meet its obligation and fully fund university tuition fees for Scottish students who attend Scottish universities? Would that not be an enormous step forward that you could commit to now?

John Swinney: The Government has been fully meeting its commitments to the universities sector, so I reject the central premise of Mr Gray's question. The Government has been doing that—and doing that substantially. Mr Gray rather glided past some of the other investments that the Government has made. Providing £75 million of additional research income for universities is a substantial commitment to the work of our

universities. That support assists universities in taking forward significant parts of their activities.

When committee members step back and consider the totality of resources that the Government is making available to our universities, in the context of the wider activities and income sources of individual universities, they will see that it is clear and demonstrable that the Government is providing substantial resources to universities, particularly in a context in which we face constant pressures on public finances. As I narrated a moment ago, there has been an increase in the core budget provision in the current financial year, as well as the additional investments that have been made during the pandemic.

Of course, universities face elements of financial strain because of the current situation, but the estimates of the significance and scale of those factors are lower than they were some weeks and months ago. Obviously, we are working with the sector to minimise any of those difficulties and support institutions where they may face challenges. That is precisely the work that the funding council is undertaking on an on-going basis on the Government's behalf.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): Good morning, cabinet secretary. We know that the Government has announced free school meals, £22 million for low-income families and £23.4 million to help vulnerable families. We also know that the number of children with additional support needs has reached a record high of 226,838 this year. What provision has been made to deal with the on-going impact of Covid-19 on vulnerable children? What work is being done to understand the impact on vulnerable children of additional Covid-19 resources?

John Swinney: A number of different elements are drawn in there that are not all within the sphere of the education portfolio and education budgets. Rona Mackay's points fundamentally relate to how the Government in the round supports vulnerable children and their families.

Over the course of the pandemic, we have undertaken two landmark investments. The first was the investment of £350 million in a variety of welfare supports to ensure that vulnerable families were able to be supported through the pandemic. The distribution of those resources was fundamentally led by the Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government, Aileen Campbell, and it involved the provision of food support and active support through a number of organisations to vulnerable families.

The second tranche of investment has been in the winter plan for social protection, which has

been supported by £100 million of resources. That investment involves support to low-income families, additional support for vulnerable children in the care sector and social work activity, work on digital inclusion, fuel bills support and a variety of other measures.

There has been a combination of investments, and the focused work that has been undertaken on free school meals has been added to that. We will sustain them through the Christmas holidays, the February break and Easter time.

We recognise the challenges that Covid is posing to families—particularly those with vulnerable children—because of its impact on income, and they will continue to be central to the Government's priorities.

Rona Mackay asked about additional support for learning. Obviously, that has been a significant area of activity for the Government. Angela Morgan's review is a focused piece of work that merits strong action by the Government and local authorities. I am very pleased to have reached agreement with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities on the actions that are necessary to take that work forward. Obviously, it will be part of the on-going agenda to ensure that the needs of every individual child are met through the education system and the wider support that is available.

Rona Mackay: It is good to know that there will be on-going evaluation of what is needed in the budget for children with additional support needs and vulnerable children.

John Swinney: That will be one of our key priorities in the education portfolio. It is vital that the policy intent of getting it right for every child is reflected in all the steps that we take as a Government. As we do that work in partnership with local authority colleagues, there will be a read-across from the work that is undertaken in my portfolio to the work that is undertaken by local authorities in providing on-going support to meet the needs of every child in every circumstance.

Rona Mackay: Thank you.

09:30

The Convener: I remind members to put an R in the chat box if they have a line of questioning that they want to pursue.

Mr Johnson is next.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): If you will permit me, Mr Swinney, I would like to step back a little. There has been an awful lot of controversy around exams and so on, and I wonder whether we have overfocused on grades rather than what those grades represent. It is

absolutely important that people get the grades that they deserve, but we must also ensure that they have what those grades represent, which is skills and knowledge. Given the great level of disruption that many young people have experienced through this year, it is inevitable that there will be gaps in their knowledge.

What steps are you considering to fill those gaps and level up young people's skills and knowledge so that they are ready to take on the next stage of their education, whether in school or at college or university?

The Convener: That question is a wee bit away from the budget, but if you are willing to answer it, please go ahead, cabinet secretary.

