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Education, Children and Young People Committee

Wednesday 11 May 2022

Session 6



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EDUCATION, CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE COMMITTEE

13th Meeting 2022, Session 6

CONVENER

*Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)

*Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP)

*Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)

*Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green)

*Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP)

*Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab)

*Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con)

*Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Craig Clement (Education Scotland)

Pamela Di Nardo (Education Scotland)

Elizabeth Sommerville (Education Scotland)

Patricia Watson (Education Scotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Stephen Herbert

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Education, Children and Young People Committee

Wednesday 11 May 2022

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:30]

Scottish Attainment Challenge Inquiry

The Convener (Stephen Kerr): Good morning, and welcome to the 13th meeting in 2022 of the Education, Children and Young People Committee. Agenda item 1 is an evidence session with Education Scotland officials as part of our Scottish attainment challenge inquiry. I welcome Craig Clement and Patricia Watson, who are strategic directors; Pamela Di Nardo, who is a senior regional adviser; and Elizabeth Sommerville, who is an attainment adviser.

Just before the meeting started, we were celebrating the fact that this is our first committee meeting in this parliamentary session in which everybody—committee members and witnesses—has been in the room. We are really happy about that; we hope that it is a sign of good times to come.

I want to share a quote from Education Scotland:

“Education Scotland will evaluate the impact of their work against the outcomes and measures set out in the organisation’s corporate plan and draw on stakeholder feedback to support this; and through the Attainment Scotland Fund evaluation by Scottish Government.”

What outcomes and measures are we talking about?

Before we get too far into the meeting, I should say that whoever is in the best position to answer a question should indicate so, and I will bring them in. Who is best qualified to answer that question?

Patricia Watson (Education Scotland): I will start off. I think that there are two parts to the question. The first part is about the outcomes that we are evaluating against. In talking through those outcomes, I will take the committee back to the four big, long-term ambitions that we set for the Scottish attainment challenge. The first is to have embedded and sustained practices across the education profession in Scotland. That includes having an understanding of poverty-related challenges for children and young people and having practices that mitigate those and allow our most deprived young people to have the same life chances as those who are least deprived.

Secondly, we talk about all children and young people achieving expected or excellent outcomes, so we have high aspirations for every child in Scotland. Again, the challenge relates particularly to those who are most deprived.

Thirdly, we want an aspirational and inclusive education system. That is about having an education profession—by that, I mean everyone who works with children and young people, so not only those in schools but those in early learning and childcare, community learning and development, and the third sector. We have strong aspirations for every young person in Scotland, and we want to ensure that they are included and have the best life chances and aspirations for their future.

The fourth long-term goal, which is probably the most challenging, is to close the poverty-related attainment gap.

I will direct the committee to a number of pieces of evidence relating to those four outcomes. I know that you have looked at some of that evidence previously. Education Scotland’s report on the first five years of the attainment challenge was published last March, and it is clear from the evidence that we gathered that we are making successful progress on a number of those four big outcomes.

On embedded and sustained practice, we have seen a significant and systemic cultural shift in knowledge across the education profession in relation to the barriers to learning that are sometimes caused by poverty. There is a real strength of understanding of social justice and the impact of poverty on the day-to-day learning experiences of children and young people in our schools. There is a real interest in and knowledge of the cost of the school day and the challenges of schools. The ability of children and young people to participate in activities that they are expected to, and want to, participate in can often be impacted by poverty. There has been a big shift in how schools deal with that.

The Convener: How do you know that?

Patricia Watson: That is a good question. We know it from the on-going work on evaluation of the Scottish attainment challenge—by which I mean the attainment Scotland fund evaluation that is carried out annually by the Scottish Government’s education analytical services division—and from annual surveys of headteachers and local authorities. More importantly, we also know it from our staff’s work with practitioners on the ground from week to week. The attainment adviser team works with them very closely, but the wider group of staff at Education Scotland also engages with practitioners across Scotland all the time and

listens to them talking about shifts in their practice. Every engagement that we have in terms of professional learning activity on the Scottish attainment challenge is evaluated. We also ask for feedback, which is received both formally and informally from those who participate in such activities.

We see the shift. The inspectors—HMIE—also reported on the changes that they have seen, over time, in shifting practice in the classroom. Therefore, for a number of reasons, we are confident that such a shift is happening.

The Convener: Your answer covered the first part of my question, which was on embedding practice. What about the second part, which was about the outcomes for children?

Patricia Watson: We are seeing a shift in the broader outcomes for children and young people in terms of their opportunities for achievement. As for their engagement with learning, we are seeing much more participation. In some local authority areas there are improvements in, for example, attendance, reduction in exclusion, and children actually engaging in learning. That has to be my first point.

Particularly throughout the pandemic, and now in the recovery period, we have also seen a significant focus on children's health and wellbeing. Children are engaging with and accessing support in the classroom from teachers who understand health and wellbeing issues that have an impact on learning.

The Convener: Attendance is a very black-and-white measurable, is it not?

Patricia Watson: It is a big issue.

The Convener: Are wellbeing issues not also very hard to measure?

Patricia Watson: They are. To be honest, we are grappling with complex measurements across the system. We are looking at how local authorities do it. Schools and local authorities use a number of tools and approaches to engage with and help young people. We think that the most important point is that children and young people themselves understand their sense of wellbeing, how they can ask for help and, as they grow older, how they can manage their own wellbeing and access support. Attainment advisers are working on a number of measures to help schools to track and think about health and wellbeing issues. However, we are grappling with those.

Liz Sommerville might want to come in on a couple of the practical aspects.

The Convener: How are you measuring wellbeing?

Elizabeth Sommerville (Education Scotland):

As you will know, there are national measures of wellbeing. Whether those are the best measures and whether we use them often enough are different questions. However, what I would say is that—

The Convener: Is the answer to those questions no?

Elizabeth Sommerville: No, it is not. We have the Scottish health survey, the information that comes through from the programme for international student assessment, and measurements of attendance and exclusions. However, although such measures give us the big picture, in looking at wellbeing it is far more important that we consider the barriers. A child's barriers will depend on their own circumstances and also on the barriers that a local authority or a school might face. Through our empowerment agenda, my fellow attainment advisers around the country and I do a lot of work with schools and local authorities to encourage them to identify the main barriers. From there, we can begin to support them in using such measures.

However, there are also measures that can be used locally. For instance, we have the Glasgow wellbeing tool—the Glasgow motivation and wellbeing profile—which focuses on work that Alan McLean did a number of years ago and which is still extremely valid. It examines concepts such as autonomy, agency and affiliation—the feelings of belonging, of having control and of having goals. Whenever we consider such measures with schools, the process does not necessarily consist of measurement; it becomes more of an opportunity to look for solutions.

Although we have that big national measure, those local measures that involve attainment advisers working closely with local authorities and schools are much richer, because they will lead to improvement, rather than just telling us where we are. It is much more important that we have data that we can mobilise.

The Convener: Does all of that lead to a discussion about the concerns around one individual child?

Elizabeth Sommerville: It normally comes right down to the individual or to groups of learners. That is the rich information.

As well as the Glasgow wellbeing tool, Education Scotland has developed a wellbeing matrix. We also use well-established tools. For instance, in relation to nurture, we encourage our local authorities to use Boxall profiles. Everything that we do locally is about leading to improvement for learners and supporting learners.

It is our job not just to consider the wellbeing of learners but to recognise that families' wellbeing can also have a direct impact on the child. All local authorities need different measures around that, because the barriers and challenges that they face are very different. Part of the refresh will give authorities the opportunity to allow people to have that bespoke measure of success, and to do that really well. It will allow them to make that difference for the children they are working with.

The Convener: That is a full answer. I will ask Patricia Watson to conclude her answer on the other two elements that she mentioned of the four. I think that the next one had to do with an inclusive system. How do you know the outcome on that?

Patricia Watson: We know the outcome through the close work that we are doing with practitioners. Education Scotland is a very teacher-focused organisation and works on a weekly basis with practitioners across the country. Particularly over the recovery period and through the pandemic, we have increased the number of practitioners we work with, through the digital delivery of our work, but we also work with practitioners through the attainment Scotland fund and the evaluation reports that come through. We also think about the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development report and the Audit Scotland report that was published last year. Both of those reports tell us clearly that we are on the right journey and that the practice is changing. The same message is coming through from the International Council of Education Advisers in its reports: we are making progress and our practice is changing on the ground.

The Convener: Is that external assessment the means by which you know whether you are making progress?

Patricia Watson: It is a combination of that and our own internal assessment and the daily work of attainment advisers. Attainment advisers report on their local authorities regularly and the local authorities feed that back to the Scottish Government regularly, too. On top of that, there is the external evaluation.

The Convener: Thank you for that. On the last point, about closing the poverty-related attainment gap, it is clear that the pandemic has had an impact. However, we have not made any progress on that and, in fact, the latest measurements show that it is getting worse. Is that correct?

Patricia Watson: Pre-pandemic, there were signs across some local authorities that we were beginning to make progress on some of the measures, particularly measures around the senior phase and improvements in children and young people's numeracy, in particular. Literacy seems to be a more complex picture in terms of

closing the gap, probably because of the complex nature of literacy. We have certainly seen an impact as a result of the pandemic in relation to children's phonological awareness and oral literacy. As a country, we cannot deny the effect of the pandemic.

The Convener: Yes. I guess that we can only measure where we stand at the minute, and at the minute the gap is greater than it has ever been.

Patricia Watson: It has widened—absolutely.

The Convener: That is why what we are doing is important.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I know that the pandemic has affected things quite significantly, but I am interested in this claim that we were making progress before the pandemic. That difference was pretty marginal and the rate of progress slow—at that rate, it would take another 35 years to close the attainment gap. Surely we cannot be satisfied with that.

Patricia Watson: It is a long-term endeavour, Mr Rennie.

Willie Rennie: Is it that long term?

09:45

Patricia Watson: I hope not. Part of the reason for our introducing the most recent changes in the new framework for recovery and accelerating progress is so that we can really look at such issues. The introduction of stretch aims for all local authorities across Scotland makes things much clearer. Taking account of the OECD's challenge, we are asking ourselves whether we are clear about what we mean by closing the poverty-related attainment gap, and also about our expectations. The OECD's report was clear that we needed to be much more up front about what we expect, how we measure progress and by when it should be achieved in every local authority area across Scotland. That is one of the issues that we have sought to address in the refreshed model for the Scottish attainment challenge.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): Will you tell us about your quantitative analysis of the impact of the pandemic?

Craig Clement (Education Scotland): I will come in on that. During the pandemic, local authorities and schools, supported by Education Scotland, worked to ensure that there was as much continuity of education as possible, with a huge focus on health and wellbeing. In that context, we worked in each locality, with individual authorities and schools, across all our directorates to ensure that the impact on continuity was minimised. We were well aware of the national position. Going back to what Liz Sommerville said,

we looked at the position school by school to ensure that we were minimising the impact. Where there were particular issues, because of absence and so on, we worked with that particular school community in more detail.

Michael Marra: We are interested in the scale of the challenge and whether the efforts made under the policy are commensurate with that. What has the pandemic done to the scale of that challenge? Anecdotally, we know that it is growing, but what do we know about the numbers? What analysis has Education Scotland done of what needs to be achieved? Is anything being done in that regard?

