



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Education, Children and Young People Committee

Wednesday 21 June 2023

Session 6



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Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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EDUCATION, CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE COMMITTEE

20th Meeting 2023, Session 6

CONVENER

*Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)

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

*Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab)

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green)

Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con)

*Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)

*Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP)

*Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Graeme Dey (Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans)

Jess Dolan (Scottish Government)

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con) (Committee Substitute)

Susan Pryde (Scottish Government)

Shazia Razzaq (Scottish Government)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Pauline McIntyre

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Education, Children and Young People Committee

Wednesday 21 June 2023

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:30]

Scottish Education Exchange Programme and Further and Higher Education Issues

The Convener (Sue Webber): Good morning, and welcome to the 20th meeting in 2023 of the Education, Children and Young People Committee. I have received apologies from Ross Greer and Stephen Kerr. I welcome Meghan Gallacher, who is joining us as a substitute member of the committee. Good morning, Meghan.

The first item on our agenda is an evidence session on the Scottish education exchange programme and further and higher education issues. I welcome the Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans, Graeme Dey. Alongside him are Scottish Government officials. Susan Pryde is team lead, HE International; Shazia Razzaq is strategic lead, university policy, governance and equalities; Jess Dolan is head of colleges and economic impact; and Jane Duffy is unit head, lifetime skills and apprenticeships. I thank all of you for joining us today.

I invite the minister to open with a five-minute statement.

The Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans (Graeme Dey): Good morning, convener. Thank you for inviting me to come before the committee to discuss plans for an education exchange programme as a replacement for Erasmus+. I appreciate your understanding the other week when I had to be in Liverpool on Government business.

I am aware that members will want to expand their questioning into other areas of my portfolio, including university funding and college governance. I have a team of officials with me to assist in providing the answers that members will be looking for. Before we get into those items, I want to make some initial points about our commitment to develop an exchange programme.

Scotland is an open and inclusive country, and we welcome and benefit from students who come to study in many of our first-class further and

higher education institutions. Equally, learners who reside in Scotland benefit from international study exchanges in many ways.

In 2021-22, we welcomed the record number of 82,000 international students to a range of programmes, including scholarships. I am grateful for the work of our colleges' and universities' international offices in continuing to ensure Scotland's global presence and reputation as a place in which to learn, study, develop and work.

Erasmus has been an integral part of our international exchange offer for many years. The last round of Erasmus+ funding, which was between 2014 and 2020, awarded over €141 million to in excess of 1,000 Scottish projects. That enabled more than 2,200 university students and 200 higher education staff from Scotland to participate in Erasmus+ annually. Proportionately more students from Scotland took part in Erasmus compared with students in any other country in the United Kingdom, and more students came to Scotland than came to any other part of the UK. That is a testament to our institutions.

As the committee is all too aware, the UK Government's decision not to associate with Erasmus+ after leaving the European Union prevents Scotland from participating fully in its own right. In May, YouthLink Scotland shared with the committee evidence of the positive impact that the Erasmus+ programme had on the lives of our young people and professionals who supported them. As YouthLink Scotland revealed, research has shown that young people who engage with our youth work sector gain the most from those experiences and that they are transformative and life changing for them. The programmes remove barriers and provide opportunities for more positive future paths for our young people.

I say again that it is with deep frustration that I acknowledge the negative impact on the young people of Scotland of the UK Government's decision to withdraw from Erasmus+. I am sure that the committee will agree with me on that.

In 2021, the UK Government launched the Turing scheme as a replacement for Erasmus+, and I am pleased that Scottish institutions have secured £17.6 million in the first two years of Turing. Unfortunately, though, Turing does not match the breadth and scope of Erasmus+, as it offers no provision for students to come to the UK or for staff exchanges. The Scottish Government will continue to engage with the UK Government to try to make Turing better reflect Scotland's needs.

Although we remain committed to the Erasmus+ programme and to working with the UK Government to address the shortfalls in the Turing scheme, the Scottish Government pledged to create a Scottish education exchange programme,

which would support people from across our education system.

My officials have been engaging with universities and other partners from across the education system to identify opportunities for collaboration on a Scottish programme that will seek not only to address shortfalls in the Turing scheme but to promote Scotland as an outward-looking and internationally connected country and as a positive destination for work and study.

I am keen—not least in view of the immensely challenging financial climate—that we get the best return for the students and staff involved from the investment that we make. With that in mind, during a meeting with Universities Scotland yesterday, I undertook to engage directly with that sector. I will also be looking for input from other sectors to shape the final proposals.

We recognise the key role that exchange programmes play in supporting our priorities. With that in mind, I commit to updating the committee on the timetable for delivery of the commitment following on from that engagement.

I thank the committee for the opportunity to come before it to share that and to answer any questions that members may have.

The Convener: Thank you, minister. That opening statement was on time as well, which I appreciate.

I move to questions from members. First up is Willie Rennie.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): Thanks for that opening statement, minister. Why are we way behind Wales on this? Why does Wales have its scheme up and running while we are still discussing ours?

Graeme Dey: I cannot speak for what Wales is doing. I hope that Mr Rennie will also appreciate that I have been in post for only 12 weeks. What I would say about where we are and what we need to do is that we need to look at a number of things to get this right.

For example, I would like to assess the allocations for Turing that were made to Scottish institutions in 2022-23 to help determine what the gaps are. It is about asking what gets awarded funding, what does not, and why. That will help us to understand what we would need to look to plug. As the committee knows, there is no inward mobility element to Turing and no inward or outward mobility for staff. Of course, there is also no youth element. We know that, but we need to understand the basis on which Turing awards. We will see shortly what the awards will be for 2023-24, which will also inform our thinking. We are waiting to see that.

On where we are currently, we are actively engaged on the issue. In the next short while, I would anticipate us launching a pilot project in conjunction with the sectors that I have mentioned and taking it from there. That is my intention at the moment.

Willie Rennie: Will you give us a bit more detail about when the pilot project will start?

Graeme Dey: As we have just started those conversations with Universities Scotland, you will appreciate that I cannot do that. However, I anticipate it being in this financial year.

Willie Rennie: You are new in post, but there has been a higher and further education minister before, and it has taken a long time just to get to this stage.

I have been given numerous excuses by various ministers over time, including one about the free movement of people. I have tried to establish whether that is a real problem, and I cannot find any evidence that there is an issue in relation to free movement of people. Have you managed to find anything?