Daniel Johnson: It is on the budget, because money needs to be spent on that.

John Swinney: If it helps to give Mr Johnson a way into his question—although I do not think that he needs any help in that respect from me—I can confirm that everything needs money to be spent on it.

The issue that Mr Johnson raises is a very important one; in fact, it is fundamental. That is why I have been so focused on trying to maintain participation in education for young people. If we look back at the trends in Scottish education over many years, we can see that levels of attendance at school and participation have steadily improved. I am not making a flippant point, but unless young people are engaged in education and at school, there is no way that they will acquire the skills and knowledge that are required for their next stages in life, so that simple question of engaging young people in education is fundamental.

One of Scottish education's great achievements in recent years has been to significantly improve engagement and participation in education at whatever level it takes place. I am agnostic on whether that education should take place in a school or in a college. If a 14 or 15-year-old child is not engaging well at school, but they can engage with college provision, that is fantastic, because it means that they are engaging in some form of education.

That engagement in education is crucial, which is why it has been so important to get our schools open and to sustain that activity over time. Mr Johnson correctly focuses on the important issue of ensuring that young people are able to acquire the necessary skills and knowledge. The recovery curriculum that we have put in place has been strongly focused on resuming the learning opportunities of young people and addressing any particular gaps that exist.

Those gaps can be addressed in a number of ways. They can be addressed in the school

curriculum; we have given clear curricular guidance on what the focus of learning should be. Reinforcement can also be provided through the work that is under way through the national e-learning offer, which provides post-school study opportunities for young people to enhance their skills and knowledge. Those opportunities are being very well participated in by young people the length and breadth of the country. Because that offer is a digital offer, it is widely accessible.

Obviously, we have expanded the size of the teaching population. We saw yesterday the publication of the statistics on the number of teachers, which show that, with an increase of about 1,400, we have the highest number of teachers in our schools since 2008. That census was taken in September, but if it was taken today it would show an even higher number because of the specific resource investment that we have made.

I hope that that gives Mr Johnson a flavour of the measures that are being taken to address any loss of opportunity for learning that is experienced by young people as a consequence of the pandemic.

Daniel Johnson: Thank you for that answer. It addresses the steps that have been taken throughout the current school year, while the pandemic has been under way, to address the issues that young people and schools have faced.

I want to look forward a bit to where there is definitely a budget question. The steps that you set out address what has happened in the current academic year, but what steps and interventions are you looking at for the coming academic year? That response might well be different. The knowledge gap for some young people will require additional interventions to level things up. Is that simply a question of increasing the number of teachers? Is it about providing tutors, as the Conservatives have suggested? Another idea might be to implement summer schools or to get the universities and colleges to provide early intervention in the summer term in schools. Is the Government considering including funding for such schemes in the budget so that, as we have vaccinations and move past the pandemic, we can level things up for young people?

John Swinney: I view all the interventions that I have talked about as having to be sustained for some time to come. The national e-learning offer, for example, will continue as an on-going priority. In essence, that provides a deliverable tutoring opportunity to young people the length and breadth of the country. It is a more dependable offer than ordinary tutoring because it is available to all young people. We cannot be certain about the mechanism by which tutoring could be delivered to young people in Scotland, because it

would have to be compatible with the restrictions on movement in the context of the pandemic, which limits the work that can be undertaken in that regard.

In addition to the continuation of the national e-learning offer, we have recruited more teaching staff, and there will be provision in the 2021-22 budget for the continuation of those roles. That was the basis on which I set out the financial commitments on the expansion of staff numbers. Obviously, we also have the opportunity to see some further fruits from the investment that has been made in the digital learning programme, through which we are supporting the provision of devices to close the digital divide, which directly addresses some of the issues of access to learning for individual young people. That is an ongoing programme from the Government.

I recognise that we will have to sustain many of those activities as we go forward. That is part of the Government's fundamental agenda of closing the poverty-related attainment gap. Our sustained commitment to attainment Scotland funding is at the heart of the work that we want to progress to close the attainment gap and address any challenges and barriers to learning that might be experienced by children from a background of poverty.