Elizabeth Sommerville: We are very keen to look at that. After the first round of school closures, the attainment advisers team went out. We did not look at the statistics, because the schools were dealing with other issues that they felt were more important.

Michael Marra: Of course.

Elizabeth Sommerville: Instead, we took a case-study approach. We visited different types of schools in different areas across the country to see what the impact had been. I think that the committee has access to our report on the impact of Covid on equity, the clear message of which was that the pandemic had had a greater impact on children who were experiencing poverty.

Michael Marra: We have seen the qualitative analysis, but has any quantitative analysis been done on the scale of the gap?

Pamela Di Nardo (Education Scotland): I am happy to come in and give you an example. During the pandemic, we were very reactive in offering wraparound support to schools and local authorities that had been identified. I will use the example of numeracy and mathematics in relation to closing the poverty-related attainment gap. We were aware that there had been a gap in that area before the pandemic, so we wanted to target attainment there to ensure that we minimised any additional gap. A bespoke piece of professional learning was put together in partnership with one local authority—we co-constructed a programme of work. We looked at the research basis for a maths recovery programme, and we provided additional support to wrap around 15 schools and track more than 100 learners in three local authority areas. We took pre-pandemic and interim measurements, and we are in the process of taking post-pandemic measurements. That detailed analysis meant that we could react swiftly by going in and minimising any additional gap in a particular curricular area.

Michael Marra: That analysis covered one specific area of the curriculum, which is a core area for assessment. Could that be a robust

measurement that could be translated across the whole of Scotland?

It sounds to me as though there are individual pieces of work to assess, many of which were done during the pandemic. However, I am interested in whether what we are doing, what is proposed and what we are evaluating will meet the scale of the challenge. I would like to see Education Scotland produce that information for us if you think that doing so is within your remit.

Pamela Di Nardo: Could I come in just to finish off my response?

Michael Marra: Sorry, convener.

The Convener: Yes, carry on, Pamela, and then we will go to Bob Doris.

Pamela Di Nardo: In my experience as a former executive headteacher and a quality improvement officer—I am still a registered teacher—the complexity of the landscape of a scale-up model can be underestimated.

In terms of managing a school and looking at consistency in practice and the high-quality learning and teaching that every child deserves in order to make progress, in order to scale that up across a school, a cluster or a local authority area, and then multiply it by 32, you have to look at the measurements to ensure that the right money is being put in the right places. We are working with the schools that are closest to the children to identify where they want to prioritise that time and investment.

We touched on wellbeing earlier. The other aspect is that, if a child has issues when they come to school—for example, they might not have had breakfast in the morning, they might not have had a proper night's sleep, or there could be a variety of other reasons as a result of social and economic deprivation—the child will not be ready to learn. Therefore, health and wellbeing are interwoven in relation to any interventions that we put in place.

Michael Marra: Of course.

Patricia Watson: One of the key measures that we have, which was published in December as part of the national improvement framework, is the achievement of curriculum for excellence levels. That data comes from every local authority. The national data on literacy and numeracy in particular absolutely shows us the extent of the gap across the different local authorities across Scotland. We are now following that up—

Michael Marra: That pertains to a very small area.

The Convener: Michael, we will move on. You can come back to the matter later.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): I have a supplementary question that is based on the convener's interaction with the witnesses. He was right to push you on whether there was improvement pre-Covid. The statistics that I have show that, in the two years before Covid hit, the number of young people in primary schools who were meeting the expected standards for literacy was up by 3.1 per cent; for numeracy, the increase was 2.7 per cent. Therefore, quantifiable progress had been made.

Last week, we heard from local authorities that we need to be better at celebrating the progress that has been made. The committee also met the West Partnership teachers at St Roch's secondary school, in my constituency. Graeme Dey and I were with one group of teachers who were a bit concerned that the impact of Covid might mask some of the really good success that has been evidenced in previous years. We need to ensure that that success is acknowledged and that the good practice is supported and embedded, along with the recovery that Mr Marra mentioned.

Will you say a bit more about how we ensure that we do not throw the baby out with the bath water, and that the good practice that has led to those improvements is not masked by Covid? That is a lengthy supplementary question, so if just one witness could answer, that would be good.

Patricia Watson: You make a really good point about celebrating success, which is the point that I made at the beginning. Before Covid, in the data at local level, we were absolutely seeing improvements coming through, and more so in the senior phase than in the primary phase. It is really important that we remember the improvements that you mentioned.

Education Scotland's role now is to support teachers to get back to where they were with recovery, rebuild their confidence in the classroom and upskill them to deal with some of the new challenges that they are finding among children in the classroom due to the impact of Covid. We are supporting them as they look at how they can use a range of interventions, as well as the learning about what works in the classroom that we have taken from the first six years of the challenge, to move those children on. We need to come back to that again and again, because having a relentless focus will be really important to the acceleration of progress.

Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP): I understand entirely how complicated the issue is, and I understand why your focus has been on supporting schools throughout the pandemic. However, in our evidence sessions, it has been said to us that there is an argument for a degree of re-baselining with regard to attainment, because of the impact of the pandemic.

So that we get a clearer picture, will you set out where we are now on attainment and the challenge as a result of the pandemic, set against where we were pre-pandemic? How would you quantify that?

Patricia Watson: It is difficult to quantify it in a single figure. It has to be quantified at each local authority level and even at each school level. We are supporting schools and local authorities to understand the context.

One of the big questions that is like a mantra for the Scottish attainment challenge—it has been since the beginning—is about knowing your gaps, and not just one gap. In the context of your school, your local community, your local authority and even your region, what are the gaps and how do you use your data effectively?

One of the strong pieces of work that Education Scotland has championed through the attainment adviser role is about the effective use and analysis of data for planning. We are focusing on that support to understand the data and—

The Convener: I am sorry to interrupt, but are you agreeing with Graeme Dey's question that it is important to establish a new baseline for the gap? You have just said that we do not know what the gap is, but we need to know what the gap is before we can follow through on the rest of your answer.

Patricia Watson: Absolutely, and that goes right down to classroom level. We need every teacher in Scotland to know the gaps that exist in their classroom and the context in which they are working.

The Convener: So we should get to a point at which we can quantify that.

Patricia Watson: I think that we are already able to quantify it to an extent through the data that was published in December through the national improvement framework.

The Convener: I am sorry, but I thought that you said that we could not quantify it.

Patricia Watson: No, I did not say that. I said to Mr Marra that we have that national measure from the data on achievement of levels. We will have more as time goes on, because we are using the national improvement framework and the 11 measures that are contained within it as the baseline.

The Convener: We will have a quick comeback from Graeme Dey.

Graeme Dey: We have focused our inquiry on the west region, and you are involved in the regional improvement collaborative there. Teachers have told us that the pandemic has had a massively detrimental effect on the work and the

scale of the challenge. Do you accept that characterisation?

Patricia Watson: Absolutely, and when we look at the local authorities in the West Partnership, we should remember that it contains five of the most deprived local authorities in Scotland. South Lanarkshire, which was originally involved in a schools programme, has significant levels of deprivation. Also, 35 per cent of Scotland's school population is in that region.

Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): On the refreshed approach, "The Scottish Attainment Challenge: Framework for Recovery and Accelerating Progress" says:

"The Scottish Attainment Challenge mission is central to all of Education Scotland's work supporting Scottish educators",

and part of it is to

"support local authorities to deliver an agreed plan".

The evidence that we have been taking from teachers, among others, suggests that there is a lack of consistency across local authorities. What work is Education Scotland doing to reduce that inconsistency? Everybody is entitled to have quality input, wherever they are in Scotland. I do not know who is the best person to answer that—it might be Craig Clement, but I will take the witnesses' lead.

Craig Clement: I am happy to start off and maybe my colleagues will add something later.

Our approach evolved during the pandemic. As we said earlier, we took a supportive role, which will continue into the future. We have already talked about providing bespoke support at school level and potentially at individual classroom level, but we will also do it at local authority level. We already have excellent relationships at local authority level through the regional improvement collaboratives, and we will look at the requirements of each local authority. We will look again at the data, where the gaps are, how a cohort is performing as it proceeds through school, what the gap is in terms of the Scottish index of multiple deprivation, and overall attainment. We will look at providing individual local authorities with a bespoke package of support and challenge, when it is required.

10:00

We provided general support during the pandemic, but we are now moving to bespoke support for individual authorities, as required. We can bring expertise, advice and challenge, because we work with authorities across the country. We are building relationships, looking for where support is most required and delivering that in unison with authorities and schools.

Kaukab Stewart: You will have been working on that for a while; that aim has been there for years. Why is it that the evidence that we have from teachers and parents consistently says that there is a variation? I am concerned about that. There appears to be a lack of progress in becoming more consistent. How are you measuring whether you are having an impact on levelling out improvement across authorities? What work are you doing on that at an authority level? Pamela Di Nardo talked about scaling up, and part of your remit is to do that.

Craig Clement: My colleagues may want to come in, but I can talk about one specific thing. By September, we will be agreeing stretch aims with each authority. There will be a range of core indicators, which we will agree jointly and will use to measure progress and achievement. Each authority will be able to identify its own stretch aims to deal with issues or to focus on areas such as health and wellbeing. An individual authority might decide to have particular additional stretch aims.

Progress can then be measured by using quantitative data and qualitative evidence. That can often go beneath the surface of the raw data and can show what is happening underneath by looking at support and challenge and taking a quality assurance approach to the individual authority.

Kaukab Stewart: Your report "Recalibrating Equity and Social Justice in Scottish Education: Bouncing forward after COVID-19 lockdowns" talks about

"intensifying support in the short term",

and says that

"high quality universal and targeted provision is vital."

What progress has been made in those areas?

Pamela Di Nardo: I will start off, and colleagues may want to come in.

In my senior regional adviser role, I have the privilege of leading a large team that is aligned to the West Partnership. We give bespoke support, drawing on national expertise. We have a multidisciplinary team on the ground, working shoulder to shoulder with local authorities in and around schools. Liz Sommerville, who is accompanying us today, is a member of that team.

We know each local authority inside out and work with the central team to identify strengths, of which there are many. Mr Doris said that there are many strengths that should be celebrated. Our teachers need to hear that, given the hard work and graft that has gone into ensuring that we are on the right track. However, we need to have a

conversation about what is not working so well and which areas we should focus on.

It is important to have a shared mission, which is why the refreshed narrative is absolutely crucial in ensuring that we take a joined-up approach. All headteachers would be able to relate to the analogy of moving from the balcony to the dance floor. Education Scotland is on the dance floor. We can provide an external perspective, taking good practice from elsewhere and giving examples of quality improvement and quality assurance. We can get underneath and drill into processes. Why is something working in one particular school? Could it be lifted to another? Sometimes it cannot, because it may be about the particular context of that school.

We have a very experienced team. I am using mine as an example: I am one of six senior regional advisers. Each of us has our own team, operating in the same way. We have conversations with headteachers and engage with class teachers. That is our direct role, and it builds on our locality work, which Craig Clement talked about. We also draw on expertise from our scrutiny colleagues.

Outwith that, there is the regional improvement collaborative. The three overarching principles for the West Partnership are equity, empowerment and excellence. Equity filters all the way through the team and aligns to each of the West Partnership's workstreams.