Graeme Dey: There has been extensive engagement on that. We believe that the scheme would be covered by a six-month study visa, which would take account of a term. We believe that it will be okay, but we await final confirmation on that.

Willie Rennie: Will you fund the scheme, or are you expecting further and higher education institutions to pay for it?

Graeme Dey: We will take forward the pilot project at the moment, in conjunction with those institutions. I recognise the financial challenges that they face, just as I recognise the challenges that the Government faces.

Willie Rennie: Okay. You did not quite say that you will pay for it. This is a Scottish National Party manifesto commitment; I would have thought that it would be funded from central funds.

Graeme Dey: I would anticipate that the Government will be at the forefront of funding this.

Willie Rennie: At the forefront. Okay.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): Thank you for your opening statement, minister, and for joining us this morning. It is appreciated.

I am still really struggling to understand why we are in a situation where 6,000 students in Wales have participated in an exchange programme across 95 countries but the Scottish Government is only piloting a project, which might not even start until the end of this financial year.

Graeme Dey: As Ms Duncan-Glancy is well aware, one of the significant challenges for the Government, currently and previously, has been budget. We have faced enormous budget challenges. That has been a factor in—as Mr Rennie would put it—holding up the development of the programme. There is no doubt about that, but that does not mean that we will not fulfil the commitment.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I presume that the Welsh Government made different budgetary choices. Why did the Scottish Government not choose to fund its manifesto commitment on the issue?

Graeme Dey: With respect, Ms Duncan-Glancy, one of the joys of being an Opposition member in the Parliament is that you and other Opposition members can call for funding for all sorts without actually having to determine where it comes from. You talk about funding choices, but I have not heard Opposition members criticising a number of the funding commitments that this Government has made.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: With respect, it is not for the Opposition to tell the Government how to fund its own manifesto.

Graeme Dey: No, but I would contend, with respect, that it is for Opposition members to show a sense of responsibility around what they call for.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: But the Opposition in this situation is calling for exactly the same thing as the Government. I feel like we could go round in circles on that particular question.

The Convener: I was going to ask you to move on.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I will move on.

In relation to the conversation that you had with Universities Scotland and the pilot project, you said that you are looking to find the gaps in Turing and to look particularly at youth work. Last week, we heard extensive evidence on the gaps in Turing and the value of youth work. Do you not have enough information to simply start?

Graeme Dey: Let me be clear: I did not share the specifics of a pilot project with Universities Scotland yesterday. We committed to have a meeting next week—the committee is the first to hear about that.

We absolutely have a lot of information on the youth aspect. However, I want to fully understand the gaps in Turing in their entirety. If we were to design a scheme and unintended consequences or shortcomings were found further down the line, I am sure that members of Parliament and this committee would rightly hold the Government to account. I want to be sure that what we are doing meets the needs, in so far as that is achievable, of

the young people, staff and support workers who will be caught up in this.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: According to what YouthLink Scotland and others said last week, conversations on the issue ceased in the middle of last year. If the Government is really intent on finding out what the issues are, I am afraid that I cannot understand what is taking it this length of time. Is the Government simply waiting and saying, “We want full Erasmus+ after independence,” or are you genuinely going to try to do something?

Graeme Dey: We have already said that, and I have already told you what we are going to do.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Is the Scottish Government genuinely engaged?

Graeme Dey: We have already been clear that we would fully align with Erasmus post-independence. I am saying that we have a plan to arrange a pilot project this year and to get it up and running, and that is what we are going to do.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: That is a pilot, not a replacement.

Graeme Dey: There will be a pilot to inform the development of the replacement.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: That is two and a half years after the commitment was made.

The Convener: Bob Doris has a supplementary question on this thread.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): I have a supplementary question on the pilot specifically. I will come back in later on the budget.

Minister, you mentioned that you had spoken to universities recently—yesterday—about the issue. Of course, there are three moving parts to it: universities, colleges and the youth sector. We are talking about a pilot and the Government has commitments to widening access and targeting resources at those most in need and least likely to get overseas and foreign travel.

You have spoken to universities, but can we anticipate that it will not necessarily be university led and that it could be college led or youth sector led, and that it could be targeted at those least likely to be mobile and to travel in Europe in the first place? Will the pilot be targeted at those most in need, minister?

Graeme Dey: It will certainly take account of those most in need. To be clear, the conversation with universities happened yesterday because we were meeting. I am meeting Colleges Scotland next week. I met the youth sector quite recently, and we will follow up on that.

Bob Doris: On that, will you take account of the fact that those who do not go to college or university are the least likely to undertake overseas travel? Those who go to university are the most likely, and those in colleges are somewhere in the middle. Will that be taken into account in any pilot?

Graeme Dey: I am acutely aware of the evidence that the committee took. I was quite taken by the line of questioning on that, which I think was from Pam Duncan-Glancy. We are not looking to have a project that excludes people. We are trying to capture everyone who ought to be captured.

The Convener: Thank you for those responses. We move to questions from Ruth Maguire.

09:45

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): I echo colleagues' sentiments in that, in times when resources are stretched, it would feel inappropriate if those who were furthest away from getting opportunities missed out. It is good to hear that the minister will engage with the youth work and college sectors.

Youth work is an obvious gap in the current Turing scheme. You mentioned that you will engage with the UK Government. What scope do you see for improvement or changes to Turing that Scottish young people could take advantage of?

Graeme Dey: I think that we can all see the scope that there would be for improvement.

I will bring in my officials to answer that in detail, because they have been involved.

Susan Pryde (Scottish Government): I will answer a bit of that. We are aware that Turing scheme funding is, ultimately, focused at the disadvantaged levels. It expects at least about 50 per cent of the funding that it provides to go to those areas.

Some projects that are focused not only on higher and further education have exchanges that are related to youth work—not specifically the youth sector in the way that we have spoken about it, but in terms of schools, associations and clubs. Successful projects have been awarded money through Turing.

Ruth Maguire: What level of engagement is the Scottish Government having with the UK Government about the Turing scheme?

Susan Pryde: We meet about monthly in relation to Turing. That includes all parts of the UK and not only Scotland as a devolved Administration.