Daniel Johnson: Thank you for that. To please the convener, I will ask a final question that relates directly to numbers. In order to understand the challenge, we need to be able to measure it. Do you know how many school days have been lost through the pandemic? You have said that that has been addressed through the e-learning offer and the provision of additional teachers.

To what degree has that e-learning offer been taken up? In particular, how many hours of that provision have been accessed by young people? Finally, is the Government committed to retaining the 1,400 additional teachers not just for the duration of the short-term emergency but on a longer-term—in other words, a permanent—basis?

John Swinney: When I announced the provision for the additional teaching resource, I set out that it would be split between 2020-21 and 2021-22, so that commitment is there over the course of the next financial year.

I cannot give Mr Johnson specifics on the number of hours of e-learning that have been undertaken, but I can say that there has been a significant upsurge in the utilisation of the glow system, which is the digital learning system that Education Scotland provides for school pupils in Scotland. There has been a substantial increase in the utilisation of that system, as well as substantial use of the e-Sgoil mechanism that we have in place. I am happy to provide further details to the

committee in writing in response to the questions that Mr Johnson has put to me.

The use of those approaches will be fundamental to sustaining the education of young people. However, I come back to the fundamental point, which is that the significant achievement of Scottish education over recent months has been to ensure, in very difficult circumstances, the safe return of children and young people to school education on a full-time basis. That has been undertaken since 11 August and has been sustained in almost all cases since then.

Obviously, there has been some variation around the country. Some schools have had more difficulties and challenges with Covid than others, so there will have been variation in the education of young people. However, schools are committed to making sure that that is properly and fully addressed, and that will remain the case as we move forward.

The Convener: I have a quick supplementary that goes back to your comment about how young people can acquire the necessary skills and qualifications. Reeltime Music in my area is a charity that was established to support young people and it is now a Scottish vocational qualification accredited centre that works with schools and the wider community.

How can the budget support community learning and development projects? How are you able to influence those projects, given that many of them will be delivered by the third sector and local authorities?

John Swinney: There are two ways in which we can do that. The first is through some of the channels that I talked about earlier, which have involved the Government allocating resources to third sector organisations to support a lot of community development activity, which is then of benefit to individual localities. The project that you cite is likely to be in that category.

In addition, in the education recovery programme, I allocated £2 million of additional funding to the youth work sector, which is being distributed through a dialogue process involving YouthLink Scotland to make sure that we can reach as many of those valuable projects that support learning in the community as possible. At first sight, they do not ostensibly look like education providers—they are not schools—but they are supporting learning and engagement within communities.

One of the important lessons that we have learned in recent years has been the significant benefit that such ventures—including the music venture that you mentioned—can bring by being the first link in establishing a connection with education by young people. A young person might

be disaffected at school, but they might want to engage with a project of the type that you identified, which could lead to their re-engagement with education. Part of what we are trying to do is to find all the available means and opportunities whereby a young person can sustain their engagement with education, and I think that measures of a youth work nature are critical in the architecture of support that is in place.

09:45

The Convener: Thank you very much. Before we move on, I put on record that we have received apologies from George Adam.

We now move to questions from Mr Greer.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): Cabinet secretary, I would like to briefly return to college funding, but to look at it from a different angle. You will be aware that college lecturers have once again voted in favour of strike action over the specific issue of lecturing posts being replaced by instructor posts, which are paid less and have different terms and conditions. It is essentially a repeat of the same dispute that has happened every year for a number of years now. I would characterise it as college management not honouring an agreement that it made with lecturers.

Colleges Scotland would make the case that it is fundamentally a budgetary issue. It says that it cannot afford the number of lecturers that there are in Scotland on the basis of the budget settlement that it receives. Is this a budgetary issue or is it an issue of recruitment policy and workforce policy for each college?

John Swinney: I do not see how it can be a budgetary issue, because the Government fully funded the increased costs to the college sector of the pay and conditions agreement that was arrived at in 2017, if my memory serves me correctly.

Ross Greer: Excellent. Thank you very much. That will be most useful as the dispute goes on.

