



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

DRAFT

Education, Children and Young People Committee

Wednesday 11 June 2025

Session 6



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Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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EDUCATION, CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE COMMITTEE
20th Meeting 2025, Session 6

CONVENER

*Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*George Adam (Paisley) (SNP)
*Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con)
*Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab)
*Joe FitzPatrick (Dundee City West) (SNP)
*Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green)
*Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
*John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
*Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Graeme Dey (Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans)
Natalie Don-Innes (Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise)
Jenny Gilruth (Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills)
Stuart Greig (Scottish Government)
Graeme Logan (Scottish Government)
Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Andrew Watson (Scottish Government)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Pauline McIntyre

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Education, Children and Young People Committee

Wednesday 11 June 2025

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:00]

Education and Skills

The Convener (Douglas Ross): *[Inaudible.]*—secretary, you would like to make an opening statement. Over to you.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): Sorry, convener. Can you repeat that? We did not hear what you were saying.

The Convener: Okay. Can you hear me now?

Jackie Dunbar: Only slightly, but yes.

The Convener: Do we need to put up the volume in the room?

Jackie Dunbar: Yes.

The Convener: Let us try that. Okay. We will start again.

Good morning, and welcome to the 20th meeting in 2025 of the Education, Children and Young People Committee.

This morning, we will take evidence from the Scottish Government in an education and skills cross-portfolio session. We are also joined by Liz Smith MSP, who will ask her questions after all committee members have spoken.

I welcome Jenny Gilruth, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills; Graeme Dey, the Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans; and Natalie Don-Innes, the Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise. The cabinet secretary and ministers are joined by their Scottish Government officials, and I welcome Graeme Logan, director of learning; Clare Hicks, director of education reform; Andrew Watson, director for children and families; and Stuart Greig, deputy director, governance and assurance division, lifelong learning and skills.

I understand that the cabinet secretary would like to make an opening statement.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): On a point of order, convener. As I raised with you during the private pre-meeting briefing, I do not think that it is appropriate for you to convene this meeting from the Caribbean. It does not make you look good and it does not make the committee look good. Once again, I ask you to reconsider

whether that is appropriate and I ask you to hand your responsibilities over to the deputy convener.

The Convener: Thank you, Mr Rennie. I will do that, because standing orders allow me to take part in the meeting if I have convened part of it. You will know that, under standing orders, I cannot take part as a committee member if I do not convene any part of the meeting. If Ms Dunbar is ready and prepared, as deputy convener, I am happy to hand over to her. I will ask my questions when Ms Dunbar invites me to raise them and I will be here for the duration of the meeting.

I can hand over to Ms Dunbar if she is ready.

Jackie Dunbar: Sorry, I am a bit confused. Convener, are you taking part in the meeting or will you just be listening?

The Convener: I can now take part because I have opened the meeting. If members have concerns, I will listen to them. I am very happy for you to convene the meeting if that will make it run more smoothly and I will come in when you decide to call me.

The Deputy Convener (Jackie Dunbar): Can we suspend for a few minutes while I take advice from the clerks? Never having done this before, I am not sure of the process.

09:04

Meeting suspended.

09:10

On resuming—

The Deputy Convener: I apologise for having suspended the meeting, but I had to take advice from the clerks.

Rule 12.1.12 of standing orders says:

“Where the convener is not available for any meeting of the committee, or leaves the chair for part of any meeting, that meeting, or that part of the meeting, shall be chaired by the deputy convener. Where at any time other than during a meeting of a committee a convener is unable to act as convener, the deputy convener shall carry out the functions of the convener.”

That rule makes no distinction between virtual or in-person attendance at a committee meeting. It is the role of the convener to chair the committee if they are present, either in person or virtually. For that reason, I will hand back to the convener, who will convene the meeting virtually.

The Convener (Douglas Ross): Thank you, deputy convener.

I invite the cabinet secretary to make her opening statement.

Willie Rennie: On a point of order, convener.

The Convener: I did allow that earlier, but I have been advised that there are no points of order in committee meetings. I understand that there are issues, but—

Willie Rennie: There is another option, convener. You could leave—

The Convener: Mr Rennie—

Willie Rennie: You could leave the meeting and allow Liz Smith to be your substitute. That would be the sensible way. You previously indicated, following my point of order, that it would not have been appropriate for you to convene the meeting. It is not technically possible for you to hand over, but it is technically possible for you to leave the meeting, and for Jackie Dunbar to take over convening.

The Convener: Unfortunately, you are not correct. Although Ms Smith would be an excellent substitute, she would not be allowed to act as a substitute, because the Scottish Conservative substitute for the Education, Children and Young People Committee is Roz McCall. Ms Smith has been invited to attend the meeting because she sought my agreement to ask questions.

I have heard your concerns, Mr Rennie, and they are on the record, but I now turn to the cabinet secretary.

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): I am pleased to be joined today by my colleagues Mr Dey and Ms Don-Innes. I will start by setting out some of our key work across the committee's remit and acknowledging some of the challenges.

In childcare and support for families, we have expanded the provision of free early learning and childcare to 1,140 hours a year and we continue to work with local authorities to reach more of the eligible two-year-olds. We are investing in 23 early adopter communities across six local authorities to design new childcare offers for children from early years to the end of primary school. That work is targeted at families who are most at risk of living in poverty. Our £3 million bright start breakfast fund will create thousands of new breakfast club places and, just this week, we announced more investment in our extra time programme.

Across Scotland's schools, we have reset the agenda, following the pandemic, by using the national improvement framework to focus on our ABCs: attendance, attainment, additional support needs, behaviour and the curriculum. We are prioritising investment in those areas through our joint commitment to increase teacher numbers and our behaviour action plan, and we continue to speak directly to stakeholders to inform that work. As of yesterday, through our headteacher national events, I have engaged directly with every

headteacher in Scotland, and I pay tribute to them and to all of Scotland's teachers and school staff for the care that they invest in our children every day.

Members will note that the latest statistics, which are from December, show the highest levels of literacy and numeracy since records began, as well as the lowest ever gap in literacy attainment between the most and least disadvantaged pupils. This year's settlement with local authorities has provided a 3 per cent real-terms uplift for education, and we continue to have the best-paid class teachers, the lowest pupil-teacher ratio and the greatest spend per pupil across these islands.

In further and higher education and skills, we have worked to support colleges and universities through extraordinary financial challenges that have been influenced by factors that are outwith the control of this Parliament. Ministers listened closely to the sector as we developed this year's budget, and we are investing more than £1 billion in university teaching and research in 2025-26.

Since February, we have made an additional £25 million available to support the sector. Yesterday, Mr Dey chaired a cross-party discussion on the future of the sector with Universities Scotland, and we both look forward to continuing to work closely on that. Crucially, and unlike in the rest of the United Kingdom, we have also ensured that university tuition remains free.