The provider, Capita, has also recently introduced a couple of groups to get feedback. It has one for universities and one for colleges. I think that it has one for schools as well, but I am not totally versed in that. Universities Scotland and Colleges Scotland are represented on those groups, so they are providing direct input on any concerns and problems that are arising in relation to the Turing funding and how it could be improved. We are making sure that that is directly fed into the planning for future Turing rounds.

Ruth Maguire: Thank you. That is helpful.

Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): We heard a lot of really positive stuff about Taith in our evidence. Youth work representatives said that it hits all their key asks. Are you looking at it as a possible blueprint, or what do you see as the key lessons from it?

Graeme Dey: I will pass that question to Susan, as she has been leading on that.

Susan Pryde: We engaged a lot with our Taith colleagues as they were setting up the programme. We meet Welsh Government officials monthly and we have been keeping up with their allocations, how they have been doing that, and how their application and assessment procedures have been working. We are absolutely looking at Taith.

We are also learning lessons from the Turing scheme. We are looking at its application assessment procedures and what would work appropriately for Scotland.

Stephanie Callaghan: I have a quick follow-up question. To what extent is that influencing the pilot work that you are looking at just now?

Susan Pryde: I think that, ultimately, it will influence that. However, the first step for any pilot is to have a good discussion with the stakeholders and lay out some of the thinking and plans with them. Obviously, they will not have experienced Taith, but they have experienced Turing and we know that they have views on what works well in that process and what does not work so well.

We will bring all of that in when we start discussions on the pilot with stakeholders. We will discuss what will work best for Scotland, key principles around how we tackle disadvantage, key Scottish Government priority areas, how the exchanges happen and what areas they happen in.

Stephanie Callaghan: At this point, are you able to say any more about who you intend to engage with on youth work, and how?

Susan Pryde: We have had regular meetings, although, as we mentioned, some of them have been paused. We were having monthly meetings

with YouthLink Scotland until February. We have a strong working relationship with the organisation, so I do not see any problem with involving it in discussing a pilot programme.

Stephanie Callaghan: The focus will remain with YouthLink Scotland.

Susan Pryde: Yes.

The Convener: Meghan Gallacher has a question.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): I want to pick up on the youth work aspect. When Liz Green attended a previous meeting of the committee, at which I was present, she said that progress had stalled around last summer or autumn and that regular meetings with the Government had stopped around January or February. I appreciate that you are newly in your post, minister, but do you know why those meetings stopped? If you are looking to have a youth element, which I believe is important, should you not be having regular meetings with stakeholders?

Graeme Dey: Yes, but I think that much of the groundwork had already been done on determining what stakeholders were looking for and what they felt was required.

To be absolutely clear, perhaps one of the most significant reasons for work not progressing at the pace that all of us would have wanted it to be, which has been an issue. All committee members will be aware of the significant budgetary challenges that the Government faces in the education portfolio. Those have been a factor in the pace at which work has progressed.

Meghan Gallacher: I have a quick supplementary question. I take your point on that, minister, but it comes down to choices—all Governments have to make choices. Given the budgetary concerns that you have just voiced, I would have expected that the student exchange programme would have been brought to the Scottish Government Cabinet, to be discussed at a higher level. My understanding is that the issue has not been brought to Cabinet, but please correct me if I am wrong on that.

There does not seem to be a consistent thread of reporting on the programme. Why is that the case? Why have progress reports not been provided? An important element of the programme's implementation is to ensure that people are updated on the progress that the Government is making.

Graeme Dey: I am not aware of what has or has not been discussed at Cabinet, or what updates have been provided. You will recognise that I have been in post for only 12 weeks.

What I can say is that a commitment has been made in the programme for government. There was no timeline on that, but the commitment was made and we intend to keep it. I have been as open as I can be with the committee about where we are and how we will try to progress the issue in the short term.

Meghan Gallacher: I have a final question. With the pilot being launched this year, will the Government be able to have the programme fully implemented by the initial date of September 2025?

Graeme Dey: I am not aware that a firm timeline has been put in place. There was a commitment in the programme for government. I said that we would like to get the pilot up and running this financial year. I want to see it up and running quite quickly, but we also want to get it right. I hope that it can inform some reasonably rapid progression from that point on. If I recall rightly, we said that it would be done within this parliamentary session. We would all like to have it done as early in the session as possible, and we are trying to put some momentum into that just now.

The Convener: Bob Doris wants to come in on that thread.

Bob Doris: My question is on budgetary concerns if that is okay, convener.

The Convener: Yes. Then we will move to a question from our deputy convener.

Bob Doris: Minister, it is reasonable to assert that the financial position of the Scottish Government has been dramatically eroded since the manifesto commitments were made, due to inflation, cost pressures in education and UK Government austerity measures. That is a strong argument for you, as the minister. However, the committee still has to scrutinise the potential budget lines irrespective of all that. The Welsh scheme is costing £65 million over four years, which means £16.25 million per annum, for a fully rolled-out scheme. Can you share with us any indicative figures, whether the Government pays that in full or in part, for the pilot?

Graeme Dey: At this stage, it is difficult to share figures because of the forms that the scheme could take. However, I undertake to provide as much information as I can to the committee as we move forward and to return to it on the subject if it so wishes.

Bob Doris: It would be helpful if we could have an idea of those figures as soon as possible. We understand that figures move and that projections can change, but having early sight of them would be helpful to the committee.

The committee also has to make choices because of cost pressures and demands. If the Scottish Government were to come forward and say, "We have found £25 million per annum to run this scheme," committee members would still have to decide whether that was the best way to spend that money in the sector, given the cuts to college budgets and other current cost pressures. The committee has to contend with moving parts on budgetary concerns.

Are you sensitive to the fact that any spend on that manifesto commitment might have an impact on other commitments that we have made in the education portfolio? How would you manage such conflict?

Graeme Dey: I am, of course, conscious of where funding has to be found. Dealing with such challenges has taken up much of my 12 weeks in the job. On occasion, budgetary pressures arise. The teachers pay settlement was one significant pressure. I see the exchange programme as being a priority now. We need to get on and do something with it, and that is what I intend to do.

Bob Doris: Finally, will the programme be wholly funded from within the education portfolio, or will Government money outwith that portfolio be deployed to help to meet our ambitions?

Graeme Dey: I am not clear on that at the moment.

Bob Doris: Okay. Thank you.

The Convener: I will bring in our deputy convener now.