I will move on to my primary line of questioning, which is about the teaching workforce. You might want to correct me—there might have been other such years recently—but this is the first year in which I can recall the employment statistics for new teachers showing that there are more new teachers on temporary contracts than there are on permanent ones. I presume that that is because of a combination of pupil equity funding and, more significantly, the 1,400 additional teachers who were recruited specifically because of Covid and the emergency funding that was introduced for that. Ultimately, it is a budgetary issue. How will you prevent a wave of unemployment next summer as those temporary contracts expire,

which would be a similar situation to last year, when newly qualified teachers were displaced and unable to find work, or the permanent casualisation of teaching as temporary contracts become the norm?

John Swinney: I will work my way through the points in that question. The first point is that it is particularly challenging to predict the size of the teaching workforce. During my political lifetime, I have seen periods of teacher shortages and I have seen periods when we have had an excess number of teachers available for employment. To put it bluntly, it is either feast or famine. We try to navigate our way through the middle and create sustainability in the teaching workforce. However, that will never be a precise science. There will inevitably be times when we have too few teachers or too many teachers available, and anyone who suggests that that can be predicted precisely is peddling false hope. We try to minimise the gaps, but the argument that we can always avoid teacher shortages or avoid having more teachers available for employment than we need is not robust.

We try to make sure that, through initial teacher education, we create enough educational opportunities to boost teacher numbers on an on-going basis as we expand the teaching workforce. Of course, the teaching workforce has expanded significantly under my tenure as education secretary, to the point where the teacher numbers that were announced yesterday are the highest since 2008.

The mixture of permanent and temporary positions is quite a sensitive balance, and the long-term prospects of teaching professionals, particularly in relation to the temporary contracts around pupil equity funding, has always been an issue that has concerned me. Obviously, local authorities are individual employers, but where PEF has been in place with, for example, five years of line-of-sight commitment from the Government, I do not think that there is much justification for giving people a temporary contract. If the Government is giving a commitment to a five-year programme that is central to the Government's agenda, I do not think that it is reasonable for temporary contracts to be issued. I cannot issue the contracts, because I am not the employer—local authorities are the employers—but I do not think that that is reasonable because, with a five-year line of sight, there is plenty of opportunity to give permanent contracts.

In relation to the teachers who have been recruited as a consequence of the pandemic, I have given a two-year line of sight on that. We have said that those costs will be met over the course of 2020-21 and 2021-22—that commitment has already been given. In the general turnover of

members of staff in the teaching profession, there are always retirements, and I would think that local authorities would have sufficient line of sight to be able to give more permanent contracts than temporary contracts to new staff.

Ross Greer: I take your point about it being the highest number of teachers employed since 2008; that is statistically correct, but it is also the highest proportion of the teaching workforce on temporary contracts since quite a bit before 2008—more than one in 10 teachers are on a temporary contract.

You said that there will be continuity of at least two years for those who have been employed via Covid funding. How will you prevent this coming summer from looking like last summer for newly qualified teachers, who were initially displaced by others and were simply unable to find teaching work, whether temporary or permanent, until the Government stepped in? Some of those teachers have still not found work but, on the whole, once the Government stepped in, NQTs were able to find work. How will you prevent that from being the case next summer if we are continuing with rolling temporary contracts for a specific purpose?

John Swinney: Obviously, I want to make sure that we have sustained investment in the teaching profession and that we are able to continue the high levels of teacher employment that we have. It is welcome that teacher employment is as high as it is—at 53,400 teachers, it is at the highest level since 2008. That is a welcome new high level in the teaching workforce. I want to sustain that, and I have given the commitments that I have around the financing of 2020-21 and 2021-22 to support that. Obviously, we will do all that we can to sustain that degree of employment in the years to come.

There are a number of different roles in the teaching profession and there has been all sorts of discussion about the role of supply staff, who are a critical part of the running of the education system, because they provide additional capacity when it is required. There will be opportunities there and with regard to the permanent posts that we have put in place, and turnover of staff is always a feature of the education system.

Our workforce planning is designed to address all those questions; as I said, it is unlikely to ever be a precise science because there are so many complex moving parts in that discussion, but ensuring the presence of a strong and sustainable teaching workforce is a key priority for the Government.

Ross Greer: The number of early years teachers continues to decline. In 2014, it was 1,200, but the statistics that were released yesterday show that there are now 729. Children have a right to access a nursery teacher but, as

the committee has discussed before, that is meaningless in practice when there are simply not enough of those teachers to do more than support other early years staff. There are certainly not enough nursery teachers to provide substantial direct contact with children. Why has the number of nursery teachers declined so rapidly?