All of that is complemented by an ambitious reform agenda across our education and skills system—strengthening and rationalising our curriculum, assessment and qualifications landscape; simplifying funding arrangements; and focusing on improved outcomes for all learners.

I will close there and hope that I have set the tone for a collegiate evidence session that will have the wellbeing of Scotland's learners at its heart.

The Convener: I will begin with a question for you, cabinet secretary. Do you believe that Scotland's university principals receive appropriate salaries?

Jenny Gilruth: As I understand it, principals' salaries are set by our universities, which are independent, autonomous institutions. However, the point that the convener made, which was raised at committee last week, relates to restraint. I believe that restraint should be exercised in relation to salaries, and that we should be particularly mindful of other salaries, the cost of living crisis and the optics of salary levels to other staff.

09:15

The Convener: You are absolutely correct that the salaries are independently set, but the universities that set those salary thresholds receive funding from the Scottish Government. What do you think would be an appropriate salary for someone leading a university—I am not talking about any individual university—if you think that they should show restraint? What level of restraint should they show?

Jenny Gilruth: I am mindful that ministers are currently subject to a pay freeze, although we have now moved to take the MSP salary, which is a shift in our position. However, we have taken that position to show restraint as a Government, and I am mindful of the pressures that people face. It would be remiss of me, as Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills—or of any minister—to comment on the salary levels at independent, autonomous institutions. I am very mindful of the challenge that we currently face with one institution, which I am sure that we will come on to discuss, but I do not think that it is for ministers and the Government to talk about the salary levels of independent institutions. However, the point that you made about restraint is important.

I know that that issue was dealt with previously through a letter of guidance from the Government. The minister and I might wish to reflect on that, given the committee's evidence from last week's session.

The Convener: Will you explain how a letter of guidance would work? How could you offer guidance while remaining neutral?

Jenny Gilruth: As I understand it, issuing letters of guidance was undertaken by somebody who sat in my position historically. Stuart Greig might want to say more on how we might be able to stipulate that, but it relates to the letters of guidance that we issue to the Scottish Funding Council, which is usually done at the start of the year.

Stuart Greig (Scottish Government): I can add that the letters of guidance are between ministers and the SFC or Skills Development Scotland and set out the priorities that ministers want to see exercised. In that context, there could be some clear messaging about ministerial expectations in that regard, but there could not be specificity.

The Convener: I will move on slightly, cabinet secretary—

Jenny Gilruth: I am sorry to interrupt, convener, but Mr Dey might wish to come in on that point before we move on.

The Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans (Graeme Dey): I hope that this will be helpful, convener. As I mentioned to the committee a couple of weeks ago, we have already had a direct conversation with the chairs of the universities in Scotland. At this stage, we are simply encouraging them to exercise restraint in the uprating of remunerative packages in view of the challenging financial circumstances and the cost of living crisis. There has already been a conversation of sorts about exercising self-restraint and self-awareness.

The Convener: Thank you all very much for your answers on that.

Cabinet secretary, I will move on to the issue of growing levels of violence in Scottish schools. I have seen some of the media coverage explain and outline the reaction that you got from Scottish teachers at the Educational Institute of Scotland conference last week. Some of the headlines were quite stark. Perhaps there is a feeling that the Government was not listening to the growing concerns of teachers about physical violence and abuse in the classroom.

You look puzzled, so maybe that did not happen and that was just the way it was written up in the papers.

Jenny Gilruth: On Thursday evening, I spent a long time at the EIS annual general meeting with my official, who I am looking to, listening to the concerns of members in relation to some of the points that you made.

The views of teaching staff have been central to all of my work as cabinet secretary. In the past year, as I alluded to in my opening response, I have spoken to every headteacher in the country, which has not been without challenge. Your point about engaging with them directly is important. I have directly addressed the issue at every single one of those events, and we had a robust discussion about it at the EIS AGM.

More broadly, one of the points that I have made when that point has been raised with me is that, across our society, we see challenges with aggressive and violent behaviour. We see that playing out in increases in misogyny, and we even see it in politics. Therefore, it should not be a surprise to people that that is now happening in our classrooms. We should look to connect those two issues and try to tackle them jointly, as opposed to saying, narrowly, that they are issues faced only in our classrooms.

As for teacher engagement, the EIS and our other professional associations have been at the forefront of helping to formulate the national action plan, which I launched last August. The plan is part of the solution here, but I accept that it is not the totality of the response that is required.

Schools cannot tackle such behaviour alone. The national action plan is starting to have an effect in our schools.

You will be aware that, in addition, before the end of this term we will publish updated guidance not only on consequences but on violent incidents in our schools, which I think was the premise of your question, convener, and in particular on conducting risk assessments.

I want to be absolutely clear that no teacher should experience violence in school. They should not be in fear of that happening in their classroom, for example. In recent weeks we have seen really challenging cases that have given me great cause for concern, and you have given examples of those from press articles. I will continue to engage with the teaching unions, to listen to Scottish teachers who have been at the forefront of the issue and to provide the funding that is required.

You will be aware that the Government's budget provided for extra funding to increase the numbers of teachers and additional support needs staff. That is imperative to providing wraparound support for classroom teachers, in particular, in our school community. We need to work with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, too, to that end. We might come on to talk about some of those points in more detail but, for me, having that extra workforce is fundamental to tackling the behavioural challenges that we are seeing.

I would like to make other points on mobile phone use and gender-based violence, but I am aware that we have limited time. Members might want to come back on those, though.

The Convener: We might get into some of those points. Remaining with the subject of violence in our schools for now, though, I recall that, last week, at portfolio question time on education and skills, you and I had a discussion about a particular case. I will not go back into that now but, in your response last week, you indicated that you would be having a joint discussion with the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs about consequences. How will that happen? What will be the process? Is there a cross-ministerial working group on the consequences of particularly violent and aggressive behaviour—for example, where the public believe that adequate sanctions are not being applied to those who have directed abuse and violence towards teachers?

Jenny Gilruth: Your point about consequences has been raised with me consistently by the profession, and a range of consequences is already at teachers' disposal. However, we know that there is currently reticence about the use of exclusion, for example. As I understand it, that will be for good reason—it should be used in only the

most extreme examples of challenging behaviour—but it is a consequence that is at teachers' disposal. Ultimately, it is up to them to exercise their professional judgment as to whether that is appropriate; it is not for me, as cabinet secretary, to instruct it.

The point raised in your question of last week is a live one. Tomorrow we will host a second summit on youth violence, which I will attend along with the Cabinet Secretary for Justice. We will have cross-portfolio engagement on the issue of consequences. Of course, that will feed into our work on the same issue, which, as I said, we will publish before the end of term.