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): I have a quick question that goes back to the subject of engagement. It was good to hear about regular engagement with the Welsh Government, because the officials who had been working on the Taith programme said that there had been no such engagement for some time. I had anticipated that, although there had been no engagement with those specific officials in the Welsh Government, there would have been regular contact between yourselves and others in the Welsh Government, so it was great to hear you clarify that. It was also helpful to hear about engagement with the UK Government on the Turing scheme and what could be learned and considered in that regard.

Given that the Scottish Government is held in such high esteem in Brussels, and that Scotland's position on the European question is so strong, I presume that there is also good engagement between relevant persons and authorities—the Scottish Government and our institutions—and our partners in Brussels that could be utilised to come up with the best possible scheme.

Graeme Dey: Not just in Brussels. The strengths of our universities include their international contacts and the respect in which they are held. That is one of the reasons that I want to utilise what they can bring to the table to develop the programme in the best possible way.

Going back to Willie Rennie's point about my predecessor, I should say that, when there is a change of minister, the incoming minister wants to look closely at what is on their desk, as I have done. That might have held up this process a little as well. I want to be absolutely clear on the best approach to take, and we are not quite there yet. I want to take a little more time to be convinced about the best way to go, which includes having those conversations with universities, colleges and the youth sector so that we get things right.

Ben Macpherson: I welcome that. Thank you, minister.

The Convener: Pam Duncan-Glancy, do you have a question?

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Not now, no.

The Convener: Okay, thank you. We will move on to—

Willie Rennie: I have more questions, convener, just to follow up on that.

The Convener: Yes—go ahead.

Willie Rennie: To be blunt, minister, I do not think that your predecessor did very much on the scheme. I welcome your putting new energy into it and making a commitment on the pilot. That is good news. However, the scale of the pilot will be important. Bob Doris and others have mentioned ensuring that youth work is included in it. If we are to learn enough from the pilot, we will need to include all the sectors. Can it be guaranteed that they will all be included?

I think that the system in Wales is run by Cardiff University. My second question therefore is: do you propose to commission some other organisation to run the Scottish pilot and the eventual scheme in the long run?

Graeme Dey: My answer to the first part of the question is yes. My answer to the second part is that that has not been decided.

The Convener: It is not often that we get "yes" answers from ministers, so thank you for that.

We are going to move on to other topics, so brace yourselves. You said earlier—you have mentioned this numerous times—that you met representatives of the universities yesterday. Was there any discussion of the on-going boycott of marking in some universities? If there was, what occurred?

10:00

Graeme Dey: That was a private meeting, but the subject was aired.

The Convener: Can the minister comment on his opinion of the on-going boycott and how it might impact on the students who are sitting without confirmed results for their degrees?

Graeme Dey: I can speak to the conversations that I have had, and my officials can perhaps add to that. Last week, I met the University and College Union, and we had a discussion about the circumstances surrounding the issue. I had further discussion with the universities yesterday.

We find ourselves in a regrettable situation, and the impact that it is having on students is also regrettable. The situation is indicative of a strained relationship between the trade unions and management in the universities sector. I have urged management in Scotland to get the Universities and Colleges Employers Association back to the table with the trade unions to make progress in resolving the dispute. That is the only way in which we will get it sorted out. Individual universities have taken different approaches to addressing the impacts of the marking boycott, which are varied, depending on the institutions. The situation in which we find ourselves is not at all satisfactory and we need to get it resolved.

The Convener: Have you spoken to any students about how they are feeling about the situation?

Graeme Dey: I have had limited conversations with students. We are meeting representatives from the National Union of Students Scotland next week.

The Convener: Okay. I know that there were some quite animated discussions on various radio programmes yesterday when we heard about the frustration that students are feeling.

Can we move to questions from Pam Duncan-Glancy? Are you ready, Pam?

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Yes. Minister, what feedback have you had from college principals following the letter that you sent to them about their responsibilities on fair work?

Graeme Dey: A couple of college principals got in touch with me directly to offer reassurance about their approach. I have had similar reassurances through Colleges Scotland that the overwhelming majority of colleges are seeking to take the appropriate approach, which is reassuring. However, I also recognise the concerns that the trade unions are expressing.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: What would you suggest that we say to our constituents who are losing their jobs as a result of redundancies?

Graeme Dey: We had this conversation in this very room a few weeks ago. Redundancies are deeply regrettable, but we are in a challenging financial position and we have to get through it. As I think that I said to you then, the work that is being done directly with colleges—which will be ramped up next week—to try to find things that we can do to stabilise them will not immediately address the problem that they are dealing with right now, but I hope that it will put them on a sounder financial footing and give them the stability that we need them to have going forward.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Do you accept that this year's £46 million cut in funding—of which the cut to the college sector is £26 million—could have impacted on that? For example, some colleges have said that they might have been able to use that funding for a voluntary severance scheme as opposed to having to move to compulsory redundancies.

Graeme Dey: They would not have been able to use it for a voluntary severance scheme. I said that previously. The flat cash settlement is the colleges' core funding. The £26 million was for transition projects, the nature of which were still under discussion with the Scottish Funding Council. The colleges would not have been able to use that money for voluntary severance schemes.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: We previously got four different answers to the question of what that money was for, so I do not think that that was particularly clear.

What engagement have you had with colleges on the impact of the redundancies? Who is losing their job? Is it lecturers who work on additional support courses, for example? Do they deliver courses on areas where we need skills in Scotland? Have you had any engagement whatsoever with colleges on that?

Graeme Dey: As a minister, I would not engage directly in operational matters, but from the conversations that I have had when visiting colleges and in other meetings with college principals, as I understand it, principals have sought to protect the courses that are absolutely required to be protected. Those include the type of courses that you have highlighted. I specifically asked principals about that point, and they have been very clear with me about that. You might have examples, which I would be interested in, of where that is not the case, but for the most part, as far as I am aware, colleges and their principals have sought to protect those courses. However, as I said, if you have evidence to the contrary, I am happy to hear that.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I have some evidence from Glasgow specifically, which I might follow up with you separately. There are significant

reductions at City of Glasgow College in the additional support needs area, so it would be helpful to follow that up.

What support can you offer staff who are facing redundancies?

Graeme Dey: In what sense?

Pam Duncan-Glancy: What more can the Government do to support people who are going to lose their jobs?