John Swinney: It is because of the changing nature of the qualification mix in the early years sector. A much higher number of staff now come into early learning and childcare not with teaching qualifications, I accept, but with much higher levels of qualification in the early years system. What is happening is that we are seeing a different balance in the qualifications mix in the early years sector.

Fundamentally—and independent evidence substantiates this—young people are acquiring a strong educational foundation within early learning and childcare as a consequence of the professional mix that is available in the sector. We have more individuals coming in with higher levels of qualifications, but we do not have as many teaching staff in early learning and childcare. There is a different mix of professional staff, but that in no way represents a diminution of the direction or substance of the education that is available in early learning and childcare.

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): I am interested in the impact of Covid on the schools for the future programme and what it will mean for my constituents. In particular, Dumfries high school is not fit for purpose, as it is not wind and watertight. It has needed to be rebuilt since before I was elected, in 2016. Will such projects still go ahead?

John Swinney: The schools for the future programme was the previous programme. There is one school that we anticipated would be finished by now but that will be slightly late. I expect it to open in April, I think. I had better caveat that. I will write to the committee if I have not got that detail precisely correct, but I think that the opening date is April. That is part of the schools for the future programme, which we have been working to complete.

There is then the learning estate investment programme. I have announced the first phase of projects in that programme and they are taking their course. I expect to be able to make a second phase series of announcements on that programme shortly, which will set out the further direction of travel.

In relation to Covid delays, I would attribute the delayed opening of the one remaining school under the schools for the future programme to Covid construction delays. I do not think that there will be any substantive delays to the learning estate investment programme as a consequence

of Covid, because many of those projects are in the development stage and will be able to take their course. I do not envisage any significant factors of that nature, and Covid will certainly not prevent us from proceeding to make the phase 2 announcements very shortly.

Oliver Mundell: Do you think that there will be enough money in the budget for phase 2 to ensure that every school in Scotland is wind and watertight? Parents in Dumfries find it unacceptable that water pours into the building that their children go to in order to be educated. They are rightly frustrated when they see new builds and other improvements to the school estate when the school that their children go to is not wind and watertight. Is that something that, after 13 years in Government, you think could be put right in the budget?

10:00

John Swinney: After 13 years in Government, we have increased the percentage of schools that are in an A or B condition—that is, a good or satisfactory condition—from 64 per cent to 90 per cent. When I came into office 13 years ago, two thirds of schools in Scotland were deemed to be in a good or satisfactory condition. That is what my predecessors thought was okay, but we have got the figure up to 90 per cent. That represents a pretty substantial amount of progress on an issue that is the statutory responsibility of local authorities, as Mr Mundell will know. The education legislation makes it clear that local authorities are responsible for maintaining their school estate.

The Government has intervened to support school refurbishment and new school buildings and we have got to a position in which nine out of 10 schools in Scotland are in a good or satisfactory condition. I obviously want to build on that, which is why we have taken forward the learning estate investment programme. The Government has provided financial commitments to that programme over a number of years; it is not a short-term programme. Such improvements cannot be made through a one-year financial commitment, so the Government has committed to the learning estate investment programme over the long term. That will not be affected in any way by the passage of the budget.

Oliver Mundell: Do you accept that parents with children in the one in 10 schools that are substandard, such as the one in Dumfries, will be pretty angry, given that water is coming in through the ceilings in Scottish schools? Regardless of who has the statutory responsibility, people will think that that is unacceptable and will want money from Government funds to be put aside to ensure that the schools that their children go to

are wind and water tight, let alone of an acceptable standard.

John Swinney: To be frank, the Government has a strong record and one to be proud of in enhancing the school estate. When we came to office, a third of schools in Scotland were in a neither good nor satisfactory condition. The fact that we have reduced that to 10 per cent after years and years of austerity is a pretty solid achievement by the Government on an issue for which it does not have the statutory responsibility—it is the responsibility of local government to manage its school estate.

A huge amount of progress has been made. Clearly, I want to ensure that young people are educated in good or satisfactory buildings across the country. That is why the Government has committed to the learning estate investment programme, it is why we have done so much work on the schools for the future programme, and it is why so many young people are now being educated in better conditions. We are committed to doing more of that work in the future.