To be clear on what is working well and where we need to focus, I drill underneath the data and the footprints of every member of the team at all levels of the system. There might need to be a bit of wraparound support in particular schools. There are conversations with the authority, and people go in together. There is coaching and support, and the feedback that we get is very much welcomed by the headteachers. We work closely with the RIC to ensure that we collectively work as part of a shared mission to get the best for our children and young people.

Kaukab Stewart: It is interesting that you mentioned the RICs. The evidence that we have taken on those has been mixed. The principle behind RICs was whole-heartedly welcomed, and people understood it, but the experience of teachers is mixed. That goes back to my line of questioning about variation across authorities. The principle was recognised as good but, if RICs are not working well and tweaking is needed, how can you respond to that? Are you taking on board the views of teachers? Some teachers think that the approach is working well, but others think that they are not part of the collaborative process and that the approach is still a bit leadership led rather than classroom led. How are you dealing with that?

Pamela Di Nardo: Liz Sommerville wants to come in on that, and other colleagues will want to add to what I say.

On team work, there is a particular workstream in the West Partnership that looks at wellbeing for learning. That goes back to the question: if our children and young people are not in the right place to learn, how can we support our teachers to engage and ensure that we respond to those particular needs, which have changed and evolved in light of the pandemic? Our team is delivering professional learning with the RIC to our teachers, and they are closely evaluated. That feeds into the professional learning that we plan for the year ahead.

Every regional improvement collaborative creates a plan, and we work with the RICs in the cycle to identify and evaluate what went well in the previous year, the current situation and what the indicators are. They have critical indicators that they measure themselves against. That will feature as part of the stretch aims space. Each local authority feeds into that process and considers what additional supports the RIC can provide.

Each local authority has its own professional learning offer to reduce some of the variability that you have identified and ensure that the offer is very tightly based around the needs of individual schools. The quality improvement officers in central teams very much work in that space. We work with them to transport and share good practice and to challenge where that is necessary. The RIC then looks to see how it can respond.

The interesting part about teachers' engagement around the RIC offer relates to leadership at all levels. Some of the West Partnership's workstream has been about leadership for improvement. There have been significant changes in new leaders coming to the front and new people taking up leadership roles. Everybody has a responsibility to look at data, whether or not they are a class teacher. Everybody is central to the core vision of targeting improvements.

Kaukab Stewart: I have a final question. Given that your organisation is about to go through structural changes, do you have sufficient capacity in it to offer the support and challenge functions that you have already mentioned?

Patricia Watson: Obviously, the whole issue of reform has been a challenge for Education Scotland over the past year as we have waited for the outcomes of Professor Muir's report. We welcome that. Education Scotland is an organisation that is full of educators, and it is a learning organisation. I have been in Scottish education for almost 40 years, and change has

continued to be the paramount thing that we have all had to work through. Change is a good thing, and Education Scotland does not see it as a bad thing. If members look at our response to the Muir consultation, they will see that a lot of what he put into his report absolutely chimes with Education Scotland's direction of travel under the leadership of our current chief executive, in respect of being much more with Scottish educators and for Scotland's learners.

In terms of capacity, we now know—at least, we are led to believe—from the cabinet secretary's response to Professor Muir's report that we will have at least two years before the organisation changes. Therefore, as far as we are concerned, it is business as usual in Education Scotland for the next two years, and the cabinet secretary has been very supportive of that, too.

We have a team of 32 attainment advisers and a strong team of curriculum staff; we are continuing to recruit and fill posts in the normal way when vacancies arise; and we continue to work in partnership with the local authorities and schools that we serve. Therefore, we are really not worried—for the short term, anyway.

The Convener: But there is change and you are being scrapped. How can you welcome that? That seems strange to me. Change is endemic to all organisations or they do not survive, but the Muir report suggests that you are going to be done away with and replaced by a completely new organisation.

Patricia Watson: I would not use the word "scrapped". I think that "reformed" is the word.

The Convener: You are being done away with and replaced by something new—that is what the cabinet secretary says.

Patricia Watson: We were reformed previously from being Learning and Teaching Scotland. I was in HMIE at the time, and we joined with Learning and Teaching Scotland to become Education Scotland. Now—

The Convener: So, it is just a name change.

Patricia Watson: No, it is not just a name change, because the change to the organisation will create really important opportunities for us. As you know, there has been a lot of discussion about the need to separate the inspection function from the improvement function in Education Scotland.

The Convener: We will come on to that in due course.

Patricia Watson: All of that will be to the good, for the system.

The Convener: Thank you.

Graeme Dey: Just picking up on the point about RICs, when you reform something, there is inevitably a degree of resentment from some quarters and a period of readjustment. If we look at the approach that is being taken here and at how pupil equity funding and other funding streams have put power in the hands of headteachers—a change that some local authorities did not particularly like—we see that there was a similar impact to that of setting up the RICs. Education Scotland has had direct involvement in that. Do you accept that there was a degree of pushback by local authorities—or at least some of them—at the outset, and has that changed? Have we got to a position where everybody is now pulling in the same direction or do we still have some way to go?

Patricia Watson: I am sorry but, to clarify, when you talk about pushback, what is that pushback on?

Graeme Dey: It is in the context of local authorities seeing their role change considerably. Local authorities were the power in local education delivery.

Patricia Watson: So, it is in terms of empowerment.

Graeme Dey: Yes—in terms of empowerment and local authorities' direct control over the system. What was the landscape at the start and what is it now?

Craig Clement: At the time of the change, I was in local government, and it is fair to say that I was aware of some of those tensions. As Mr Dey said, it was a change in the way of working and there was anxiety about that.

However, my experience since coming to Education Scotland, where I have been for more than a year now, is that the relationships between ourselves, the RIC leads and colleagues and directors generally is really positive. There are a couple of good examples of that from the pandemic. For example, I do not think that the work on e-learning would have happened to the same extent had RICs not been in place.

You are right that any change brings a bit of uncertainty and anxiety, but I am not sure that I would describe it as pushback. I would say that it was folk trying to find their place in the system. We regularly meet RIC leads and colleagues from the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland about the development of RICs, and that relationship is productive. That is in large part due to the senior regional advisers, including Pamela Watson, who have worked really hard on those relationships to ensure that the work of the RICs will complement the work of local authorities and Education Scotland, so that we are not all in the

same space, as it were, and competing with one another.

That is not to say that there cannot be further improvement; as outlined in the RICS evaluation and noted in Professor Muir's report, changes in governance and so on may be required. However, the principle of regional working and its benefits are now well established.

10:15

You mentioned the empowerment agenda; across the system—among teachers, professional associations, other support staff and Education Scotland—everyone is agreed that there is huge benefit in empowerment. We can build on that positive agreement. It is important to say that accountability will remain with the local authorities but, in the context of empowerment, there is a huge opportunity to build on the successes to date.

Graeme Dey: I have a follow-up question for Pamela Di Nardo. As I said earlier, we have focused on the west region, which has a significant poverty issue and attainment gap to tackle, and everybody has a clear focus on tackling that—just as they did prior to this workstream. Is it the same situation across the rest of the country? I think that you were involved in the Tayside regional improvement collaborative at the outset. That collaborative takes in a major city with significant deprivation and attainment issues, but also rural areas such as mine, where there are towns with a focus of deprivation, and challenges that are masked in the rural areas—my colleague Oliver Mundell will come on to that later. Is the picture that Craig Clement paints a universal one across Scotland, or are there different sets of challenges and recognition of those challenges? Are we seeing variation in the performance of the RICs in the context of attainment?

Pamela Di Nardo: As Craig Clement mentioned, there are six SRAs and we work very closely with them. I used the example of roots and lift. We identify what is going well and we regularly connect and share practice. As you know, it is not just Education Scotland that works in that space. We work very closely with the Robert Owen Centre, which provides support to the West Partnership and offers a different research basis in order to support the direction of travel. We see some of that and other links with other regional improvement collaboratives.

On connectivity and variation, it goes back to the point that, if we are going to make any change, there has to be a shared mission and everyone has to be clear about their function and role and how they can support that change. Your initial question to Craig Clement was about local

authorities. Local authorities work very closely with their schools and in relation to pupil equity funding they are willing to say, "Let's look at your self-evaluation. Where does your school improvement priority sit, and how are you going to use your funding to support and drive some of those areas?"

If we take that from school level to local level and then lift that to the RIC level, the variation is minimised, because of those structures. However, there is still a lot of work to do, because RICs have evolved only very recently and then the pandemic struck. In that new space, it is very much a VUCA—volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity—learning environment. We are asking where we are going to adjust the practice, where we need to reprioritise and focus, and how we can share expertise to ensure that we have equity across the country.

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): I want to ask about the role of attainment advisers in more detail. Elizabeth Sommerville, you spoke earlier about taking down barriers in relation to both the local authority and the schools. Could you tell us a bit more about the degree to which attainment advisers are working with schools or with local authorities? It is always helpful to our understanding to hear examples of specific bits of work.

Elizabeth Sommerville: Thank you for that question; it is always nice to be able to celebrate the work of attainment advisers. Our role can be quite varied. It is important to acknowledge that we take quite a responsive role. The major part of our work is working with local authorities, schools and teachers to examine what the barriers are that need to be removed if they are going to have a focus on closing the poverty attainment gap. Attainment advisers do that at different levels; as well as working in schools we provide national support, guidance and training programmes. We have a whole suite of training that is targeted at leaders, practitioners and support staff. We highly value the work that support staff do in our schools.

We work with local authorities and schools on leading improvement and building capacity to close the gap. That is the type of work that Craig Clement was talking about earlier: we are working at a universal level in the local authority. I might work with schools on data and first, at local authority level, we might have to look at what processes it is following to allow the schools to be more adept at understanding the gap. Our work to support their improvement can be really varied.

We also work in a targeted way. That can involve local authorities saying that there is a certain group of schools that need support around numeracy and asking what we can do to support them. We have lots of different examples. For

example, one of the attainment advisers is working with the local authority on a parental engagement strategy. In East Renfrewshire, we know that support has been given on outcomes and measures. In West Dunbartonshire, the attainment adviser has helped to support the review of the experience of care experienced young people. That is a targeted, universal approach.

The intensive support can be quite varied. I work very closely with schools that are sometimes directed by the local authority. Sometimes schools come and ask for that level of support because they recognise that they are not making the progress that they want to make. In that type of support, we first carry out a deep contextual analysis to understand what their gap is. That is not just based on numerical data. It is important that we also considered the qualitative data. We ask, "What are your pupils telling you?" The children's voices are at the heart of this, but we also need to ask what parents are telling us. We want to make sure that we are listening to the whole picture rather than just looking at the numbers. All our work needs to be based on sound foundations that will allow us to drive forward attainment for those pupils.

It is important to recognise that, when we go into that intensive work, it can sometimes relate to our mainstream work, such as leadership and supporting that. The impact of Covid shows that our leaders are amazing. Every single time I speak to a headteacher, I am honestly in awe of them and the fact that they have managed to take their schools through a pandemic. I am very proud of them. However, the pandemic has also had an impact on them and sometimes the role of the attainment adviser is to build the headteacher back up and allow them to remember what they were doing before and that they were making really good progress. It is not always about being innovative and bringing out a shiny new toy; sometimes it is about giving leaders the opportunity to step back and remember what they do well, to enable them to build on that and take it forward.