Graeme Dey: Would you like to give me an example of what you think that the Government should be doing?

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I think that, over the past 10 years, the Government should have properly funded the sector so that it could afford to employ the staff that it needs. The Government needs to look at flexibilities, but it is not my job to answer that question, minister.

Ultimately, there are people, particularly in Glasgow—I will not focus only on Glasgow—but across the sector who are facing job losses at a time when we really need colleges the most. We need skilled people for our economy. We need colleges to be the engine rooms in our local communities of learning, skills and development and supporting people from poorer backgrounds specifically. However, at this moment, those institutions are laying people off.

Graeme Dey: Additional money has been put into colleges over the past few years. I absolutely recognise the financial challenges that they still face, but if your point is just, “Well, you should’ve just put more money into colleges,” I guess that my challenge to you, Ms Duncan-Glancy, is, “From where?” I do not think that anyone on this committee would have been calling for us to not put more money into tackling the attainment challenge or settling the teachers pay dispute and various other things that are, rightly, priorities. I am afraid that, sadly and regrettably, colleges face a situation in which they are having to make redundancies. We hope that those can be minimised.

You are absolutely right about the future: colleges will be front and centre in what we will be doing, so we need to stabilise them now and get them into a better position for what lies ahead. However, we are in a very difficult financial position at the moment.

The Convener: Thank you.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I appreciate that, but I do not think that we can continually get into this back-and-forth conversation in which you expect Opposition members to do the budget for the Government—

The Convener: This is a back-and-forth conversation, too, Ms Duncan-Glancy. We have had this conversation already. Can we move to a question?

Pam Duncan-Glancy: It is, and I am doing that, thank you, convener.

The point that I am trying to make is that there are people who are going to lose their jobs in a sector that the Government has said is important. Have colleges come too late to negotiations? Did you use all the money up before it came to colleges?

Graeme Dey: As the committee is aware, an additional pressure arose as a consequence of settling the teachers pay dispute. That money had to be found from the education budget. That is the nature of Government.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Do you think that it is acceptable to pit educators against educators in that circumstance?

Graeme Dey: We have had that exchange previously, in the chamber. The simple fact is that, if the money is not there, it cannot be magicked up. I absolutely regret the pressures that the colleges are under and the redundancies that are having to be made, but I am afraid that that is the reality of the situation.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Okay. I have one final question, and it is about—

The Convener: No. We will now move to questions from Bob Doris.

Bob Doris: Minister, I do not expect you to comment on City of Glasgow College, but I want to use it briefly as a case study of corporate governance. The Educational Institute of Scotland Further Education Lecturers Association had plans to mitigate the 100 compulsory redundancies that are looming in Glasgow. It told us that the principal described those plans as nebulous and superficial and that they were rejected by the board on 14 June.

The EIS-FELA also told us that the 18 different papers that have been taken forward for the 100 redundancies contain errors and inconsistencies, and we know that scoring exercises have been started to deem who might be made compulsorily redundant, with redundancies potentially coming as early as 28 June. The unions have asked for the process to be delayed.

What reassurance can MSPs in Glasgow—or, indeed, MSPs elsewhere in the country, for their local colleges—be given that, when boards consider proposals from unions or anyone else, they do so fairly, robustly, in detail and prudently? Without casting any aspersions on anyone, we have unions saying that they have not been

considered appropriately and robustly, so how can we reassure unions that they have been? What checks and balances exist so that MSPs can reassure wirsels that things are not going awry in the college sector—in corporate governance, in particular?

Graeme Dey: I do not want to get into the specifics of one particular example, but you raised good points about the robust nature of oversight by college boards in any locality and about the role of the Scottish Funding Council.

I realise that there will come a point when I have to stop making this comment, but I have been in post for 12 weeks, so I am still getting my head around the nature of some of the processes that are followed. However, as I understand it, the SFC has given assurance that due process was followed in that example. I am alive to the very fractious nature of industrial relations that sees claims and counter-claims made. As politicians and as the Government, we have to deal in facts.

More generally, I am taking a keen interest in the form that college governance takes.

Bob Doris: Will you say more about that?

I am keen to move away from talking about City of Glasgow College, because, although I am sure that constituents will be listening very carefully to our exchange on City of Glasgow College, there are colleges across the country. I have no doubt that some of them are performing very well and have close relationships with their union colleagues, but that is not so much the case for other colleges. I am also sure that some will robustly challenge college principals, and that others might not do so much of that. How do we get consistency of approach to scrutiny? If we were talking about issues related to housing associations, there would be the ability to appoint individuals to boards to support oversight.

Graeme Dey: In a minute, I will bring in Jess Dolan on the detail of some of that.

One issue that has come across my desk during the past few weeks—no doubt there are good reasons for this—is that, if a college conducts a process of voluntary severance, it has to run that past the SFC. However, it does not have to do so if it is conducting an exercise in compulsory redundancy, which is a little bit anomalous. It relates to what you just said about the oversight of processes, and I am keen to have a look at it.

Bob Doris: Finally, minister, would it be best practice for colleges going for compulsory redundancies to run that past the SFC even though they do not have to?

Graeme Dey: It is not necessary, at the moment, so I can understand why it is not happening. I have to look at what we might do in

the future. I saw your reaction to my pointing out that anomaly, and I think that you get where I am coming from. We need to look at it.

Bob Doris: Is there anything to prevent colleges from going to the SFC and asking it to check it over even though they do not have a legal duty to? Would that be best practice?

Graeme Dey: There would be nothing to prevent their doing so.

Willie Rennie: I want to follow up on the evolution of the no compulsory redundancy policy, which we discussed in the chamber last week. When Mike Russell was Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, he said:

“This party believes there is no place for compulsory redundancies in Scotland’s colleges.”

Subsequently, colleges got closer to Government, but they have been excluded from the no compulsory redundancy policy. Will you explain the rationale for that?

Graeme Dey: Not specifically, because it predates my time in post. They are required to pay heed to public sector pay policy but are not bound by it. That is the nature of the structures that they have.

Willie Rennie: Okay. I had hoped that you would have an understanding as to why the approach has changed.

10:15

Graeme Dey: It has not changed. It has always been that way. You said that the cabinet secretary at that point believed that there was no place for compulsory redundancies. My understanding is that the colleges were not bound by the policy.