Oliver Mundell: I will leave it there for now, but that answer will come as little comfort to pupils at Dumfries high school.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): I will follow on from Ross Greer's questions about the statistics that were released yesterday on nursery teachers working in ELC settings. As he said, there were 1,200 such teachers in 2014, but there are now only 729. I note that the cabinet secretary said that that was about the changing nature of the qualifications mix, but we know that some councils have been moving their workforces away from nursery classrooms as a money-saving exercise. The fact that somebody has a teaching qualification makes them more expensive to keep. A teacher in a nursery can be replaced by others in the ELC workforce who can be paid less. Has the Government not failed to recognise the reality of the budget for classrooms?

John Swinney: No. To be frank, I think that that diminishes the skills base of members of staff who have gone through an educational process to ensure that they can contribute effectively to the learning of children in early learning and childcare. Different qualifications have been developed to ensure that we can strengthen the educational base of staff who are involved in early learning and childcare, and that has been a really positive achievement and a positive aspect of the progress that has been made in recent years. The quality of early learning and childcare is testament to that change. I do not view that as in any way a bad thing.

Beatrice Wishart: Professor Pasi Sahlberg, who sits on the international council of education advisers, said in February:

“It’s wrong to think that the smaller the children are, the less education the teachers need.”

Do you think that there is a narrowing of the skillset in the workforce?

John Swinney: Not in the slightest. Pasi Sahlberg is a huge admirer of Scotland’s approach to early learning and our approach to the curriculum. I totally agree with Pasi that the learning that is associated with early learning and childcare is absolutely fundamental to ensuring that children are equipped with solid foundations for their educational journey—foundations that can be provided by the sophisticated level of education that is available to the range of early learning and childcare staff that we now have. Their commitment to that and their approach to the acquiring of qualifications is something to be warmly welcomed.

Beatrice Wishart: In September 2019, the Scottish Government announced that it would provide £15 million of funding for the recruitment of 1,000 classroom assistants to support children with additional support needs. Has the Scottish Government monitored that recruitment? Can the cabinet secretary offer an update?

John Swinney: I will need to write to the committee with a specific update in that regard, but the issue would be pursued through the recruitment practices of individual local authorities. We make those funds available to local authorities for that purpose. However, I will update the committee on the specific details in the light of Beatrice Wishart’s question.

Beatrice Wishart: Thank you.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Good morning, Deputy First Minister. On 25 November, the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced that teachers and most other public sector workers who earn £24,000 a year or more will have their pay rise for 2021-22 paused. Given that that obviously has Barnett implications, what is the Scottish Government’s view of that?

John Swinney: The issue of public sector pay is clearly one of great sensitivity. In the context of what we are wrestling with on Covid, public servants have made a very significant contribution to sustaining our public services in very difficult conditions, and we are profoundly grateful to all of them for all that they have contributed. That obviously includes the teaching workforce.

The policy position that was adopted by the United Kingdom Government has an implication for us, and the Cabinet will carefully consider issues of pay policy. The Cabinet Secretary for

Finance will set out the approach that will be taken when she sets out the budget at a later date, and that will establish the parameters of pay policy. Negotiation will come as a consequence of that.

Kenneth Gibson: The National Union of Students has pointed out that many students were hit very hard by the pandemic and were prevented from working in hospitality and other sectors; I should mention that my two sons were in that position. Most students are not eligible for universal credit, and those who are face delays with support. Those who live in areas of deprivation are potentially the most adversely affected.

What is the Scottish Government’s view of the NUS’s request for additional discretionary funding, given that situation and given that the UK Government does not seem to be willing to move on eligibility for universal credit?

John Swinney: It is a significant issue. We have already accelerated the discretionary hardship funding—we brought forward more than £11 million of discretionary funding for earlier access during the pandemic—and we have supplemented that funding with an additional £5 million of resources. We are considering carefully the point about discretionary funding that the NUS has put to us, recognising that access to employment for students, in hospitality in particular, is currently a significant challenge.

Kenneth Gibson: Six universities anticipate that they will have less than two months’ worth of cash reserves by the end of July. For comparison, what is the Scottish Government’s cash reserve?