Sometimes our intensive work is about supporting, tracking and monitoring the agenda to provide a robust evaluation of what people are doing and whether it is working. Last week, in the committee, Ruth Binks used the phrase "adopt, adapt and abandon", and everybody who knows me will know that that is my mantra. The reason for that is that it is important that we recognise what we are doing well. We do that at an intensive level, by asking, "What is specifically working well at your school?" We also do that at a local authority level, by asking, "What is working well, what supports are going in and how can we share that?"

The role of the attainment adviser is to ensure that we are sharing internally within local authorities but also externally, because we have this amazing network of 32 people who all know what is working around the country. The role is about being able to provide the bespoke advice that schools and local authorities need at that particular time.

The part of the job that I find most rewarding is hearing anecdotal stories from practitioners and headteachers. Because I am always keen to get better at my job, I recently undertook a 360 review, when I asked people who I have worked closely with whether I could do anything better. One comment was, "Thank you for your time. You make me a better headteacher." If we can do that across the country, the leadership to drive forward the attainment challenge will be amazing. All my other attainment advisers are doing the same thing.

Ruth Maguire: That is helpful. While we are scrutinising and challenging things and looking for things that we can do better, it is always important not to lose sight of the diligence, professionalism and commitment in our schools. We have heard about great examples of that.

When the convener, Michael Marra and I spoke with teachers on, er, Monday—forgive me for forgetting; it has been a long week already—we heard fantastic examples of work. I was particularly impressed by the work that is going on to bring in parents to assist with literacy; an example was given of a successful film club that had been run in a library.

One challenge that teachers raised was about the research that policy is built on. One teacher described some research as flawed, because it is not disaggregated by ethnicity. They also said that some research that is being used undervalues and underplays the importance of support for learning workers. In that teacher's school, English is a second language for many children, and support for learning workers is crucial. An example was given of a young pupil being given an assessment in Turkish and, to quote the teacher, smashing it. If he had been given his assessment in English, the outcome would have been different. I am keen to hear your reflections on how we ensure that the research is not flawed and that policies are appropriate for all our children in schools.

Elizabeth Sommerville: It is important that we are evidence based. I know that the committee has heard from the Education Endowment Foundation, which would say—I do not think that Becky Francis would object to me saying this—that, with any research, something has a good chance of working. We are saying that the research gives people an idea of what works. As attainment advisers, everything that we do and

every piece of advice that we give is based on evidence. Everything that is in our training and that we put in the national improvement hub is based on evidence.

The question whether the evidence is flawed brings us on to the next piece of work, which is done at local authority level through attainment advisers, and through the RICs, as Pamela Di Nardo mentioned, where we have an important role in supporting practitioners to undertake inquiry. The large pieces of evidence that give a good hint about what might work might not give a fuller picture of what might work for one person's situation. We are putting lots of support in place to allow practitioners to undertake inquiries and look at their context. The example was given of children who have English as a second language. If that is the barrier, we need to look at what we can do to support and address it.

Another part of attainment advisers' job—we have a very varied job—is almost to become researchers for practitioners. We might go away and look out evidence, and we might link with places where we knew that something was working particularly well. As an example, we know that Glasgow, which is in the West Partnership, has a vast number of children with English as a second language and that schools there are skilled in their approaches to addressing that need. That practice also exists in other local authorities.

The attainment adviser's role is to make links and look for opportunities for collaboration, so that people are not sitting on their own in a room trying to work out what to do. I would definitely see facilitating collaboration as part of my role in taking forward such a situation.

10:30

Ruth Maguire: I am trying to understand what might go wrong and why somebody would say that there was an issue there. Is that a case of someone who is further removed from the school placing value on research that might not necessarily be appropriate to the pupil? Does that make sense? I am trying to understand where the comment that I mentioned came from.

Patricia Watson: It could be, but without having a conversation with the person, it is hard for us to say, "That's the reason why that person made that comment." We would want to have a conversation with that person to understand the context of the comment.

I would like to add to Liz Sommerville's feedback. I want to say a bit more about classroom support workers and support staff who work most closely with young people with additional support needs. As Liz said, we have

been trying to improve our own work. We recently did an evaluation of who used our resources on the national improvement hub, and one of the things that came back to us was that there were two particular groups of practitioners who were not aware of the resources that were there and were not accessing the support and the professional learning opportunities as much as others.

One of those groups was student teachers. Over the course of this year, we have taken steps to address that. Throughout the year, the attainment advisers have been scoping out work with the Scottish Council of Deans of Education to look at how we can become more involved with initial teacher education so that we reach those students, and so that they understand the support that is available from Education Scotland and the wealth of resources and knowledge that we have on the Scottish attainment challenge, poverty and so on. We are doing work in that area.

The second group was the one that you talked about. We have taken steps at local authority level to be really proactive in that regard. All the attainment advisers have that as a key strand of their work over this academic year, and that will continue as a focus group in our national SAC plan.

Ruth Maguire: I am sorry to interrupt, but what is your understanding of why support workers would not be accessing those resources? Is that a question of time and workload? Do they not have the same space for professional development?

Patricia Watson: The situation varies across the country. As you know, the contracts of support workers are different from those of teachers. Many support workers work part time and are not always available for the twilights that might be on offer, so we have rescheduled some of that activity. As a result, we are beginning to have an impact. In the office yesterday, one of our attainment advisers was talking about a particular learning activity that is targeted at those support assistants that will take place next week. At the moment—it is not closed yet—more than 200 support assistants have signed up for that.

That has come about as a result of the attainment advisers using their links with local authorities and exploring what is possible. Through their local authority links, the attainment advisers can look at what is available for those groups of staff at local level. At a national level, we have had to take more steps to get underneath the skin of that and take proactive action.

The Convener: So, you can completely refute the comment that was made by one of the headteachers who spoke to us, who said that Education Scotland placed little value on the support for learning role.

Patricia Watson: Absolutely—I completely refute that. Education Scotland values the support for learning role. Every member of staff in Education Scotland would understand the importance of meeting learner needs and the value of the staff who do that.

The Convener: It is important that you have made that clear. I appreciate that.

Willie Rennie has a quick supplementary question.

Willie Rennie: I was fascinated by what you said about the work of the attainment advisers. The feedback that I get from a lot of teachers is that they are exhausted as a result of the pandemic and that they still feel as though they are in the middle of the pandemic, because a lot of staff and kids are off sick. A lot of the children have fallen behind in relation to where teachers would expect them to be. On Monday, a teacher told us that they were frustrated by the latest idea coming along when they already had a mountain of work to do. I realise that the issue is probably much more sophisticated than that.

You are under pressure from us and others to improve attainment. At the same time, you are getting pushback from the schools, which are saying, “We’ve got enough to handle here without you coming up with new ideas.” How do you judge that? Can you explain what kind of discussion you would have to make sure that you do not overwhelm the schools, while driving forward improvement? Can you talk through that a little?

Elizabeth Sommerville: I could give you a couple of examples of the kind of conversation that we are having. Before the pandemic, things were going really well for one of the schools that I am working with. The excellence agenda was improving, attainment was up in general and it was beginning to close the attainment gap. The school had previously gone through a local authority review that was very positive. The impact of Covid on that school made things very difficult. Rather than looking for the shiny new toy, as we spoke about before, sometimes it is about refocusing and giving people the time to refocus. However, we cannot stand still; we have to move continually.

If we are going to refocus, we want to refocus on things that will make the difference and accelerate progress. I have not yet met anybody who works in a school, whether they be support staff, a headteacher or a depute head, who does not want the best for their children. They are keen to recover not just attainment but children’s wellbeing and their opportunities and experiences. Some children have been working in bubbles all the way through nursery, so it is not about their phonological awareness. We have that kind of

interaction with children who are really struggling, and every person I have met is committed to that.

Teachers are tired, and some would describe this year as having been tougher than the other years of the pandemic because, as you can imagine, Paul is off on Monday, Pamela is off on Tuesday, Patricia is off on a Wednesday, and their lesson plan is not what they want it to be because they have to take everybody with them. However, our staff are resilient and amazing. They are able to do what needs to be done in order to recover those children.

For some schools, it is not even about recovery but about recovery and beyond. I have worked with some schools that have managed to recover back to where they were and made further progress in closing the gap and their attainment results. That is about the context in which they are working. The higher the level of deprivation, the higher the barriers, and the higher the impact of those barriers, and it is about heads giving staff time to refocus and remember what was working for them.

I also support one of the RIC workstreams, and we were doing some training with an excellent teacher who had come along to talk to other practitioners and share their practice. She said to me, “This has been really good for making me refocus, because I have got into some bad habits. I have had all my children facing the front for the last two years.” Refocusing and beginning to look back at practice should empower teachers to say to themselves that they just need to remember what was working well and get on with it.

It is not always about shiny new things, and local authorities are not pushing them. They are pushing the recovery, and that is where our stretch aims will come in by allowing teachers to focus on the things that they know work well for them so that they can make the difference.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): This is probably a question for Patricia Watson in the first instance, but feel free to refer it to colleagues if that is more appropriate. I am looking to draw together some of the threads in the various answers that you have given already.

A couple of weeks ago, the committee heard evidence from Jim Thewliss of School Leaders Scotland. He is one of a number of witnesses who have suggested that there is a need for some longitudinal studies on the impact of the funding. We are at the stage at which an entire cohort could have gone through their whole time at primary or secondary with the funding in place, so this is an appropriate point at which to do some high-quality and in-depth longitudinal work to assess the impact of that.

You have mentioned the various bits of assessment work that you have been doing. In the work that you are already doing, is there anything that matches the description of what Jim Thewliss asked for? If the answer is no, do you have any plans to do the longitudinal work that people are interested in?

Patricia Watson: The question about a longitudinal study is a good one. The question for Education Scotland is what we would want to gain from it and what we could expect to gain from it that we are not gaining from the evidence that we are gathering year on year.

The attainment Scotland fund evaluation is a longitudinal study of the impact of the Scottish attainment challenge. We do a headteacher survey and a local authority survey each year, and we build up a picture of the impact in terms of what happens on the ground.

If, by “longitudinal study”, you mean doing case studies in which we follow and track individual learners, I think that there is merit in such an approach. We currently do that through attainment data, and there is the potential to do it better. Along with the Scottish Government, we are looking at how we can track individual pupil progress; we are also doing that with some of the regional collaboratives. For example, the Northern Alliance and the South-east Improvement Collaborative have an on-going piece of work in which they are considering how we can take a close look at and get a granular picture of individual learners and track them over time. There is merit in doing that, because it will give us a close understanding of what made a difference for those young people. My fear is that it will tell us that different things have made a difference for individual young people. The question that we need to ask is whether we will get more out of doing that.

For me, as an educator for many years and as an HM inspector, evaluation has the biggest impact when it is done robustly at a local level and when we have a system that is able to accurately self-evaluate the impact of its own work. That is why we take a strong approach to developing skills in self-evaluation across Scottish education. It means triangulating data, observation and stakeholder views, and bringing that together to get an accurate, granular picture of what is working well and what the next steps should be. That is why we share the suite of quality indicator frameworks that we use, such as “How good is our school?” and “How good is our community learning and development?” This country is quite unique in sharing all the inspectors’ work across the system, and we expect everybody to use those tools to get under the skin of what is working well.

There could be some merit in longitudinal research; it depends on what we want to get out of it, how we use it and how we expect practitioners to use it.

Ross Greer: Absolutely—I agree with much of that. Would it be fair to say that, if we were to embark on such a piece of work, the appropriate body to undertake or co-ordinate it would either be Education Scotland or the Government’s learning directorate?