The Convener: Thank you very much.

I move to questions for the Minister for Further and Higher Education. I know that you will provide a full response in due course, but we are now several weeks on from publication of the committee's report on widening access, in which there was cross-party, unanimous agreement that a unique learner number should be introduced. In the past I have picked up from you a willingness to look at that. Will the Government go any further than simply looking at it? What options does it have for fully introducing such a number?

Graeme Dey: You are right, convener; I will respond to the committee's report in detail, but I will update the committee as far as I can today.

My officials have continued to explore the matter over the past two months. That work has included meetings with Universities Scotland, the SFC and the commissioner to understand the specifics of how using such a number would work in practice. My officials have also had a meeting with the Scottish Information Commissioner to garner his thoughts on that. It is fair to say that that would be extremely complex work. It would be cross cutting in nature and would involve sharing the personal, sensitive data of millions of individuals, so you will appreciate that it would need to be done properly.

I cannot go beyond that at this stage, but I hope that that gives the committee an understanding of how seriously we take the idea, as well as an assurance that we are exploring it actively.

The Convener: Would it be fair to say that you have been exploring it for a number of years, though?

Graeme Dey: On and off, it has been there. It certainly predated my time as minister, too. However, we are increasing our focus on potentially using such a number, not least because our university colleagues believe that there would be some merit in it. That said, that work is not without its challenges—it is not straightforward.

The Convener: I am conscious of the time, and I want to get to other members, but I will ask one

question to the Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise. Minister, there have been a number of questions to you in the chamber about nursery provision, particularly local authority nursery provision, potential closures and lack of consultation. I think that the Government has now been clear that consultations must be held. Has there been any breakdown in communication between what the Scottish Government expects and what local government is delivering on the ground in consulting on the closure of nurseries?

The Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise (Natalie Don-Innes): It seems, from the correspondence between a specific local authority and the Government, that there has been some level of miscommunication. However, the Scottish Government has written to that local authority to set out the guidance more clearly and to overcome that miscommunication. I believe that we are waiting on the local authority reaching out further.

I and the First Minister have been clear in the chamber that we are further reviewing the guidance. At the moment, we are ensuring that local authorities are aware of the guidance as it currently stands.

The Convener: Is there a timescale for when the Parliament and local authorities will be updated on that further review?

Natalie Don-Innes: The work is under way, and officials will seek input into the process from stakeholders over the summer. That will be the next stage of the process.

The Convener: Thank you all. There are lots of questions, but I want to get to other members now, starting with Jackie Dunbar.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): Thank you for attending this morning.

Staying with the question that was put to the Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise, we are all looking forward to hearing more about the Promise bill. I appreciate that what you can tell us today will be limited, minister, but can you outline what progress has been made on some of the key policy areas in recent months—such as foster care, kinship care and social work?

Natalie Don-Innes: Absolutely. As Ms Dunbar has stated, I am unable to go into a huge amount of detail on the Promise bill. As I stated in the previous committee session, however, it was my intention to introduce a bill to the Parliament to address some of the legislative aspects of keeping the Promise, and that is still the case. I will be introducing the bill in June, and I am very grateful for the committee's patience with it. I look forward to discussing the bill further with the committee once you have seen the full details.

Regardless of our waiting for the introduction of the bill, and as I am sure Ms Dunbar and other members will be aware, there has been a range of activity on delivering the ambitions of the Promise. Ms Dunbar mentioned foster and kinship care, and a number of actions have been taken there. We announced the Scottish recommended allowance in August 2023, and it has made an impact for foster and kinship carers. That was backed with £16 million of Government funding. As a result of the cost of living pressures, we uplifted that in this budgetary year, which will provide further financial support for foster and kinship carers.

The committee will be aware of the range of consultations that we have undertaken in relation to the Promise bill, which I discussed the last time that I was here. One of them was specifically on the future vision of foster and kinship care and on the children's hearings system, moving on from care and the definition of care experience. All of that has included a huge level of engagement with children and young people with care experience, and with relevant stakeholders. I will be able to go into more detail on some of that once the bill is introduced.

Going back to foster and kinship carers, and aside from the Scottish recommended allowance, we know that the issue is not just one of financial asks. A level of support is required to allow foster and kinship carers to play their role in caring for our children and young people. There has been a range of engagement sessions and consultations with those carers. I personally attended one to listen and to understand some of the issues that those carers are facing. I hope to be able to support kinship and foster carers with that. We will launch a new vision for kinship care later in the year, and there will be further progress in relation to foster care. I believe that that will speak to many of the asks and concerns that have been raised.

I hope that that answers Ms Dunbar's question.

Jackie Dunbar: Thank you very much. I, for one, am looking forward to the Promise bill coming forward.

The Scottish Government recently published an impact report on pupil equity funding. What is the Government's assessment of how that is helping to close the attainment gap?

Jenny Gilruth: The PEF sampling work has been pivotal in looking at clear-cut examples of where PEF has made a difference. I am sure that the member will be aware of examples from her constituency. Every headteacher whom I meet at the events that we host and at school visits is asking me not to take PEF or Scottish attainment challenge funding away.

If members remember, the funding stream was always meant to be a 10-year funding stream. I

have discussed that with the committee and given it and Parliament an assurance that the funding will continue to 2026-27, which is as far as any Government can go. I suspect that there is probably cross-party consensus that it is important that the SAC funding is maintained and that there is a PEF budget line within that.

I have said at the headteacher events that I have been to that I am struck by the normalisation of poverty in our schools, and the existence of food banks and clothing banks. The reality in our schools is that PEF is being used to meet needs that it did not have to meet 10 years ago. That means that the funding is being used in lots of creatively different ways to impact on our schools. For example, a primary school in Kirkcaldy that I visited recently was using it to fund a parents' group. On the face of it, that might not be considered to be an educational intervention, but it is about getting mums involved in their children's education and, in so doing, helping to improve attendance and attainment.

There is a link between allowing our headteachers the autonomy to use that extra funding for best use and the requirement of the Government to reflect on the impact of PEF. We have done that through the PEF sampling report, which tells us a positive story about the detailed impact that it has had.

We also need to ask, what more? Schools are responding to a need that they might not have had to meet in the past, so we are required to reflect on how we resource our schools post-pandemic. I have been keen to discuss that point with headteachers at the national events.

Jackie Dunbar: In the letter that you provided to the committee before today's session, you spoke about additional support needs. Under the section on revised statutory guidance, you said:

"The refreshed Code of Practice will provide further clarity that a diagnosis is not required in order to secure additional support for learning."

Would you expand on that a bit more?

Jenny Gilruth: I gave evidence to the committee on ASN last September, and at that time I gave an update on the refreshed code of practice. On the back of listening and responding to the committee, we made a number of changes to that.