John Swinney: In the past, as part of my finance secretary responsibilities, I would have known the answer to that. I cannot give you an up-to-date picture, but I will write to the committee on that question.

Kenneth Gibson: Is it not the case that it is significantly less than two months’ worth?

John Swinney: Let me write to the committee to give a definitive answer on that point. As you will know, the Scottish Government is able to hold a very limited amount of resources for particular purposes in the cash reserve. I will write with an up-to-date answer on that question.

Kenneth Gibson: You made significant provision for enough places in universities and colleges to ensure that no one was crowded out. What were the financial implications of that for our universities? Has that been fully funded by the Scottish Government?

John Swinney: We are still working through the detail of all that. Our best estimate at this stage is that the additional cost will be in the order of £12 million. That will be funded by the Scottish

Government. We are still working our way through the details in consultation with the institutions.

Kenneth Gibson: My colleague Rona Mackay and others have touched on additional support needs. I have been astonished at the number of pupils with additional support needs—the figure has gone from 37,504 just a decade ago to 208,765 last year. That is a more than fivefold increase. That amounts to 27 per cent of primary school children and 35 per cent of secondary school children, and the numbers are continuing to grow every year.

Why have we seen such colossal growth in those figures? Do children have more needs than they did a decade ago? What are the budget implications of that? In its submission, the Educational Institute of Scotland raised concern about the fact that the growth in the number of ASN teachers and support staff has not kept pace with demand. How could it, given that level of demand?

Could you explain the current situation? It seems remarkable. What additional resources have been put in to address that growth in demand? Does the Scottish Government anticipate that that demand will continue to rise year on year? If that is the case, how soon will children with additional support needs be the majority?

John Swinney: Fundamentally, the growth in the number of young people with additional support needs is due to changes that have been made to the definition of additional support needs to broaden and capture fully the various needs of children and young people in our education system. Within those totals, there will be a wide variance in the requirements and needs of individual young people, from those who require very acute interventions to those who require very few, if any. The range of needs is significant within the larger number that Mr Gibson has put to me. That explains the change in the data and the numbers.

10:15

Beyond that, the fundamental commitment of our approach to education for children with additional support needs is to ensure that their education is delivered through the application of the mainstreaming principle. We look to the whole education system to support the needs of all young people, rather than looking to a particular group of staff to provide support to young people with additional support needs. In that respect, there have been several years of increased expenditure at local level. For example, the most recent data available shows a 4.1 per cent increase in the amount of money spent on

education at local level in Scotland. Expenditure on education at local level is increasing, and we look to the education system to meet the needs of all young people, given the variety of needs that young people have.

Kenneth Gibson: You have made an important point, but only 2.2 per cent of the increase of 4.1 per cent in real terms in education funding was for additional support for learning. Therefore, despite the huge growth in the number of children who require additional support for learning, the funding is growing by less. Will the Scottish Government discuss additional funding for additional support for learning with COSLA? I know that £15 million goes in each year, but that seems inadequate, given the huge number of children who have been added to that category.

Given the phenomenal increase—you mentioned the huge range of additional support needs that children have—what kind of additional support needs are categorised as being ASN that were not categorised as such five or 10 years ago?

John Swinney: On Mr Gibson's first question, I go back to the point that there has been a fundamental policy shift, whereby we aim to see young people with additional support needs being supported through mainstream education, where that is possible. The benefit of the sustained increases in education spending at local level will be felt by young people with additional support needs, and not just in relation to the element that is identified specifically as additional support needs funding.

On Mr Gibson's second point, a broad range of needs will be identified, which will cover a variety of emotional, physical and educational needs of young people. The definition has been broadened significantly to cover a wider range of young people to ensure that the principle that underpins our policy of getting it right for every child can be the means by which we identify the best approach to meet the needs of individual children and young people in our education system. That approach is designed to ensure that we can maximise the effectiveness of our approach to education to meet the needs of individual children and young people.

Kenneth Gibson: Finally, is there a list of definitions or of what qualifies as additional support needs? Does it vary by local authority or school, or is there a standard list for Scotland? If so, could we have a copy of that list? I am not sure what is included. Is it a moveable feast, whereby the criteria change each year, or is it a fixed list?