As the national education agency, you are ideally placed to co-ordinate a piece of work that would use case studies to look at, for example, a school in an urban area with high levels of deprivation, a school in a rural area that sits in the middle of SIMD and a school with a high level of students for whom English is a second language. Could you decide to do that, or would you need direction from the Government? Would you need the cabinet secretary to tell you, “We have now been running this funding programme for long enough, so I want to see the kind of longitudinal work that School Leaders Scotland has suggested”?

Patricia Watson: Education Scotland would most likely do that research in partnership with academic institutions. We already work quite closely in partnership with universities across Scotland, and we acknowledge that there are huge levels of expertise in academic research in our universities. Our staff undertake a lot of evaluation and a lot of them are very skilled in doing research. Many of them are undertaking, or have undertaken, PhDs, and every educator in Scotland has undertaken research as part of their journey towards being a qualified educator. Therefore, there is a level of expertise. However, for that research to have real impact, we would want to do it in partnership with universities.

If we are talking about a whole-system approach to improvement, I do not think that Education Scotland would take any of that on board on its own. We would say that it is for the system to own that as a collective; that means universities, local authorities, Education Scotland and the Scottish Government’s analytical services coming together to be clear about—

Ross Greer: I am sorry to jump in. You are right that there needs to be a whole-system approach, but somebody needs to lead the piece of work in order to get it started.

Patricia Watson: Absolutely.

Ross Greer: Will you consider leading that piece of work or do you need direction from Government? For example, do you need the cabinet secretary to say to you, “This is a strategic priority, so I would like you to co-ordinate it. I would like you to commission academics and work

with partners and so on”, or is that something that Education Scotland, using its executive authority, can go ahead and do?

10:45

Patricia Watson: Although it is not in our corporate plan or part of our strategic priorities at the moment, if we saw that as a strategic priority, we could absolutely undertake it.

Ross Greer: If there is time, convener, I have one more question about inspectors and inspections—it relates somewhat to the issue of longitudinal work and the length of time between inspections of individual schools. When your inspectors go into a school and engage with it as part of that regular programme, do they ask standard questions about specific points related to the use of attainment funding as part of their report? Could you give us a bit more detail on the role that the inspectors play in making sure that we are gathering the right kind of evidence in a supportive manner?

Patricia Watson: That is a good question, and I am glad to be asked it. The thread of equity is embedded in the “How good is our school?” quality integrated framework that inspectors have been using. Coincidentally—or perhaps not—that framework was launched in 2015, at the same time as the Scottish attainment challenge. In developing the refresh of HGIOS at that time, all the quality indicators were refreshed in the knowledge that it was a really important piece of work that would take Scottish educators on a journey. Every quality indicator and every inspection of an establishment or centre considers the impacts of Scottish attainment challenge funding.

Ross Greer: Now that that has been the case for seven years, has there been any collation or review of what inspectors come back with, or any identification of common trends in their reports?

Patricia Watson: Absolutely; the chief inspector’s most recent publication, which came out last year, considered the collation of inspection findings from 2018 to 2021. A lot of the strengths that I have mentioned, such as the cultural shift, the focus on wellbeing and teacher practice, and awareness of interventions and the kinds of practice that help to alleviate the barriers to learning that our most deprived children feel, all came through as strengths in the report.

The report said that we need to do more in the areas that Ruth Maguire asked about in relation to identifying and meeting every individual learner’s needs, and we are looking into all that. What also came through in the report was the need for more differentiation in the classroom and a closer look at monitoring and tracking of progress, and how

that all impacts on planning for learning that is appropriate in order to ensure that every learner makes the progress that they are capable of.

Ross Greer: Excellent.

Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): It is clear that, nowadays, many more of our children struggle with anxiety, social skills and relationships. How much focus is there on asking our children and young people, and their parents, about their health and wellbeing and what outcomes they want to progress towards?

Pamela Di Nardo: I am happy to answer that.

Stephanie Callaghan: I will let you guys choose who answers.

Pamela Di Nardo: I will kick off, and then colleagues might want to come in. I have already provided examples of how we weave in and work around local authorities’ improvement priorities; we also work with the regional improvement collaboratives. I will give an example of a current workstream that is looking at wellbeing for learning. That workstream, which sits with the West Partnership, includes youth ambassadors and is looking at how the United National Convention on the Rights of the Child could be enacted. We have a senior education officer who has delivered professional learning on hearing the voice of our children and young people so that they can be leaders of their learning, and on how to capture insights and views about where they are and where they feel they need to be supported, as well as what we can do better in this changing context and what we can put in place that is not already there.

In addition, there was a piece of work on nurturing and distressed behaviours, and the uptake was so great that we had to roll out additional sessions. We have now opened that up at a national level, and people from different regional improvement collaboratives have come to ask for it. It is an example of a focused piece of work that has generated a lot of discussion, with practitioners thinking about the children in their classrooms as individuals and putting almost a team in place around a child or family. It leads them to ask questions such as, “What does this look like for families or parents of children in my school? How does it improve the way in which our team works?”

One insight involves the way in which PEF, in particular, has been used for cooking classes in which the parent and the child cook together with, say, a family support worker working alongside them. We have been able to take that feedback from our children and young people, strengthen our relationships with families, bring the community together with wraparound support and, ultimately, support the child on their learning

journey. That is one example of our response to wellbeing in a wider sense.

Liz Sommerville may want to tell you about the other work that she has been doing.

Elizabeth Sommerville: In the work that we do with schools, we take some time to consider the best way of capturing the pupil voice, and parts of our national document “How good is our school?” allow that to be pulled through for schools—

Stephanie Callaghan: That is really interesting as far as schools are concerned, but I am really interested in hearing about what individual children—and parents—are saying about where they are at, where they want to be and what changes they want to see.

Elizabeth Sommerville: With the Glasgow wellbeing tool that I mentioned earlier, children are asked a series of questions that lead to conclusions about where they are with regard to their autonomy, their affiliation and their agency. Teachers then follow up those conversations at different levels, including one-to-one conversations with the child, but if the issue is autonomy within a classroom, the class itself can say, “Listen—do you realise that three of our classmates feel that they don’t belong here? What can we do to strengthen things?”

As well as the wellbeing tool, lots of local authorities are working with third sector partners, which is something that we encourage—we have people working with CLD, Barnardo’s and lots of other agencies. That work is very granular: those people are looking not just at the child’s strengths but at the difficulties that they are facing and trying to increase some of the strengths and reduce the difficulties. That work, which is done in partnership with the parents and the child, happens not just at secondary level but right through primary level, too. Many agencies use that strength and difficulty model, but it is also integrated with the child’s overall plan in a school to ensure that everyone is clear about the agenda and is working towards it.

Some schools have employed wellbeing coaches, who also focus on that strength and difficulty aspect. For example, a child might be finding it difficult to make friends in the playground, so the wellbeing coach makes a concerted effort to ensure that they feel included and involved, with the knock-on effect of the child seeing that they can make friends beyond one particular experience.

Lots and lots of things are going on in different schools, and that is as it should be, because, again, it is all about knowing where the gaps are and knowing the individual child. In fact, it is more important for wellbeing that things are addressed at that granular level, given that the difficulties that children face can be very different.

Anxiety has been mentioned, and in a piece of work on attendance that we recently did in partnership with the educational psychologist in the local authority, we made sure that we addressed all the different barriers and how they could be reduced. One such barrier is definitely emotional difficulties, and overcoming it requires bringing in the experts. It is all about encouraging schools to look at those individuals, to ask why they are not attending and to take that problem-solving approach.

The role of the attainment adviser is not just to do the local work. It is about taking that practice down into the classroom where it makes a difference. However, we cannot just start in a classroom; we have to do the foundation and scaffolding work to ensure that it goes all the way down to where it needs to be.

Stephanie Callaghan: That is really good to hear.

More than 30 per cent of our children and young people have additional support needs, including those who are neurodiverse or care experienced, and anxiety, relationships and social skills have always been issues for that particular group. It almost sounds as though they are drawing a little bit closer together with that cultural shift, with children being looked at more individually. I remember Angela Morgan saying that if we addressed all kids’ needs in the way that we address additional support needs, it would benefit all children.

Is specific work being done around improving outcomes for young people who have additional support needs or who are care experienced, and are we measuring that to see whether the outcomes specifically for that group are improving?

Elizabeth Sommerville: I am happy to take that question.

There are lots of supports out there for children with additional support needs, and we need to remember that poverty is an additional support need. We are doing work centrally, but I will take you a bit deeper into the care-experienced children and young people fund, which is one of our newest funds.

You will be aware that the Promise has been made to the children, and we are seeing the care-experienced funding go hand in hand with the Promise and being driven by the children. As we discussed a moment ago, the children are directing it. Along with the children, local authorities are deciding what aspects of the Promise they want to focus on first.

As AAs, we are looking at what we can do to support our local authority colleagues to address

the needs of that group of learners. I will come back to how we track that, because it is a very complex issue. The interventions include training for staff and projects being run in partnership with third sector colleagues. There is also a participatory approach, whereby learners identify how barriers can be removed to allow them to access learning, whether through tutors or through things that other parents can provide that theirs cannot.

We are seeing a lot of rich work coming directly from the children, but we are also seeing a more strategic approach, including through the use of virtual headteachers. A virtual headteacher is a headteacher who has taken responsibility for all children who are care experienced—they are the person who ensures that the outcomes for those learners are positive. Virtual headteachers are not in every school, and they work closely in partnership together. We are seeing an increase in that approach throughout the country. One of its strengths is the virtual headteacher network that has been set up. One of our colleagues in our inclusion team supports that work.

The contexts around the country are very different. We recently had a west region training day for people from different local authorities who are involved in working with care-experienced young people. They drilled into the issue of how to track outcomes, which you mentioned in the second part of your question.

Tracking those outcomes is very difficult. It differs from how we normally track, mainly because if we use the measure of care-experienced children, the numbers will only ever grow because they never stop being care experienced. On using attainment and attendance, children who are being looked after either at home or away from home, but who go on to become care experienced, are probably at a crisis point, and by the time they get to that point, the impact on their attainment and attendance has already happened. We have to look at every single child at a granular level, which is where the work of the virtual headteacher comes in.

You could also use measures of children who are looked after at home or away from home, but children come into and out of that group. It is also not appropriate to look only at children who are on the register at a particular point, because we want to ensure that every learner who has that experience is being supported to overcome any difficulties.

11:00

Tracking outcomes is therefore fairly complex. It is important that local authorities look at their data in general, to see on what groups, and where, the

impact is biggest; however, that can change from year to year, depending on the data that is looked at.

If we take a look at a more granular level, we can see that a power of work is happening at the local authority level, supported by Education Scotland, that will allow those outcomes to be tracked. It is still early days, because we have had that fund for only a few years. However, I can see where it is going to make the difference.

Stephanie Callaghan: That is great. I have quite a short question on that, convener, if there is time. Will the £2 million funding for the RICs be ring fenced, to match up with the Scottish attainment challenge? Will you be able to do that, or is it going to be much more about a combination of funding?