Since that time, we have also had a parliamentary debate, in which the Government committed to a further review of ASN and how it is delivered. I contacted all parties this week to set up a meeting to look at the scope of that review, while being mindful that, as we undertake the review, we will also have to consider the code of practice, which is being updated anyway. I want

committee members and Parliament to feed into that process, as far as possible.

The code of practice is fundamental, but when we consider ASN in its totality, we need to think about how children and young people experience support in schools. When I meet headteachers, classroom assistants and teachers, I am struck by the variation in how needs are met across the country. That has been the subject of recent debate, so it would be remiss of me not to talk about it.

There is a programme for government commitment that looks at better data collection. There is also the Audit Scotland report, which I accept provides a great challenge to the Government, but which I also welcome, because it talks about the need for transparency about ASN spend. The committee will be well aware that we spent more than £1 billion last year in relation to ASN, and the budget bakes in an extra £29 million for local authorities to be used for specialist staff. Transparency and the need for granularity are important.

There have also been arguments and suggestions for a national staged intervention model; Graeme Logan might want to say a little bit more about that. We have been discussing that with headteachers, because they have been clear in their discussions with me that they want to see consistency from local authorities on how their staff experience support and wraparound care for children and young people. The code of practice can go some way towards responding to that, but the wider request from Parliament for the review also has to take that work into consideration.

Graeme Logan (Scottish Government): Different councils operate staged intervention models, which effectively identify the level of need and then the support that a young person gets. There is some variation in how that is applied across the country. As the cabinet secretary said, one idea that has been raised is that we look at the national staged intervention model. For example, if a young person is diagnosed with dyslexia, what should their support be and what entitlement should they have?

We are looking at that more consistently across the country, and, as part of the action plan, we are also looking at a national measurement framework to make sure that we are effectively capturing and recognising the achievements of young people with additional needs and that they get the recognition and parity of esteem that they deserve. There are a number of actions in the action plan that we hope will make an even greater difference to children and young people.

Jackie Dunbar: I will finish off. It would be remiss of me if I did not ask the Minister for Higher

and Further Education a question about North East Scotland College, which is in my area. As you are aware, minister, an open letter from NESCOL was recently published regarding the changes to the funding approach. NESCOL did not think that the changes resolved its long-standing issues, because it covers a wide area. As you are aware, it has a campus in Aberdeen and one in Fraserburgh, so that is a huge area to cover. I do not think that the rural aspect of the issue has ever been explored. Can you say more about funding and what help, if any, can be given in the situation?

Graeme Dey: The first thing to say is that the rebaselining exercise that was carried out with the SFC was requested by the sector. It was made very clear to colleges that, in doing that, there would be winners and losers.

Jackie Dunbar: I cannot believe that I am saying this, but I can hardly hear you, so could you move your microphone up a tiny bit, please?

Graeme Dey: Is that better?

Jackie Dunbar: Yes.

Graeme Dey: Apologies. The rebaselining exercise that was carried out was requested by the sector. The SFC was clear that, in doing that, there would be winners and losers. Despite that, it was probably predictable that the two colleges that were least well served by the exercise took issue with it.

Perhaps more of a surprise was NESCOL's reaction, because it was one of the net winners in that exercise. There was a sectoral uplift of 2.6 per cent, and NESCOL received circa 3.1 per cent in totality, including an increase in the teaching funding.

That said, I have a degree of sympathy with its argument. This is a historic, long-standing issue with the Fraserburgh campus, and NESCOL is right to say that the element of rurality that it has to deal with has not been recognised. I hope that you and NESCOL would appreciate that all the anomalies that sit within quite a complex funding system were never going to be addressed in one giant leap.

The SFC, through the tripartite group, has shown a lot of flexibility and good responsiveness to asks from the sector, and I think that that will continue to be the case. We are trying to evolve the funding model to make it more flexible and agile, better reflect the outputs from the individual institutions and align with the needs of the local and national economies.

I said this in response to a question from Mr Rennie in the chamber a few weeks ago—if it is possible for us to do this, there is a need to add an element of alignment with the needs of the local

and national economy into the funding model. That may well require additional funding, which will be difficult to find in the current economic circumstance, but if we could do that and NESCOL met the criteria, I would look to address that, because I understand the point about the Fraserburgh campus.

Jackie Dunbar: I realise that I have gone over time slightly, convener, so I pass back to you. I may come back in later.

The Convener: Do not worry about it at all. We move to Pam Duncan-Glancy.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): Good morning. I appreciate the opportunity to ask questions. I will start with a general question about education and opportunities in Scotland. Attainment in schools is declining, the attainment gap is widening, overall positive destinations are down, more pupils leave school with no qualifications than ever before, fewer pupils leave with one pass or more at Scottish credit and qualifications framework levels 5 and 6, and the gap in attaining a pass or more at those levels is up. Modern apprenticeship starts are down and youth unemployment is up. Why is education declining and why are opportunities narrowing?

Jenny Gilruth: I believe that Ms Duncan-Glancy and I are going to engage in trading statistics this morning, so, if I may, I will consult my notes.

The proportion of pupils who achieve the expected level in literacy and numeracy across primary and secondary schools reached its highest level ever in 2023-24. The poverty-related attainment gap between young people from the most and the least deprived areas who are meeting literacy standards has reached record low levels. The gap between secondary pupils from those areas who achieve third level in both literacy and numeracy has reached record lows, too. Therefore, I do not accept all the challenges that Ms Duncan-Glancy has put to me in that regard.

Ms Duncan-Glancy also mentioned issues in relation to positive destinations. The proportion of pupils who have gone on to a positive destination three months after leaving school is 95.7 per cent, which is the second highest since records began.

We can engage in trading statistics if Ms Duncan-Glancy wishes to. However, I intend to engage in the substantials in relation to my responsibilities. I do not accept all the challenges that she has set out, because we are seeing improvement in our schools on the narrowing of that gap. For example, the achievement of curriculum for excellence levels—ACEL—data tells us a much more positive story. The examinations data shows a trajectory of improvement since the pandemic. In addition, as I

said, we have the second-highest level on record in relation to positive destinations.

I am not clear whether Ms Duncan-Glancy and I will agree on the statistics that we have traded, but I am happy to take any questions that she might have.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I appreciate that, but the reality is that, this year, 35,400 young people between the ages of 16 and 24 are not in employment, which is an increase. There has also been a reduction in the number of people going to college. We know that the number of positive destinations has gone down, despite the figures that the cabinet secretary has cited. On this Government's watch, opportunities for young people are declining. Can the cabinet secretary explain why that might be? What can she do to address the situation?