Willie Rennie: Yes, but, at that point, they were further away from Government. The Office for National Statistics reclassification brought them closer to Government, so there was an opportunity to include them, but a decision was taken to separate them from bodies such as the Cairngorms National Park Authority, the Crofting Commission, the Risk Management Authority and Scottish Canals, which are bound by the policy. They are public sector bodies. Colleges are also public sector bodies, but a decision was taken to allow compulsory redundancies to take place. Surely, we must have an understanding as to why that happened.

Graeme Dey: Because they are non-departmental public bodies with boards.

Willie Rennie: But they are still public sector bodies. A decision could have been taking to include them in the public sector pay policy, which meant no compulsory redundancies.

Graeme Dey: I do not want to duck your question, Mr Rennie, but it long predates my involvement in the matter.

Willie Rennie: That is unsatisfactory. I hope that you will write to us later on and give an explanation.

Graeme Dey: I undertake to do that.

Stephanie Callaghan: I am sure that you will not be surprised, minister, that I am interested in the Lanarkshire colleges. The current governance arrangements are not ideal and distract the Lanarkshire colleges from their main focus on students and economic recovery. The efforts by the board and executive to make the governance work with the regional strategic bodies are time consuming and unlikely to change outcomes for students and communities. Are you able to provide firmer timescales on governance options for Lanarkshire and Glasgow?

Graeme Dey: There has been an ask from the three existing colleges in the city of Glasgow that we revisit the Glasgow Colleges Regional Board structures. We are currently considering the options on that, but there is a bit of a simplistic view about the process. I think that some people hold the view that we can move fairly quickly on it. I answered a question from, I think, Pam Duncan-Glancy on that in the chamber.

We are identifying the legislative process for revisiting the structures. If that is primary legislation, it could take quite some time. If it is achievable through secondary legislation, it could take somewhere between nine and 12 months, because we have to consult on it. Therefore, we could not facilitate an immediate change.

I am aware of what the colleges wish for and of Mr Doris's view about how the moneys that are caught up in running the GCRB could be better spent. I am also acutely aware of the staff who work for the GCRB. It is an unsettling time for them while all the speculation happens.

I am keen that we get to the point at which we can indicate what our thinking is on the matter, but, in all circumstances, it is important that the governance, whether at individual college level or regional level, provides appropriate oversight. That is essential. To go back to the answer that I gave to Willie Rennie on the subject initially, we are taking a little bit of time to consider the best way to proceed on the matter and will write to the committee once we have reached that point.

Meghan Gallacher: I will continue with the theme of the impact that the budgetary issues are having on our college estates. Like Bob Doris, I will use a case study—in this case, New College Lanarkshire. The halls of residence at the Motherwell campus have closed and the nurseries

at the Cumbernauld and Coatbridge campuses have also closed. Those closures impact not just the hard-working staff at those facilities but our learners, whether rural young people who look to study in more urban areas or students with young children.

In last week's debate, I referred to the example of a young person from Argyll who is no longer able to go to college because the student accommodation on the Motherwell campus has closed. We are moving beyond the stage where things are deeply regrettable and can now see the direct consequences that budgetary issues have for our young people.

What support is the Government offering for students who find themselves in such circumstances? Is the Government saying that rural young people cannot go to college because of budget cuts?

Graeme Dey: That is not what we are saying at all, and I think that you know that. Considerable support is provided to a number of rurally based colleges across the country, of which the University of the Highlands and Islands and Borders College are two examples, to ensure that young people who reside in rural settings are able to access colleges on their doorstep or as close to home as possible.

There is also a great opportunity to use technology to improve and enhance what is available remotely.

You spoke about New College Lanarkshire and gave specific examples. Ministers do not have a role in the operational decisions that are taken by individual colleges. You raised the point about halls of residence during a debate in the chamber last week. I thought that the nursery issue had been paused.

Meghan Gallacher: Until December.

Graeme Dey: Until December. They are still looking at that.

I do not doubt that colleges are having to take very difficult decisions at the moment, and I recognise that those decisions have consequences. That is why the detailed dialogue that we have entered into with the colleges is so important. There is a constructive dialogue about what we can do to enable colleges to become more sustainable in the short and medium term. That is the spirit in which those discussions are taking place, and they will be ramped up next week when I meet college representatives directly.

Meghan Gallacher: I thank you for that response, minister, but are we saying that rural young people should stay in rural settings? Rural young people should have the flexibility to move into urban settings, should they wish to learn

there, but, as it stands just now, and particularly in the case of New College Lanarkshire, we are actually closing the door to rural young people who might want to study there.

I understand that it is not the Government's role to tell colleges what to do, but, if New College Lanarkshire is facing a £4.3 million cut, it has few options. I understand that the college is going to review the nursery issue in December, but what security does that give to people who work in those settings or to students who are on courses now but who might have to find alternative childcare at the last moment?

Graeme Dey: I recognise that point. You have highlighted the need for additional investment in early years provision and, no doubt, in various other things, but we have a fixed budget for education and cannot do everything.

You make an important point about the opportunity for youngsters who might live in a rural setting and want to go to college in an urban one. That could also be reversed: people who live in an urban setting might want to go to college in a rural one. The Withers proposals give us the opportunity to look at how we provide college education. We tend to focus on university students travelling to different parts of the country to do their courses, but I think that Withers gives us the opportunity to look at that in a college setting.

We will have to emphasise the needs of the economy, but other courses are also absolutely essential and some of our colleges might become centres of excellence. If we are going to do that—which is a conversation that we must have—we must look at how we will support college students to attend particular centres of excellence. We could see rural to urban migration, but we could also see the reverse. For example, Borders College provides some really good gamekeeping courses, and I do not doubt that some urbanites will want to go there. We must look at how we will deliver that in the future.

Meghan Gallacher: I can agree with you on that point, minister, but I hope that you share my concern that closing student accommodation will directly prevent young people from doing that.

Finally, on the back of the issues surrounding New College Lanarkshire, Unison is calling for a review of college finances and governance. What is the minister's response to that? Will a full review take place?

Graeme Dey: If you are referring to some form of emergency funding package for colleges or the general approach to funding, we are absolutely not in a position to provide additional funding to colleges right now. On what future funding looks like, Withers is very clear that there is no shortage of funding in the skills and post-school education

landscape. It is about how we better utilise that funding. That will form part of the discussion that we have around Withers and taking that issue and various other things forward.