Craig Clement: You are right that the RIC funding comes through the attainment funding. As you said, it is £2 million, and each RIC identifies how it will use its share to implement its strategic improvement plan. There is no intention to change that. We have been working with Scottish Government and local government colleagues to try to give a bit more certainty over that level of funding, because it is quite difficult to plan when funding is for only one year. It is the same issue as for schools. In an ideal world, a medium-term plan would be agreed for RIC funding, rather than the year-on-year funding that we have at the moment.

Patricia Watson: Every RIC is expected to have a focus on equity, but Education Scotland does not tell them how to make that focus clear in their plans. It comes through quite differently in different plans. The West Partnership, as Pamela Di Nardo said, has big, overarching principles around equity and excellence. The South-east Improvement Collaborative has in its plan a dedicated workstream about improving equity, to account for some of the diversity among the local authorities in that RIC. In the Northern Alliance, there is a very strong focus on equity, which runs right through all its workstreams, including its literacy workstream and its health and wellbeing workstream. In reviewing the plans, we absolutely expect to see how the RICs are addressing the issues around the attainment challenge.

Willie Rennie: There has rightly been a focus on closing the poverty-related attainment gap, but are we lifting everybody up right across the school population? What is the effect of the challenge?

Elizabeth Sommerville: The short answer is that we are doing that, and so we should. However, equally and at the same time, we should also be closing the poverty-related attainment gap. Our agenda is excellence and equity, not one or the other. It is important that we lift learners. I describe it as being like a motorway with two

lanes. We want to push all our learners on, but we want to have the outside lane—the fast lane—for our learners who are impacted by poverty.

Willie Rennie: Okay. My next question probably simplifies things too much, but what three things—that I could understand—have the biggest impact in the classroom to close the poverty-related attainment gap?

Elizabeth Sommerville: The first thing is the quality of teaching and learning. If a child does not have the most effective teacher, their outcomes will not be as good as those of others. Local authorities and schools focus on improving teaching and learning. However, there is also an equity slant. That is shown in some of the work that we have been doing nationally. We have been looking at what the evidence tells us about what makes the difference to equity around pedagogical approaches—for instance, the idea of metacognition. That is quite a scary word, but what we are talking about here is independent learners. Before they start, such learners will consider what approach they will take. During their work, they will look at whether the approach is working or whether they need to change it, and at the end they will evaluate their work and decide whether it went well. Those are the kinds of approach that we are working to develop with our class teachers. Again, that is all research based, because we want to make sure that we have a really good opportunity to make it work.

Another thing that is really working is leadership, not just at the headteacher and depute head level, but drilling right down into the classroom. We are empowering our teachers to be supported by the leadership team and to be the leaders in their classrooms. We are empowering them to look at their pupils, see where things are not working and consider what they can do differently, and to have the authority to make those decisions themselves. There is a professional learning agenda around that, as well as a cultural agenda, in that we have to ensure that they are able to do that.

The whole picture around teaching and learning is massive. Running parallel to that, to use the motorway analogy, we see the use of interventions and the opportunity for additional staffing, whether that involves staff, teachers or even the third sector. A lot of our CLD colleagues are delivering additional qualifications for children, which may not be accredited but are equally important for life skills. We see a whole range of opportunities to work with children and intervene in order to put them on a stronger pathway. There is lots of evidence from schools around the country and from the West Partnership on how effective that has been.

The other thing that I suggest is working really well is the use of data. We are seeing more of that

in the classroom, although it has taken time. There was an earlier question about it being a long-term endeavour, but we have put down really solid foundations in the past few years. Staff in our schools are now much better equipped to use data and we are seeing that being delivered in the classroom. The West Partnership RIC delivers a lovely programme called “Improving Our Classrooms”, within which there is an emphasis on data. As Patricia Watson said, it is about knowing your gap, knowing your children and knowing what you need to do.

Those are the three things that jump out for me, but surrounding that is the idea of families and communities. We cannot do it without them, so we need to support them and uplift them. Over my time as a teacher—I will not tell you how long that is—the job has changed. The job that I did at the beginning was very different from the job that our teachers are doing now. Teachers not only educate pupils but support families. We see that relational approach again, which involves taking our families with us through family learning approaches, engagement and even just family support, and enlisting the right type of support to enable them to flourish. All of that will make a difference for children in the classroom.

Graeme Dey: A group of principal teachers and headteachers that Bob Doris and I met in Glasgow said that there were fads in the first year but they were quickly identified as fads and ditched. They said that we are now in a space where we know what works in tackling the attainment gap. Is that your experience? Is the whole country in that space? Do we now know what needs to be done to tackle the attainment gap? If so, given that starting point and accepting that we may need to re-baseline following the pandemic, do you accept that we ought to see significant progress in the coming years?

Patricia Watson: Absolutely. That is the picture. In the early days, schools were given significant amounts of PEF. There was a lot of professional learning around how to use the money effectively, and the big message of the challenge was about needing to try new and different things. Closing the poverty-related attainment gap is a big, wicked issue for us in Scotland, so we encouraged schools to look at the evidence and research and take lessons from what has worked in the London and Manchester challenges. Of course, not everything that worked in those contexts will work perfectly here and what works in one school might not work perfectly for a child in a classroom in another school down the road.

In the beginning, there were underspends of PEF. There were big issues in recruitment, including the time that it took for people to get

additional support staff onboarded following recruitment because of the funding being provided by the financial year as opposed to the academic year. Those were challenges for schools in the first year or so of PEF. People tried different things; as Liz Sommerville phrased it, it was a case of adopt, adapt, abandon. That was important, and we encouraged it.

I know that the committee has seen our most recent PEF publication, “Pupil Equity Funding: Looking inwards, outwards, forwards”, in which we have gathered from across the country a wealth of strong examples of what is working well. It is not just about what happens with learning and teaching in the classroom; it is also about how decisions are made and support given by local authorities to encourage effective use of the money.

From the beginning, our mantra has been that we need to spend every penny. We should not have underspends; we should maximise the potential of the money, and we should be doing that from now on. We are certainly seeing a huge difference in that regard. Underspends are significantly reduced from where they were in the first couple of years, and the money is making a difference because people are learning from one another.

We started off with the challenge authorities and the schools programme, and we then brought in PEF in all 32 local authorities. Our job as a national agency has been about spreading learning right across the country; catching it and synthesising it through the hub and, more recently, through our publications; and being really clear about what works. That is not to say that there are things that we have not discovered yet that might work, so we are still encouraging innovation and creativity. In general, however, there is a universal understanding in the classroom of the things that Liz Sommerville talked about, and we want to ensure that every practitioner has a relentless focus on those things.

On the questions of how much and by when, I note that, if we achieve that, there should be stronger progress by the end of the current parliamentary session. That is our ambition and what we expect to see.

Bob Doris: The conversation this morning has been fascinating. I want to look at Education Scotland’s monitoring role. I will ask about some of the core aims of the attainment challenge and I might refer to some of the stretch aims, which I think are called core plus.

One of the core aims is about the proportion of 16 to 19-year-olds who are participating in education, employment or training. At last week’s meeting of the committee, I waxed lyrical about

the positive destinations that have been achieved in my constituency and across Glasgow, which are tremendous given the pandemic and what has happened in the past two years. However, that is a snapshot in time. If we consider a 16-year-old who leaves a school in my constituency, who is monitoring where they are at 17, 18 or 19? We have to be robust in what we measure and we have to ensure that progress is sustained. Does Education Scotland monitor that?

Craig Clement: Thank you for the question, Mr Doris. You are absolutely right. This must be on-going throughout a pupil’s journey, from the start of school all the way to post school. A lot of work is being done—not by me, but by colleagues in Education Scotland—on participation beyond positive destinations. As you say, there might be a positive destination in that snapshot in time, but what happens six months later and beyond that? There has to be a bit more work in that area—with colleagues in further and higher education and with employers—to ensure that positive destinations are on-going.

It is also about starting earlier. When pupils are coming through the system and going on to the senior phase and so on, we should consider the choices that they are making about the curriculum and ask whether we can make better use of foundation apprenticeships or alternative qualifications, for example. You heard about that from the directors of education at last week’s meeting. It does not always have to be about qualifications; we should also consider other achievements that would help the child, pupil or young person to move into employment or to FE or HE opportunities—for example, the Duke of Edinburgh’s award.

The point that you alluded to is right—we need to look at the wider picture, rather than just a snapshot. We need to look at the bigger scene in order to form a general understanding of the progress that pupils are making, rather than just considering one specific aspect.

11:15

Bob Doris: That is very helpful. I will bring in Pamela Di Nardo in a second, but I have a follow-up question that it would be great if you could also address. I know that Mr Clement has a strategic responsibility for performance. I want to know about the 16-year-old who goes into a structured volunteering activity as a positive destination. It is a positive destination if it creates another opportunity for the 17-year-old and another for the 18-year-old, where they can build on that again. It is a lifelong learning pursuit. We need to put in those building blocks.

I accept what Mr Clement said, but he did not say who is doing the monitoring. I have mentioned a longitudinal study in previous meetings, as has Ross Greer. Are we tracking a cohort of 100, 500 or 1,000 students over three, five or seven years? Who is doing that kind of work? If that is not being done, there is a great opportunity for Education Scotland and its successor organisation to do some of that work.

I do not know whether Pamela Di Nardo would like to comment, but those are my thoughts, based on the initial response.

Pamela Di Nardo: I am happy to comment. That is an excellent question and you are absolutely right. Craig Clement touched on that. If we think about the wee ones who come through our nurseries, if we do not address any gaps from the early years, it will have a knock-on effect on the long-scale progress that we would wish those children to make.

There are some fabulous examples of work to do that. We are working with the West Partnership on a piece of research across the regional improvement collaborative on how the 1,140 hours of childcare is making a difference. That looks at the early years aspect of education. Another example of collaborative improvement is the one that my colleague from East Renfrewshire spoke about at last week's meeting when you spoke with directors of education from the West Partnership. Collaborative improvement is an activity that is pooled and co-constructed with the local authority, and it pulls expertise from across the country from ADES, our regional teams and our organisation to focus on a wicked issue or a particular area that they want to explore.

Inverclyde has recently gone through that experience. It was looking at positive destinations and whether we are getting it right for all our young people post their exit from education. Where do they come back into communities as adults? That links into the cycle, because those children become adults, they could become parents, and they support the economy.

On the point about tracking and monitoring, that goes on in every school. Teachers are engaged in three-way conversations with headteachers about the progress of every child. If children are not making progress, teachers will look at any reasons for that, and we have referred to some of the interventions that can be addressed. That information is collected at a local level, and some local authorities do that at a cluster level and look at comparator schools. There is a really rich threading, if you like.

Bob Doris: That is helpful. You have the granular, child and family-centred, tailored approach that we need, and you have all the

wonderful anecdotal stories and the layer upon layer of great practice that is happening. However, we need to know reliably what is happening consistently across the country as a pattern, rather than as a snapshot, so that we can measure those activities. The danger is that that does not happen. Is Education Scotland going to bring a structure to look at that data, instead of citing individual bits of good practice—which can, I am sure, be multiplied by the 32 local authorities across the country? What work is Education Scotland doing now, and what does it intend to do, to monitor that in a meaningful way? I do not know whether Patricia Watson wants to comment.