Jenny Gilruth: I reiterate that the level of young people who have gone on to a positive destination three months after leaving school is 95.7 per cent, which is the second-highest level since records began. Therefore, I am not sure that I can accept the totality of what Ms Duncan-Glancy has said. When we look in the round at the—

Pam Duncan-Glancy: That data on positive destinations is taken from "Summary Statistics for Attainment and Initial Leaver Destinations No 7", which was published in 2025.

Jenny Gilruth: I know where the data is taken from—it is Scottish Government data.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: In that case, you will know that the level has gone down.

Jenny Gilruth: It is the second highest since records began.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: But it is declining.

Jenny Gilruth: I am sorry—it has declined since last year, but, in totality, there has been a great improvement since 2007. We have narrowed the attainment gap, particularly on the number of young people going on to positive destinations. We know that, historically, that was not always the pathway that they would have found after school. Ms Duncan-Glancy and I are of similar ages. She will remember that, when we were at school, at the end of secondary 4, there was often a cohort of young people who were encouraged to leave and go elsewhere. Their destinations were not tracked, their pathways were not supported, and they often did not go on to positive destinations. We have completely transformed that post-education pathway. There is now far more support for young people at school.

I accept that there has been a slight movement since last year, but, when we consider the statistics in the round, that level is still the second

highest on record, so I am not sure that I can accept your overall negativity about our education system. It is clear from the ACEL data that we are starting to see improvement there, too.

I accept that we are moving into an election year, which might characterise some of our debates in the coming months. However, it is not all doom and gloom in Scotland's schools and our education system. We do a disservice to those who work in our schools, colleges and early years facilities if that is the way in which we choose to characterise the situation.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: On the subject of those who work in our schools, we have shortages of teachers in some secondary subjects and locations. As we have seen from data published as recently as last week, the workforce is burnt out and staff still do not have the non-contact time that they were promised. Some 44 per cent of staff in schools say that, in effect, they work a day each week for nothing. Why, then, has the Government ended up with unemployed teachers being stuck in temporary or supply contracts?

Jenny Gilruth: The member will be well aware that there are currently a number of challenges on teacher numbers. Historically, there has always been a challenge on subject gaps, but we are currently seeing it present in some subjects in more ways than in others. More broadly, we also accept that there are challenges on primary staffing and impermanence, and I am sure that we will come on to discuss those in more detail.

We all know—because we regularly debate these matters in the chamber—that the Government does not employ teachers; local authorities do. I have been clear that, through our budget negotiations with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, I need to agree with local authorities on a funding approach that will protect teacher numbers and also deliver on the point that Ms Duncan-Glancy rightly raised on reducing class contact time, which we know will make a difference in alleviating the workload. She rightly mentioned the burnout that the profession is currently experiencing.

I am sure that that partly relates to the issues that Ms Dunbar raised in relation to PEF because, post-pandemic, schools are doing so much more to meet the needs of their children and young people. The expectations on our classroom teachers in particular are now completely different from what they might have been prior to 2020.

09:45

The responsibility for local workforce planning rests with local government; we have a responsibility nationally and we work with local authorities on that planning every year. However,

through the work of the education assurance board, and through Ms Duncan-Glancy's debate and another debate in this space more recently, we have agreed to have a national approach to workforce planning, with COSLA at the table—indeed, as the employer, local government must be there.

Finally, on teacher numbers and how we resource them, although we have our battles at the Cabinet table over the issue, I put extra money into the budget. We managed to uprate funding to £186.5 million to protect teacher numbers and there is £29 million of funding to support additional support needs in our schools. I must observe that Ms Duncan-Glancy and her party colleagues chose to abstain on the budget, which I do not think was the right call. The extra funding is there for a purpose; without it, I am not sure how we answer the challenge that Ms Duncan-Glancy has put to me today.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: The cabinet secretary often refers to such inputs, but we still have a situation in which teachers cannot get jobs. She mentioned additional support needs. What is the pupil teacher ratio between pupils with additional support needs and ASN teachers?

Jenny Gilruth: The overall PTR is 13.3, but I do not have the ASN figure in front of me. When it asked ministers to appear today, the committee did not provide us with a detailed breakdown of all the areas that it wished to cover. However, I am more than happy to write to the committee with any of that detail.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I think that I can help. In response to a freedom of information request, the Government has detailed how many ASN teachers and ASN pupils there are. That equates to a ratio of approximately one ASN teacher to 208 pupils with additional support needs. Parents, children and young people and teachers and staff in schools will probably recognise that ratio, because they know how stretched things are. What will the cabinet secretary do to make a difference for pupils with additional support needs?

Jenny Gilruth: The premise of Ms Duncan-Glancy's question is that ASN can be met only by an ASN teacher, but that is not the case. As we know, 95 per cent of pupils who are identified as having additional support needs are in mainstream education. Classroom teachers in Scotland have a responsibility to meet additional support needs, which is why they are provided with support to do that in their teacher training—

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Forgive me for talking over you, cabinet secretary, but the data that we saw last week from the trade union said that only 1 per cent of classroom teachers say that they have

time to support pupils with additional support needs.

Jenny Gilruth: That takes me back to the point that I made previously, which is that we need to reduce class contact time. We do so by providing funding through the budget. If other parties can get behind it, we can deliver on that goal by putting in the extra teachers who are needed to allow us to reduce class contact and to create the time for teachers to engage in relation to ASN.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Finally, the Government has said that it will look at ASN accreditation for support staff. However, that has been deprioritised for another focus. When will that be reprioritised? When will support staff be a priority for a workforce plan?

Jenny Gilruth: That has not been deprioritised. It was part of the Bute house agreement, which I am sure that Mr Greer will want to come in on. It is tricky, because there are 32 councils that often do 32 different things when it comes to education; getting them all to agree on something is not without challenge, as the committee knows, because we regularly debate such matters.

Some local authorities—I would like to heap praise on mine, which might surprise Mr Rennie—have an approach to accreditation that involves supporting staff who join the pupil support workforce to become accredited at a certain level; other local authorities take different approaches and do not require accreditation. We will look to publish the report on that in the coming weeks.

I want to put on record my thanks to Mr Greer for all his input on the issue, which I am sure that we will discuss in further detail. ASN accreditation has been a key ask of the profession. I am absolutely committed to delivering on it, but I need to get agreement from local authorities, and from COSLA in particular, on how we roll that out nationally.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Thank you, cabinet secretary. With the convener's forbearance, I have a couple of questions to put to the Minister for Higher and Further Education. In her letter to the committee, the cabinet secretary said that there would be no reduction in funding for colleges this year as a result of the change in the funding model.

However, Glasgow Kelvin College, in my region, has had a net reduction in funding, and it has been left wondering why it has been grouped with the family of colleges that it has been grouped with. Can the minister shed any light on the reasons for the decisions that have been taken and the impact that they have had on colleges such as Glasgow Kelvin College? The fact that they serve a number of areas that have a high level of deprivation does

not seem to have been taken account of in the allocation.