The Convener: That is a nice segue into questions from Ruth Maguire.

Ruth Maguire: I hear loud and clear what you are saying about fixed budgets and the financial constraints that everyone has to operate under. As well as making choices about funding things or not, it is important that we make sure that our public bodies have all the tools that they need to be able to operate. Operational and financial flexibilities become very important—I know that I have asked about that a number of times, convener, and I will keep asking about it.

Some of the flexibilities being provided were outlined by the cabinet secretary in her response to our college regionalisation inquiry report. How are discussions progressing between the Scottish Government and Colleges Scotland? If possible, can you speak to potential shorter-term and longer-term solutions? I understand that there might be opportunity for flexibility around resource operation and capital, so anything that you can say to that would be helpful for the committee.

Graeme Dey: As I said in response to your contribution to the debate in the chamber the other week, I do not want to be unhelpful—I hope that I come across as wanting to be helpful to the committee—but it is a bit difficult to talk about discussions that have not taken place yet. It would be a bit disrespectful to the colleges if I was to talk about some of our thinking.

When I was a member of the committee and the cabinet secretary was in front of it, she outlined the flexibilities that had been provided and have been welcomed by the colleges. However, I recognise that we need to go further in order to support them. The approach that has been taken is that the colleges have been working up a number of thoughts, as have we. We will come together next week, not to have a discussion and then wander off before coming back to the matter after recess, but with a view to looking at what is achievable now and in the slightly longer term. There is no doubt in my mind that we can do more to assist the colleges into a position of stability.

You talked about capital spend. I am keen to explore with the colleges how they might be encouraged or assisted to address some of the issues with the fabric of their buildings, and in doing that, address the net zero challenge. The issue is not just about resource but about what more we can do, because some colleges face significant challenges in relation to the age and condition of their buildings. There have been restrictions, or they felt that there were restrictions,

on what they can do in that regard, and I hope that we can find a way to lessen that and encourage some movement in that area.

Ruth Maguire: I am surprised that those discussions have not taken place. I thought that I might be picking that up wrong.

Graeme Dey: Of course, there has been dialogue between officials on progressing the matter, but we are meeting next week to try to make significant progress.

Ruth Maguire: I am glad to hear that, because there needs to be a bit of urgency around it.

Graeme Dey: I agree.

Ruth Maguire: It is good to hear that we are not at the start of the process. Does Jess Dolan want to say something?

Jess Dolan (Scottish Government): Yes, if that is okay. I assure you that discussions have been on-going for some time. The meetings next week that the minister refers to are part of an on-going series of conversations that we have been having with Colleges Scotland, and college principals have fed into those discussions over a significant number of months. It is more of an iterative process, so we are not waiting for a single meeting to take place.

Ruth Maguire: I appreciate that.

Graeme Dey: To be clear, the meeting next week is for us to try to get agreement and put something firmly in place. Once we are in a position to do that, I hope that we will be able to write to the committee jointly to outline what is happening.

Ruth Maguire: That would be helpful.

The Convener: Yes. That issue was certainly something that came out loud and clear in our colleges report.

We are going to move on to topics around the Withers review, and Bill Kidd will kick us off.

10:30

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): Minister, you have stated clearly—we have all heard you—that the Scottish Government will not shy away from skills reform following the recommendations of the Withers review. You have mentioned that a couple of times this morning already. Can you share any further thinking on how those recommendations will be implemented? When can the response that sets out the way forward be expected?

Graeme Dey: If I may, convener, I will take a moment to outline our approach to the Withers review. It is certainly radical. I welcome it, not least

because it takes a look at the whole skills landscape, whereas previous reviews looked at bits and pieces of it. It is incredibly useful. I was going to say that it is the start of a discussion, but it is not, because we are going to make changes.

Although we warmly welcome the broad direction of travel that Withers sets, there are 15 clear recommendations, five of which are structural. Significant implications for individuals as well as organisations arise from those recommendations and I feel that it is appropriate for us to take a small amount of time to interrogate those implications. There might be a slightly different way of taking forward that work. We might want to go further. There might be some things that, for a variety of reasons that emerge, are not the right thing to do. In a general sense, however, Withers points to the way forward. It is a terrific report.

What time will we take to reflect on that? We have already spoken to all the major stakeholders and we have asked them to take a bit of time—six to eight weeks—to reflect in detail on how the Withers report impacts on them directly and in a broader sense, because they might spot areas in which they can contribute. I had a meeting with the Royal Society of Edinburgh yesterday. It has a good overview of the sector, so it would be useful to hear what it is thinking. I encourage the other stakeholders to do that reflection.

At the conclusion of that rough period of time, we will engage directly with stakeholders to get their thoughts on how we can implement the recommendations and what we ought to do. I have to say that the response to Withers has already been positive. I am conscious that some would have us simply go and do it now, but we need to take a bit of time to talk to our trade union colleagues and others, and we are thinking it all through in great detail.

Although we are working to a rough timetable, I would hope and expect to come back to Parliament soon after the recess, to make a statement, if that is what Parliament wishes, or whatever. Perhaps I would come back to the committee and update members on our thinking that way.

I would also say—and I mean this genuinely—that I know that a number of members of the committee—Stephen Kerr is a case in point—have taken a great deal of interest in the principles of reform of the sector, so my door is open to anyone who wants to talk to me about their thinking on this. We have a fantastic opportunity to make much-needed change and to get it right.

It is therefore important that we interrogate the review, look at whether any unintended consequences would flow from anything that

James Withers has recommended and then get on with addressing the reform agenda.

Bill Kidd: You are talking about taking just over a couple of months, maybe three. It is not for me to make any decisions for the committee, but I think that it would be good if you came back to the committee before you stand up in Parliament and show us what will be implemented, so that we can interrogate that to some degree. Is that reasonable?

Graeme Dey: To give myself a bit of wriggle room, I note that you, not I, mentioned three months—I said that it would be as early as is feasible after the recess.

It is for Parliament to determine the process that ought to be followed. If it was felt that it would be appropriate for me to come before the committee, I would be happy to do that. I am also happy to have an informal discussion with committee members, collectively or individually, about their thinking on the review, or if we make a statement to Parliament.

I recognise the intense and justifiable interest in the review; there is also the purpose and principles document to be considered alongside that, as the two documents need to be read together.