Patricia Watson: On what we are doing now, our 16-plus team, which sits largely within the inspectorate in Education Scotland, works very closely with Skills Development Scotland and it has a significant amount of national data, a participation measure and year-on-year destinations for individuals. That pattern is looked at and aggregated across the country. Nationally, we have a significant amount of data with the participation measure and on post-school destinations. For example, we know from a report that was published recently that the gap is widening in the way that it is for young people in school. We know that, post-school, the participation gap is widening. We know, for example, that young people who live in the areas of highest deprivation are less likely to sustain a positive destination.

The other tool that is really important in tracking all of that is the national insight tool, which tracks the database for all senior phase attainment. That tool can be manipulated, so we can look at individual groups of learners and the situation at the end of secondary 4, 5 and 6 to see who stayed on at school, where the destinations are, and what the journey is. A wealth of data is available, which we use to track that. We share that with local authorities and get a dialogue with them on it.

One of the opportunities for the new organisation will be to refocus and to strengthen the focus on being a performance-led organisation. That is the challenge that Professor Muir gave us in his report. That will come forward, and we will build on that.

Bob Doris: We need to follow through a couple of things. The committee will eventually move towards report recommendations, and we want to do that by consensus. With the convener's indulgence, I ask witnesses every week about celebrating success in education, and I deliberately mention the positive things that are happening. However, for my credibility, I need to ensure that I also scrutinise the positive information.

Education Scotland and Skills Development Scotland might collect data, but that does not necessarily mean that they are consistently collecting the correct data in the correct way and in a way that fits in with your key monitoring role for the proportion of 16 to 19-year-olds who are participating in education, employment and training. I know that there will be a new organisation, but you have said that Education Scotland has another two years to perform. We are not going to wait for two years until we get more sophisticated in collecting data.

Perhaps you could reply to this in writing, because there are time constraints. I suspect that we would like to put something meaningful in our report about how we can ensure that we take the longitudinal approach that Ross Greer has talked about and that I am talking about now so that, when I celebrate success in the committee, which is important, I am confident that a 16-year-old in my constituency will be supported when they are 17, 18 and 19, and that there is success in learning for life. We are not sure about that as yet. Do you have any comment to make on that?

Finally—I will not come back in again, because of the time constraints—in each meeting, I have asked about a dashboard of robust and reliable indicators to depoliticise some of this. Sometimes the data will show good things for politicians in Government, and sometimes it will show not-so-good things. Do we have an agreed range of indicators with which we can have a balanced approach to scrutinising the progress that has been made? If so, will Education Scotland lead on providing that information? I do not mean a 40-page strategy document; I mean one page of the top 10 indicators that are tracked over time. Some indicators will be up, some will be down and some will be the same, but we could look at that accessible and transparent document in a quick and easy way.

Are there any thoughts on those two issues? I will not come back in.

Craig Clement: On your first point, I am happy to give the committee separately that information from colleagues with further education experience, in particular.

On your second point, a dashboard would be helpful. As you alluded, we have the core stretch aims, which will provide the core bit of information.

On your wider question, we could not agree the data collection approach alone. It would be much better agreed with all the partners because, as you are probably aware, there are many potential indicators. The local government benchmarking framework has an agreed set of indicators, some of which relate to education.

Patricia Watson alluded to the dashboard approach more generally in relation to the work that we are doing across the Northern Alliance and the south-east. Fantastic work on tracking and monitoring is on the go. A lot of it is on individual systems. It is not a coherent model in that everybody is using their own packages. Some are commercially bought, some of that work is done through the national SEEMiS system, some is on the Insight system and, in other cases, the school has developed its own package.

To track and monitor comprehensively, we should do it from the classroom up. It should commence in the classroom and, eventually, go to the national level. It must be built up rather than done from the top down.

Bob Doris: If schools and councils do not track and monitor in the same way, we cannot compare anything.

The Convener: I did not say that you could come back in.

Bob Doris: I know, but it is my birthday.

The Convener: I know that it is your birthday, but come on.

Bob Doris: Convener, I am sure that someone else will want to get an assurance that we have to track and monitor consistently across each school and local authority, or we will have a mountain of anecdotal information and nothing that we can compare substantially and robustly.

The Convener: That point is well made and will require some further response from Education Scotland. I think that it was suggested that that should be in writing. I see from the nodding heads that that is what we will get.

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): I regularly get feedback from teachers that Education Scotland still feels too remote from what is happening in the classroom, that it can be urban and central belt-centric in its thinking, that the needs of smaller, rural schools, in particular, can be missed and that, although a lot of the advice and guidance that the agency gives is fine—they are not challenging its content—it can be quite generic. Does Education Scotland take that feedback on board?

Patricia Watson: It is important to remember that Education Scotland is staffed largely by teachers. We recruit from teachers and the education profession across all the sectors, whether FE, early learning, childcare or CLD. Our organisation is staffed by educators. We turn over that staff as regularly as any other organisation, so we bring fresh blood into it regularly. We are therefore very much connected to the teaching profession and what is happening in education.

We also have strong relationships with schools and local authorities.

However, we take on board that feedback really strongly. Over the past year, we have been focused on a piece of work on our transformation programme, a big part of which has been about moving how we develop as an organisation towards a service user design approach. We are taking on board the Scottish service user design approach and building on it.

We do a lot of work directly with class teachers, school leaders and educators in different sectors. During the pandemic, we had a programme that we called wee blethers and big blethers. Hundreds of practitioners from across the country joined with Education Scotland to talk to us about their experiences during the pandemic. We then considered how we could listen, take account of those experiences and build our support and resources to support their needs.

They were the ones who were living and breathing educational continuity in their schools. We would have been foolish not to take account of that, and, indeed, we did. We listen, we take what we hear seriously and we adapt our approaches regularly as a result of that.

11:30

Oliver Mundell: I want to ask about two specific examples, the first of which concerns regional improvement collaboratives. I hear that, even in quite large areas, many small rural schools feel that they are pushed out of decision making when it comes to setting priorities and the agenda of the collaborative. Staff in those schools find it hard to participate because no one is available to cover their absence while they are taking part, and they feel that their interests are not heard. It is not that they think that the priorities are wrong; it is just that the priorities inevitably tend to gravitate towards what larger schools in urban centres are saying. They would say that they have more commonality with similar schools in other areas but, because of how the collaboratives are set up, there is not always the chance for the national issues that affect small and rural schools across Scotland, who form a community of interest, to be aired in the regional collaboratives. Do you recognise that?

Patricia Watson: The larger regional improvement partnerships—the West Partnership and the Northern Alliance—are each made up of eight local authorities, but they operate in different contexts and face different challenges. In the Northern Alliance, we have a regional improvement team that is working closely with the Northern Alliance regional improvement collaborative team as well as the local authorities

in the north. That comes back to the work that Craig Clement was talking about earlier. Education Scotland cannot take a one-size-fits-all approach; we must work with our partners and take account of their local contexts. If you look at the work of our northern team, which works with the Northern Alliance, you will see that there is a strong focus on rural poverty and, in relation to the attainment challenge, on addressing some of the poverty of experience. We work with CLD and third sector partners both areas to do that.

Oliver Mundell: Would you accept that that is not consistent across the country? That is an example of something that is working well in one of the collaborative areas, but it is not necessarily replicated across the country. Earlier, someone mentioned the fact that the various collaboratives set out the opportunities and their slant on equity in different ways, and there is certainly a feeling in the local authority area that my constituency is in that the interests of smaller rural schools is not always reflected in how the priorities are set out. You can imagine the frustration of the teacher in a school whose pupils are experiencing rural poverty when the circumstances of smaller schools are not reflected in the decisions that are taken.

Patricia Watson: I absolutely agree. If you are a teacher in a school and you feel that your voice and your circumstances are not being taken account of, that will be really frustrating.

I was trying to articulate that what you are describing is not the way in which the collaboratives intend to work. I would say to a teacher in such a position that they should talk to their local authority and raise that issue through the challenges to see—

Oliver Mundell: However, the issue is compounded by the fact that those schools often have a small staff facing a number of competing priorities, which means that they do not have the same space that teachers in a larger school might have to take part in that reflective work. I have a big worry about that. Sometimes, people in single-teacher schools are under more pressure and do not have that kind of professional freedom or space. I know that all teachers are pushed for time and are under pressure, but I think that it is a particular challenge in those schools.

Patricia Watson: The challenges are different depending on the school that you are in. Last week, you spoke to Gerry Lyons. If you are in his school, or in one in the centre of Glasgow, you will face different challenges from those that are faced by teachers in a small rural primary school, whether it is in Ayrshire, in the Scottish Borders or in Highland. It is important that we acknowledge that, and Education Scotland absolutely takes account of that. We ensure that our staff are skilled and understand the different challenges.

That is not to say that we get everything right all the time and that everything has the impact that we want it to have all the time, but the intention is to support all practitioners in all different contexts. That is absolutely our aspiration, and, if we are not getting that right, we need to know more about that and how to address the needs of a particular school.

Oliver Mundell: Staff in smaller schools have a barrier to participation, because they do not have the time and space to participate in initiatives beyond school level. They struggle to find cover to keep a school going, which would allow them to participate.

Craig Clement: First, I acknowledge and understand the difficulties that exist in small schools, including small rural schools. Schools in the local authority that I worked for were in that situation.

I will make a couple of points. In a lot of ways, the establishment of regional working and the RICs has helped. One RIC recently held an activity to develop its plan that involved all schools in a way that would not have happened previously. That involved not just headteachers but a range of staff. I suppose that a positive from the pandemic is that we have moved much more to an online approach, which overcomes the difficulty for rural schools. I was well aware that the traditional way to have such discussions—in a meeting at a central point, which might require somebody to travel for an hour there and an hour back—was not practical. The online bit is important.

Another aspect for small schools is working in the locale—through four or five schools coming together to work on priorities and share opportunities for people to go to events. That is the approach in most cases, but, as has been suggested, a school could also work with a partner school that is elsewhere in the council area in order to work differently.

Participation is a challenge for a headteacher if there are no other promoted posts in their school, so other mechanisms must be in place to overcome the barrier. It is important for such heads to feel included, because they are a vital part of the decision-making process.

Oliver Mundell: That leads to the second issue that I will raise briefly, which is that a lot of headteachers in smaller schools feel excluded from PEF, either because they are in the 3 per cent of schools that get no PEF at all or because they receive such a small amount of PEF that it is difficult to do something meaningful with the money. Do you reflect on that? Is there a policy challenge for schools that get no PEF? Such headteachers are not empowered in the same way to do things differently in their schools. That is

another problem that attaches itself particularly to smaller rural schools.

Pamela Di Nardo: If it is okay, I will respond to that point, as I have been a headteacher in a rural school and an urban school. You gave examples of the complexities for rural schools, so I wanted to touch on the online learning facility. One form of support that we provide is any-time learning. Having been a headteacher in such a context, I know that one issue is using national supports to give staff opportunities.

Oliver Mundell: I come back to the generic point that people feel not that those resources are bad but that they are not school specific and that they are not of the same quality as those that other people enjoy through face-to-face and other opportunities.

Pamela Di Nardo: That leads me to the second part of my response—I am glad that you made that further point. As a headteacher, my job is to support the self-evaluation process at the local level, which feeds into the national level to say, “This is what I need. This is the context of my school.” Self-evaluation is driven back into improvement planning, so we ensure that that is bespoke to the needs of all our school leaders and teachers in supporting the needs of the children in their communities.