John Swinney: There are definitions in statute and then individual local authorities will make their own assessments of the additional support needs of young people and design their support

accordingly. Fundamentally, it comes back to the principle of getting it right for every child and ensuring that we are taking all the steps that we possibly can within the education system to meet the individual needs of individual young people.

Kenneth Gibson: Thank you, Deputy First Minister.

The Convener: I have a final question, Mr Swinney. I know that you are aware of the work that the committee has done on music tuition and the report that we published on it. A number of submissions that we received before your appearance today pointed out that Covid has exacerbated many of the concerns that we had about the ability to deliver music tuition and its long-term sustainability. Is there anything in the budget for next year to show that the Government is looking to improve that situation or to influence that with COSLA colleagues?

John Swinney: There are two elements to that. The first is the direct effect of the pandemic, which, unfortunately, has had quite an impact on the practical delivery of music tuition. The issue is not to do with resources; it is the implications of the constraints that have been created by the restrictions that are necessary to suppress the pandemic that make the delivery of music education more challenging. I am acutely aware of how difficult that is in an individual and a school setting. Frankly, there is a lot of joy that our schools are not able to participate in just now because of the fact that music activity is so restricted by the constraints under which we have to operate.

The second point is that we work closely with COSLA colleagues on a shared aspiration to encourage high levels of music participation in our schools. We recognise that as a central part of our curriculum and we work closely with COSLA colleagues to maximise participation. We are greatly assisted in that effort by the work of the music education partnership group, which is led by John Wallace. We work closely with the group to expand participation and awareness of the importance of music education in our schools, although I caveat that with the challenges that we face because of the pandemic and all that it raises for us.

The Convener: Thank you; there are a couple of supplementary questions.

Kenneth Gibson: We know about the impact of the pandemic on the provision of music services. Are there any other areas of education where the number of pupils who access provision has significantly increased or decreased during the pandemic?

John Swinney: The delivery of practical subjects—music and drama, in particular—has

been an area of challenge. We have been able to relax some of the constraints around physical education to make that more deliverable, given that the conditions outside make it difficult at this time of year. A number of subjects have been affected but, as we proceed through the school year, we are trying to minimise the disruption that individual pupils face as a consequence.

Kenneth Gibson: Thank you.

Jamie Greene: I have a quick question on the Scottish Qualifications Authority. Obviously, the role of the SQA has changed this year and will change next year with regard to what it will do in the moderation and assessment of exams. A chunk of its budget goes towards paying external markers. Can you clarify whether the SQA budget is likely to stay the same, rise or fall next year? Has it made any requests to you for next year's budget? If there are changes, will they reflect the changing role of the SQA? In relation to the announcement that you made on payments to teachers for their additional workload in the assessment of pupils, will that come from the wider education budget or specifically from the SQA budget?

John Swinney: Those issues are all interconnected. The financing of the SQA on an annual basis involves a significant amount of expenditure on markers' fees. We are taking a different approach for the 2021 diet, with which members of the committee will be familiar. The requirement for markers' fees will not be as extensive as usual, but there will be a requirement for payments for SQA appointees to undertake moderation activities; they will work with schools and local authorities on the development of the alternative certification model. All those factors are part of the determination of the SQA budget and the financial requirements that will be necessary to run the qualifications system for this year. Obviously, that is the subject of active discussion at the moment.

Jamie Greene: I presume that there are cost savings because, reading between the lines, it sounds as though the SQA budget is going down, although perhaps you cannot confirm that today. Will that free up cash to fund the other policy that you have announced of paying teachers to do the job of SQA marking?

John Swinney: As I said, all those budget issues are interconnected, and they are currently being discussed.

The Convener: That concludes questions from the committee. I again thank the cabinet secretary for his attendance. This is our final meeting of 2020; we will return on 13 January to take evidence from teachers, the SQA and Education

Scotland on learning and teaching in the senior phase.

10:26

Meeting continued in private until 10:44.

I thank all the Parliament staff for their support during the past year. We appreciate that it has been a very different parliamentary experience for us all, and we wish them the best for the festive break.

This is the final edition of the *Official Report* of this meeting. It is part of the Scottish Parliament *Official Report* archive and has been sent for legal deposit.

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