Graeme Dey: As the cabinet secretary has done, I take issue with the statistics that you are quoting. I have the numbers in front of me. Glasgow Kelvin College received a 3.15 per cent uplift. It was one of the main beneficiaries of the rebaselining. Of course, some of that was for lecturers' pay and some was for pension funding, but there was a basic uplift of £170,000 on the college's credit thresholds, so it received more money.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: The minister is right about that data. The £170,000 is a 0.82 per cent net increase, which, as the college put it to me, when you take into consideration its other, wider obligations, is a real-terms cut. Does the allocation take account of the fact that the college serves areas of multiple deprivation and a large proportion of learners with ASN?

Graeme Dey: One of the wider challenges that Glasgow Kelvin College faces is the increase in employer national insurance contributions that was brought in by your Government at Westminster. We received insufficient consequentials to allow us to negate the effects of that. A lot of the pressures that the college faces are outwith our control.

On the nature of the families that colleges were put in as part of the process, that was something that the SFC implemented, and I am happy to ask the SFC to provide a rationale for why Kelvin sits where it does. The colleges in and around Glasgow had a legitimate concern about the way in which they were funded, compared with other colleges, and the exercise in question has begun to address that.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: The minister will be aware that I have written to him about that issue. Colleges have raised some concerns about the decision. I look forward to hearing back from the SFC, through the minister, on how those decisions have been reached.

Finally, minister, do you recognise that colleges in Scotland are the only part of the public sector where staff numbers have decreased significantly? What impact do you think that that will have on skills?

Graeme Dey: I recognise that there has been a decrease in staff over a period of time. Colleges have been evolving their offering because they need to respond to the needs of the economy.

There is an interesting element to that. Sometimes, staff numbers have gone down because the number of courses has been reduced. I can think of at least one college where the number of courses was reduced because of

demand, but the number of students attending that college went up. That is about responding to need.

No one ever wants to see job losses at scale, but we are in a period of evolution in the college sector, as we are in other sectors, and I am optimistic about where colleges will end up in the future. As they evolve their offering, they are better aligning it with the needs of the local and national economy and the needs of learners.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: That period of evolution has meant a 28 per cent reduction since 2007. That represents a significant reduction and quite a long period of evolution.

My final question is for the Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise. Will she set out when the transitions strategy will be published?

Natalie Don-Innes: Absolutely. As the member is aware, we have committed to introducing Scotland's first national transitions to adulthood strategy to ensure that a joined-up approach is taken so that young disabled people who are transitioning to adulthood get the support that they require. I wrote to Ms Duncan-Glancy on that recently. The strategy will be published before summer recess.

Willie Rennie: I have a question for the cabinet secretary that follows on from Pam Duncan-Glancy's question about temporary teachers and short-term contracts. I have been inundated with concerns from a host of teachers who changed careers because they wanted to engage in primary education to shape young minds, but they are limping from one temporary contract to the next, sometimes gathering only a few days' work every month. They cannot claim any benefits because they are receiving some financial income from their work.

Your workforce planning group has estimated that there are 950 more primary teachers than there are jobs. You have also said that you would encourage some of those teachers to move into secondary education or ASN. How many jobs in ASN are available for them?

Jenny Gilruth: I obviously do not have that detail in front of me; I would need to go on myjobscotland to collect it. It is important to recognise that many ASN staff are now employed using the PEF money that I mentioned in my answer to Ms Dunbar.

Mr Rennie raises a wider issue that he has written to me about as part of his constituency correspondence. The situation varies by local authority area. The issue of teacher recruitment practices was one of the first that I raised when I was elected back in 2016, because we have 32 different approaches and I do not think that that is a great way of supporting our teaching profession.

In a debate that we had a few weeks ago, there was a line in the Labour amendment about having a national list of supply staff. I am all for supporting that, and we agreed with the Labour amendment, but we now need COSLA to work with us on delivering that in practice. We see too much inconsistency in how local authorities use contracts and a huge overreliance on probation. We should not divorce the issues of permanency and short-term contracts from that of having a centrally funded probationer scheme. I have committed to reviewing that because, to my mind, we are seeing too much churn in the system, particularly in primary schools. That is not good for our early years teachers, it is not good for supporting them and it is not good for retention.

We need to work with local authorities to encourage them to provide permanent contracts. The budget settlement has been part of that process. The other part of it, which I alluded to in connection with pupil equity funding, concerns the four-year funding streams that the now First Minister committed to when he was cabinet secretary, to give local authorities clear sight of the funding that was coming, so that they could create permanent or longer-term posts, which Mr Rennie asked about.

There are significant challenges for our whole workforce just now, but that issue is not unique to Scotland. Last year, the United Nations published a really helpful report that talks about the precarity of employment that exists across the education landscape in many different countries, which we are seeing across the United Kingdom.

The situation has been partly driven by wages. It was right that we awarded the profession the good pay rises that we awarded it, but that means that local authorities are now having to look at other budget lines. We need to re-evaluate how we fund the totality of the teaching workforce, which was another point that came out of the debate that we held the other week.

Willie Rennie: Let me take you back to those 950—maybe more—teachers who cannot find a permanent contract or even find any work. You offered them the option of teaching pupils who have additional support needs. First, you have not answered the question of how many jobs there are because you clearly do not know. Secondly, how many teachers have taken up that offer? If that is a real offer, teachers want to know how many of them will actually be able to successfully pursue that route and find some kind of work. Can you give us some clarity about how many jobs there are and how many teachers have applied?

Jenny Gilruth: Roles and responsibilities are important here. Mr Rennie knows that local authorities are the employers. What we have done

through the budget agreement, which was made in good faith—

Willie Rennie: Cabinet secretary—

Jenny Gilruth: I hear Mr Rennie speaking over me and ask him to allow me to complete my point.

Extra funding was provided in the budget and there was also extra additional support needs funding, which was ring fenced to local authorities for the provision of specialist staff. It is in their gift how that funding is deployed; that is not my role as cabinet secretary. If Mr Rennie wishes the Government to employ teachers, I would be interested in hearing him expand on that point because I often hear that in the chamber.

The second point is about primary teachers moving into secondary teaching. We are working with the General Teaching Council for Scotland on that very point and we are also looking at creative ways in which we might be able to use professional learning to support some of that work. I met with School Leaders Scotland last week and that body is amenable to that. I must say that the issue of having primary teachers working in secondary schools is not without debate in Scottish education and that our professional associations have differing views on that. I am a secondary specialist by trade, as Mr Rennie knows. I do not think that there is any support, quite rightly, for primary school staff being involved in the delivery of national qualifications and the GTCS would certainly have something to say about that, but there is a role for us in looking again at the role of primary teachers in the early years of secondary education. I know that a number of headteachers are now using primary teachers to deliver the broad general education. That is happening across the country and what matters is how we work with our professional associations to support them in that.