Patricia Watson: You made a point about the policy challenge around PEF and the fact that 3 per cent of schools receive no PEF. That was part of the evidence that we looked at in designing the new approach to the challenge and the new strategic equity fund, which goes to all 32 local authorities. They will be a way of helping to ensure that local authorities in those areas, which can be the most rural areas, can identify and work with their schools by using that funding to begin to look at some of the practices that they might need to take forward in relation to rural poverty and hidden poverty that the original framework for the challenge perhaps did not address in such an overt way.

Oliver Mundell: There are more things that I would like push on, but, in the interests of time, I will accept that.

Michael Marra: Thanks for your evidence. I realise that time is ticking on, so I will try to be short and punchy—if you can be, too, that would be great. I appreciate the endurance that you have shown over the past couple of hours.

You have confirmed that you have been involved in the redesign of the Scottish attainment challenge work. My question is for Patricia Watson and Craig Clement. As strategic directors, did you raise concerns about the significant cuts to the existing challenge authorities and what that would mean?

Patricia Watson: The refresh of the challenge is the result of looking at all the evidence that we have had over the past six years of the challenge. All that evidence points very clearly to a need to accelerate progress. The OECD report also asked us to look at more universal support and hidden poverty, and to take account of the pandemic, to make sure that we were really recognising that poverty exists everywhere in Scotland.

We are looking at a redistribution of the funding, not a cut to it. We should remember that the overall attainment Scotland fund has actually increased, from £750 million to £1 billion. That was the cabinet secretary's decision. It is not a cut to funding; it is a redistribution, and it is a different model.

Michael Marra: The funding has not increased on an annual basis; the increase is just because we have more years of the same money. Actually, the amount of money per year has decreased this year from last year. Even when we take into account the 15 per cent uplift, there is a decrease. It is a small cut, but it is a consistent piece.

My question related to the attainment challenge authorities. Dundee is facing a 79 per cent cut—that is a cut. A hundred posts are at threat. In North Ayrshire, 60 posts are at threat; a colleague raised that, as well. Did you not raise concerns about the impact in those authorities?

Patricia Watson: As you know, we have worked with those local authorities for a number of years. The inspections of the nine challenge authorities included colleagues from Audit Scotland, who worked with Education Scotland at that time. There is a shift in the rationale and a new mission for the challenge—that is what is really important for us all to consider. It is about a new mission of improving outcomes for all learners who are living in poverty in Scotland.

Michael Marra: To be fair, what is really concerning to me, as a Dundonian—although what has happened has affected many authorities on a national level, as well—is that there has been a 79 per cent cut in the money. That will cut 100 posts of people who work with the neediest kids in my community. That is what I am concerned about. Did you not raise concerns about that?

I understand the rationale in relation to hidden poverty, and I think that we all accept that something had to be done. However, there is an extraordinary challenge for the local authorities that will lose funding, and other evidence shows that. Were no concerns at all raised by Education Scotland about the impact on those local authorities and the children who live in those areas?

Elizabeth Sommerville: Do you mind if I come in?

Michael Marra: I would like to pursue this, but I will certainly come to you, if that is okay. I am asking specifically whether concerns were raised on that point. Did you raise concerns?

Craig Clement: When we are looking at funding distribution, it is always a difficult issue—

Michael Marra: I am sorry, but it is a bit of a yes or no question. Did you raise concerns about the impact? We have heard a lot about the great work that you have done with headteachers and other people. Did you or did you not raise concerns?

Craig Clement: We were looking at the bigger picture, so I think that “concerns” is the wrong word. We were trying to look at the most equitable and reasonable way of distributing the funding, and that was the approach that we came up with. We came up with it collectively. It was not a matter of Education Scotland saying that that was the way of funding. There was consultation throughout the process to come to the best way to distribute the available resources.

11:45

Michael Marra: But it is not the best way for those kids. I know that it is not your decision alone—it sits on the desks of the cabinet secretary and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, and conversations happen there, too—and I am not saying that you guys are to blame, but I would have thought that, given the work that you have done over the years, you would have recognised all this. However, what I am hearing is: no, you did not raise any concerns.

Patricia Watson: Our advice as the education agency working jointly with the Scottish Government to deliver on the attainment challenge was, as I have said, based on the evidence that we had from the first five years, international evidence and the feedback from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and Audit Scotland. It also took into account the impact of the pandemic. That is how we presented our advice on how to refresh the challenge.

We were also involved with the Scottish Government in a range of stakeholder consultations, including with the directors of education in the nine challenge authorities, to find out what progress they had made, what had been learned, and so on. Last week, Ruth Binks said that she would have liked to have had more money. That is not a decision for Education Scotland, but the local authorities understood that the fund was a fund at a certain point in time that was for innovating, trying out new things, learning and really looking at the issue.

Michael Marra: On Monday night, a headteacher told us that she was “raging”, and

trade union representatives have said that what has happened is immoral and that they have no idea how those local authorities will cope.

I see that Liz Sommerville is keen to come in.

Elizabeth Sommerville: I am quite happy to do so.

Patricia Watson mentioned Ruth Binks from Inverclyde, who made it very clear that this was always about having a sustainable strategy. The Scottish attainment challenge money is for finding out what works and putting that in place.

To go back to my motorway analogy, I think that we need a motorway of sustainability and intervention that brings us to a place where we have a solid and embedded approach. Local authorities that received challenge authority funding were also encouraged to look at a sustainability strategy that might involve exiting certain aspects, maintaining them in a different way, or a transfer of responsibilities. For example, one local authority used challenge authority funding to employ an educational psychologist on a temporary basis. However, over the past wee while, that educational psychologist role has been subsumed into the service and is now part of what is being delivered. It was all about upskilling staff and changing the culture, as a result of which the psychologist post was no longer needed. As it happened, the authority was unable to fill the post anyway, so no one lost their job, but the role has now been embedded in the service.

There are also some services that local authorities will not want to do without, such as some of the third sector work that is going on—

Michael Marra: So, do you expect them to pay for some of those services with PEF money, given the reduction—

Elizabeth Sommerville: No. What I am saying is—

Michael Marra: Would that even be allowed?

Elizabeth Sommerville: Some authorities are actually prioritising this work and saying that it needs to come through other funding. We have very strong evidence of how effectively the third sector work is working. As you will know, given that you have heard from them, third sector workers and managers are very skilled at getting alternative funding. We are seeing a bit of that coming through as well as a bit of match funding to support the reduction in the new strategic equity fund money, which was previously the attainment challenge money.

We are also seeing responsibility for some of those pieces of work being transferred. For instance, there has been a piece of speech and language therapy work on the vocabulary gap in

early years establishments, and a whole lot of funding has been put in place to bring on board some additionality with, for example, people who might have been part time going full time for a year or two in order to upskill the practitioners in nursery and early years provision. They have decided to make that part of their core business, because they see the benefits: they are not seeing as many children coming through who need that specialised support because they have put that early intervention in place.

In some ways, we are seeing that sustainable strategy coming through and producing results. That was happening even before the cuts were announced, because people were beginning to see that that approach was embedded, and that was where they wanted to end up.

Michael Marra: Those are really useful examples. We have heard evidence from Dundee City Council that it does not know how it will cope with the cuts and that that will be extremely challenging.

This will be my last attempt in this area, convener. If Education Scotland did not raise concerns, were concerns raised by anybody else in the discussions that you mentioned?

Patricia Watson: Not particularly.

Michael Marra: Okay.

The Convener: Wow. That is an interesting answer.

Graeme Dey: I want to take us back to Oliver Mundell's line of questioning. I apologise if I missed something, but surely there is an active role for Education Scotland in addressing that issue, given that you have a Scotland-wide remit and involvement in every collaborative. You talked about good practice in the Northern Alliance around rural and remote rural schools. Is there not a role for you guys to say to the other RICs, "Look, you have rural schools that would benefit from the amassed corporate knowledge that we have in Scotland, and we want to make sure that you are taking the needs of your rural schools into account."?

I heard the words "intention" and "aspiration", but I am more interested in practical application. If you are not already doing that, it would not require Government direction or a policy change. It strikes me that it is self-evident that that should be happening, if it is not happening already.

Craig Clement: I apologise if I did not make that clear earlier. I was acknowledging that there may be some schools and some individuals who feel that way. The RICs work within their own areas, learn from each other, and share good practice. They have their own plan and so on, but we are increasingly seeing that work happening

across the RICs. Earlier, I gave the example of two RICs that are working together on data.

On the rural question, we have shared good practice with all the RIC leads. We have meetings with the RIC leads individually and collectively. In those discussions, they have the opportunity to put things on the agenda, as do we. Much of the discussion is about how we learn from each other. We had set up a conference to focus on that very thing but, unfortunately, because of Covid, we did it online.

Graeme Dey: With respect, that still seems a bit vague. That is a self-evident thing to be doing in a proactive way. If there is a risk that some schools have fallen through the cracks and that is avoidable, we should avoid it.

Pamela Di Nardo: It is a good question, but I would argue that that is taking place. Forgive me for repeating this example, but attainment advisers and our teams are working to support schools on self-evaluation, which is then linked into the local authority improvement agenda. That is then captured through the regional improvement collaborative, which has multiple priorities across the local authorities that it serves, and that is then put on the RIC plan.

As I said in response to Oliver Mundell, a headteacher should use those channels. It is meant to be a networked learning system, in which we are a listening organisation. How can we use those channels to seek those views in order to identify improvement priorities, seek out great practice, and share it? That interauthority work, as well as cross-RIC work, is taking place.

We also have structural mechanisms. As I said, there are six SRAs who create that space, there are senior partnership officers in the RICs, and there are the RIC leads. Those conversations are happening as part of that networking space. That is absolutely possible.

Until now, it has predominantly been about recovery from the pandemic, and the network has been quite reactive. However, there is now an excellent opportunity for us to become more proactive in that space.

The Convener: I have two very quick questions. You have a quarterly progress meeting with the Scottish Government on the topics that we have been discussing. Where would one go to find the inputs and outputs of those meetings?

Patricia Watson: Those meetings are only just emerging as the refresh starts. We have had discussions with the cabinet secretary.

The Convener: Have you not had a meeting yet?

Patricia Watson: We have had one meeting, but it was more about discussing the process that we will undertake as we develop the stretch aims.

The Convener: So, those quarterly meetings have not happened yet, but there has been one pre-meeting, as it were. Where would we go to get the inputs and outputs when those meetings happen?

Patricia Watson: The Scottish Government.

The Convener: In the spirit of the fact that we now have more admirals than ships in the Royal Navy, there is a question that I have been dying to ask from the beginning of the meeting. You are both called strategic director. Why are there two of you?

Patricia Watson: We have different responsibilities.

The Convener: So, there is a bit behind your title that was not included in our information. That was confusing. What is your full title, Patricia?

Patricia Watson: We are both strategic directors for regional improvement, but my lead role is on the Scottish attainment challenge and Craig Clement's lead role is on local authority performance.

The Convener: Performance? Sorry—I did not quite catch that.

Craig Clement: Local authority performance, the whole transformation and so on.

Patricia Watson: There are actually six strategic directors in Education Scotland, all of whom have different remits.

The Convener: Six! Perhaps I should have asked about that at the outset.

I thank Craig Clement, Pamela Di Nardo, Liz Sommerville and Patricia Watson from Education Scotland for joining us this morning.

That brings the public part of our meeting to an end. I hope that those watching enjoy the rest of their day.

11:56

Meeting continued in private until 12:36.

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