I am happy to do whatever Parliament feels is appropriate by way of a further update on our thinking.

The Convener: I call Stephanie Callaghan. Over to you, Stephanie.

Stephanie Callaghan: I am okay, convener.

The Convener: In that case, I bring in Willie Rennie.

Willie Rennie: One of the implications of the Withers review might be for research funding for universities. Has the minister had any thoughts about that? The Withers review does not cover that aspect specifically, because it is skills focused, but nevertheless it will have significant implications for it. Does the minister have any thinking to share about that, or is it still too early?

Graeme Dey: You are right—it is not picked up in the review, but we have had some conversations with Universities Scotland about that, and it is right to have raised those issues.

One of the concerns that have been raised relates to the recommendation regarding the funding body, and whether it should be a new funding body with powers taken from three different directions. I think that has caused a degree of disquiet around research. All that I can say is that we entirely recognise the importance of research funding.

Willie Rennie: That is my point. I have raised this before. The performance of Scottish research, in terms of attracting UK research council funding, has dipped. We have been excellent at it—we are just not as good as we used to be.

I think that the universities are anxious that the Government perhaps does not fully understand the connection between research, applied science and economic opportunity. Although the minister has referred repeatedly to the budget challenges, that decline in performance on research predates all of that and is relative to the performance of the UK, which has faced the same financial envelope.

I just want some reassurance that the minister fully understands the value of research, that you are prepared to invest in the long run, that you will ensure that the new funding arrangements will take that into account, and that, given that Government is keen to re-engage with business and promote economic opportunity, research will be at the heart of it.

Graeme Dey: I recognise entirely the role of research and universities in all this.

Willie Rennie: Okay—fine.

The Convener: Meghan Gallacher, do you have a supplementary? You caught my eye, but I was not certain.

Meghan Gallacher: No—not at this time, convener.

The Convener: That is fine. Over to you again, Mr Rennie, for your next question.

Willie Rennie: With regard to mental health counsellors, I was pleased to see that the think positive project had secured its funding through the National Union of Students Scotland. Do we have any news about what is happening with the mental health counsellors? We discussed that last week; I am just keen to see whether there has been any progress since.

Graeme Dey: I cannot sit here today and give you an answer to that; I simply offer the reassurance that it is currently very live. I recognise that the end of the month is a significant date in that context. We are in a very challenging situation with the finances, and we are still trying to find a solution.

Willie Rennie: Okay—that is fine, convener.

The Convener: I have a question relating to the flexible workforce development fund. The other week, I was at the Edinburgh College graduation ceremony and I heard of a number of employers that are struggling. They are desperate for their current staff to be upskilled and retrained in order for their organisations to grow and expand, but the college is not able to do that, as the funding is not quite there to match the aspiration.

Can you say how that might be further improved in order to ensure that those small and medium-sized businesses and colleges can work together to really support the growth of those businesses?

Graeme Dey: We are aware of the good use to which colleges have put that fund.

I go back to what I said about the significant budget challenges that we are facing. We are still working through the entirety of that. I hope that we will be in a position to make an announcement about the flexible workforce development fund very shortly.

The Convener: Shortly—would that be before recess?

Graeme Dey: Now you are trying to put me on the spot, convener.

The Convener: Sorry. I hope that we will get an update on that as soon as is practically possible.

I will go round the room in case there are any other questions. I see that Willie Rennie wants to come in.

Willie Rennie: When is the international education strategy going to be published?

Graeme Dey: I go back to what I said to Mr Rennie previously about how I want to approach that and about the relationship with the universities, in particular. We have committed to a meeting with the universities next week on this specific issue, and I want to involve them as closely as I can in finalising the strategy.

Willie Rennie: Has the funding for the national innovation strategy in relation to universities—so that they can deliver their part in it—been worked out yet? How are we getting on with that?

Graeme Dey: I think that that sits with another minister, and I cannot speak for my colleagues.

Willie Rennie: Okay—so, you cannot even speak to the university implications of the strategy.

Graeme Dey: I think the universities will be engaged in conversations with other ministerial colleagues on that.

Willie Rennie: Okay—that is fine.

The Convener: In the absence of Stephen Kerr, I will ask a question that he I am sure he would be keen to ask—and I know that Mr Dey will be glad to answer it.

What assessment has the Scottish Government made of the SFC forecasts that international fee income will make up a bigger proportion of university funding than funding body income by the end of 2023-24? We have concern about the finance that comes from international students supporting our Scotland-domiciled students.

Graeme Dey: Mr Kerr is presumably asking about the assessment that has been made.

The Convener: Yes.

Shazia Razzaq (Scottish Government): I suppose that it is a matter for SFC, working closely with institutions, considering what the approaches of individual institutions are as part of their assurance and governance processes, what strategies they have in place and how they are going to minimise any impact.

The Convener: Is there a need to look again at the number of funded places that are available for Scotland-domiciled students, to ensure that those who are eligible can actually get a place at a university?

Graeme Dey: I go back to the conversations that we had earlier today. If we want to put more money into a particular aspect of education, it has to come from somewhere else.

The Convener: It is all about choices.

Thank you very much, minister. I can now let you leave.

10:42

Meeting suspended.

10:43

On resuming—

Subordinate Legislation

Lews Castle College (Transfer and Closure) (Scotland) Order 2023 (SSI 2023/171)

The Convener: We move on to the second item on our agenda. The order before us closes Lews Castle College from 1 August 2023 and transfers its property, rights, liabilities and obligations to North Highland college. The instrument is being considered under the negative procedure.

Do any members have any comments to make about the order?

Pam Duncan-Glancy: The subordinate legislation to merge the colleges is fairly straightforward. However, I have spoken to people in rural areas, and particularly to members who represent rural areas, and it feels like this is another budget-pushed decision as opposed to a decision that serves rural communities best. It is worth putting that on the record, because people in some communities are already struggling to get to and from colleges. Pulling everything into one place might mean that a larger college does not serve diverse areas as well as it might.

The Convener: We took a significant amount of evidence on the matter during our college regionalisation inquiry, so we are aware of those concerns.

Is the committee agreed that it does not wish to make any recommendations in relation to the instrument?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: The public part of our meeting has now concluded. We will consider the final items on our agenda in private.

10:44

Meeting continued in private until 11:20.

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