I can come back to Mr Rennie on his substantive points about numbers, but I must also say that we were not provided with any detail in advance of today's meeting about what the committee wanted to consider. If Mr Rennie wants me to obtain that information from local authorities, which employ our ASN staff, I am more than happy to write to the committee with that detail.

10:00

Willie Rennie: Yes, I would want that. To be blunt, teachers are pretty angry. They are lurching from one contract to the next. They were promised a career, but you produced too many primary school teachers because you were unable to match supply with demand. That was your responsibility, through the initial teacher education institutions, and that is what teachers are furious about.

In a throwaway comment, you have offered the option of teaching pupils with additional support needs when you do not know how many jobs there are, and you do not even know how many teachers have applied for those jobs. That is why teachers are angry. They think that they are being treated with disrespect, and I agree with them, because it is unacceptable that they are being left in this position. It is also not good for them in the classroom. I am sorry to be so angry about this, but I see every day just how angry teachers are, and I hope that you see that, too.

There are 950 surplus primary school teachers at the moment. At the end of this process—let us say this time next year—how many surplus primary school teachers will we have?

Jenny Gilruth: On the substantive point, I do not want there to be surplus primary school teachers. I would like them all to be in employment—

Willie Rennie: No, but how many do you think that there will be—will there be any?

Jenny Gilruth: Mr Rennie is asking me to make a guess about something that will happen in the future. That is not my responsibility—

Willie Rennie: You see—this is what they are angry about.

Jenny Gilruth: I am hearing Mr Rennie talk over me. I hear what he is saying. I am well aware of the challenge, because it is put to me regularly. The issue that I face as cabinet secretary is one that we will keep coming back to in this committee, namely that the Government does not employ our teachers. Every education secretary before me has faced the same challenge in relation to how we can get local government to commit to protecting teacher numbers, because we know that that is what makes a difference in our classrooms.

It is worth pointing out that, since 2014, the number of permanent posts has remained static at around 80 per cent. There has also been an increase of 2,500 in the number of teachers in Scotland's schools, because we are protecting funding for teacher numbers. On what would have happened had we not done that, COSLA's 2022 budget proposal included a reduction of up to 8,000 teachers. That is not acceptable.

I hear Mr Rennie expressing the anger from the profession. I accept that, and I have taken action. For the academic year 2025-26, the initial teacher education intake for primary school teaching programmes has been reduced by 10 per cent to respond to that exact criticism and that exact point. However, it is not good enough for us to have a continued debate about the Government not acting when the Government cannot employ

teachers, so what is the answer to Mr Rennie's point? We have to work with local authorities. The work that has begun to establish an education and childcare assurance board is part of that. The budget agreement, which was made in good faith, absolutely has to be about not making throwaway comments but putting cold hard cash into the system to employ ASN teachers, ASN specialists, speech and language therapists, educational psychologists or classroom teachers to make a difference. I protected the funding at the national level, and I now expect local authorities to deliver on it locally, as they are elected to do.

Willie Rennie: I will move on to a question for the higher education minister. He will recall that, during the budget negotiations, we secured £1.4 million for Corseford College in Inchinnan in Renfrewshire, which is for adults with particular needs. There was a requirement for an evaluation process before the funding could be continued for a further two years. Can the minister give the committee an update on that?

Graeme Dey: To be clear, the work that we did jointly to progress that was on the basis that it would be the Corseford model or something that was based on the learning from the evaluation. The evaluation commenced in March and I am pleased to say that it is a timely question from Mr Rennie, because we have received the initial feedback on the evaluation in the past few days. I am not going to commit absolutely to the way forward yet. However, I can say that the report has reached what we would describe as broadly positive conclusions about the Corseford model, with some suggestions for improvements in relation to staffing, processes and approach. We are now going to look at what that means in practice. I am optimistic that we will have something positive to say fairly quickly. It needs to happen fairly quickly, because there is a lot of uncertainty around it.

The exercise that we have carried out, which I accept should have happened previously, is a proper assessment of the outcomes—what worked well, what did not work so well and what we can learn from it. I hope that I will be able to say something more definitive shortly.

Willie Rennie: I thank the minister for that. Capability Scotland, the staff, the students and the families will be pleased if we make some positive progress on this. I have visited the place myself and I have seen what I, as a layman, think is a good facility, so I hope that we are able to move quite swiftly on this.

The Convener: Cabinet secretary, I have a question to follow on from Willie Rennie's questions. When did you last meet Scottish Teachers for Permanence?

Jenny Gilruth: I am scheduled to meet the group's members shortly. You raised this matter with me in the chamber and I am scheduled to meet them in the coming weeks, I think—before the end of the term.

The Convener: The last meeting was on 28 November 2024 and its members had not heard anything, so I am encouraged to hear that a meeting is now in the diary. However, they also believed that you would convene a meeting between them, COSLA and yourself. Has that also happened, or will it happen?

Jenny Gilruth: I will engage with the group's representatives at the next meeting.

As cabinet secretary, the route for me to engage with the workforce and the profession is via the professional associations that I meet regularly. However, I have met that new group, which is not affiliated to the trade unions, as I understand it. I look forward to meeting its representatives soon.

The Convener: Thank you very much. We move to George Adam.

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): Thank you, convener. Before I ask my questions, I would just like to say a few words with regard to you convening this meeting from a tropical island on the other side of the world.

The Convener: Please carry on, Mr Adam.

George Adam: For the record, I am not happy with the idea. I find it farcical that you would even think that you could actually do that online from the other side of the world.

To be fair, this is the best behaved you have been in the past couple of weeks, so perhaps being online suits you, and not actually meeting people in person is maybe your best way forward.

Your aggressive manner and the lack of respect that you have shown to people who have come to the committee in the past has made the Parliament look bad. I want to put that on the record, because we have tried on numerous occasions to talk to you, take you aside and ask you to do the right thing, but you continue with your behaviour, and quite frankly, I think that it makes you look small and pathetic.

My question is for the cabinet secretary and it is about the UK Child Poverty Action Group. The group has recently spoken about the increasing costs of the school day, which is something that we have been hearing about for some time now.

I have also heard that Keir Starmer is seeking to copy some of the Scottish Government's good ideas about free school meals. Can you tell me where the Scottish Government is with its ideas to help to reduce the cost of the school day? In a

cost of living crisis, parents and families will be finding that an extra burden.

Jenny Gilruth: I thank Mr Adam for his question. We are taking a range of different actions to reduce the cost of the school day, not least of which is reducing the cost of school trips by providing funding to local authorities to that end. There is also the work on free school meal provision, which I think Mr Adam was alluding to.

As we know, and as I said to Jackie Dunbar earlier, pupil equity funding is being used in many different schools to help to reduce the cost of the school day. The substantive part of Mr Adam's question leans back to the point that I was making to Ms Dunbar earlier, which is that schools are now filling a gap that did not use to exist. Because of the erosion of the welfare state in certain areas, schools have stepped up to the mark, where arguably they should not have had to. That has impacted on how they engage with PEF and with the wider school community. They have done that because they care about their children and young people, but my argument would be that they should not have to do that.

We are taking a range of different measures to reduce the cost of the school day. We know that the funding that is being provided for free school meals is saving families up to £450 per child per year, which is making a real difference. There is also funding in the budget for the roll-out of the bright start breakfast funding, which has been welcomed. Across Scotland, about half of all schools have some delivery of breakfast provision and many schools use PEF to meet that need.

There is not a universal structure for meeting that need across the country, as we have explored with Mr Rennie and other members. How local authorities deliver that varies, but the Government is providing funding to reduce the cost of the school day in many different ways—free school meals, school trips and, more broadly, pupil equity funding.

George Adam: It is quite interesting that—I think that we have discussed this before, cabinet secretary—in all my time on the committee, we have seen PEF being used in schools that have leadership, where they can see the issue and they start to deal with it. It is not what PEF was originally meant for, but it is filling that gap. It just shows the situation that many schools find themselves in, because of the decisions of the UK Government.

Surely we should be asking the UK Government to look at some of the issues that it has, so that we can use PEF in the way that it is meant to be used instead of to paper over the cracks caused by a failing UK Government?

Jenny Gilruth: I agree with the sentiment behind Mr Adam's question. I do not yet know whether there will be an announcement today about lifting the two-child cap, but we know that that would alleviate child poverty at the stroke of a pen. There are many actions that the UK Government could take and I hope that we will hear more about that today. Unless both our Governments work in unison to tackle child poverty, it will not work. We know that the Scottish child payment has been a game changer in ensuring that Scotland's child poverty levels stay lower than those in other parts of the United Kingdom, but we must see a concerted effort across these islands and must be able to work with the UK Government, so I really hope that we will see more progress from the UK Government to that end today.

George Adam: I move to questions for the Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise. The minister and I were at a recent Promise oversight board event about keeping the Promise, which I hosted in Parliament. One big issue that was discussed was the need for a cross-Government approach, which is interesting after what the cabinet secretary just said. Can the minister say a bit more about progress on that? Where are we at on working together with the UK Government to make a difference?

Natalie Don-Innes: Mr Adam raises a really important point. I have said a lot about the delivery of the Promise. We will not deliver that in isolation: we will need a joint approach between the national and UK Governments and we must work with UK Government colleagues, local government and our third sector.

We are taking a number of different approaches to ensure that we have that joint approach. For example, at Government level, we have a Cabinet sub-committee on the Promise, which includes ministerial colleagues who have a relevant interest, to ensure that everyone is aware of the actions that are being taken within their own remits. I recently met Paul McLennan, the Minister for Housing, to discuss housing issues in relation to delivering the Promise.

In relation to local authorities, the Promise progress framework will be instrumental in understanding how we are keeping the Promise and I welcome the oversight board's recognition of that. That framework has been developed by COSLA, the Scottish Government and The Promise Scotland, with input from a range of key stakeholders, including Who Cares? Scotland, CELCIS and a number of other organisations.

To go back to my first point, this is the first step in understanding progress in relation to what is being delivered, by whom and how we are working together to deliver on the aims. There will be a

number of actions that we can take from that, and a range of learning.

I have met UK Government colleagues to discuss different aspects of the Promise. We are, obviously, on quite separate journeys, but it is important to discuss that because it relates to a number of approaches that are being taken by the UK Government and we must be aware of those areas. It is relevant to ensure that we are talking to each other because of issues such as cross-border placements in secure care.

Finally, I draw members' attention to the progress with, and success of, the whole family wellbeing fund. Mr Adam will be aware that that provides funding to children's services planning partnerships in local areas to encourage a joined-up approach so that local authorities are working with relevant partners and key stakeholders. There can even be barriers to having departments within local authorities speaking to each other at times, but the whole family wellbeing fund has really helped to transform and embed approaches, which is key.

I thank Mr Adam for that question, because it is really important to place on record the importance of having a joined-approach to delivering on the Promise.

George Adam: You made a point about local government. You and I come from almost the exact same background in local government, and we come from the same place. You know that local leadership and ownership make a difference to issues and projects such as this. The committee has seen that some councils are proactive, and the idea behind the Promise is part of the very ethos of their work, but that others are less like that. Arguments can be made about the significance of their size, in that smaller councils can react a lot more quickly than larger ones, but we are talking about changing the whole culture. How are we ensuring that local councils take that culture change on board, develop it and make it part of their on-going work in their day-to-day business?

10:15

Natalie Don-Innes: That is a really important point. I do not want to do local authorities a disservice; there are difficulties. As Mr Adam has stated, challenges arise from the different demographics in our range of 32 local authorities, so it is correct to say that different approaches are being taken. Some local authorities are perhaps further forward in some areas and others in different ones. That is why it is so important that we are able to track progress in relation to the Promise progress framework.

I also want to mention a point that I tend to labour, which is about the importance of sharing best practice. In recent years, I have been to a number of conferences and events where local authorities come together with third sector partners and Government to understand what others are doing and the different approaches that are being taken. Having such opportunities to come together, engage and understand the various approaches is extremely important. Achieving that, in itself, is really good progress.

As I said in reply to Mr Adam's original point, there are a number of ways to track delivery of the Promise. We are making good progress in ensuring that transformational change is happening through the various approaches being taken at local authority level.

George Adam: As we know, minister, all roads lead to Paisley. Last Friday, the Government announced extra funding that will expand the Scottish Football Association's extra time programme. I mention that mainly because the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice made the announcement while visiting a project run by St Mirren FC Charitable Foundation, which you will know does great work in both our constituencies. Can you say a bit about the programme, what the extra funding will do and how it will make a difference?

Natalie Don-Innes: Absolutely. I am very keen on the SFA programme. I visited one of its projects and can say that what it delivers for targeted primary school children from low-income families, through provision of before-school, after-school and holiday activity clubs, is fantastic. As Mr Adam rightly said, last Friday we announced that we are increasing our investment in the programme to £5.5 million. That will allow the programme to increase the number of clubs that it supports from 31 to 53 and ensure that it will reach children and young people across Scotland. The programme is very important because, as we are aware, families and children have different needs so taking a one-size-fits-all approach is not appropriate. Understanding that will be absolutely instrumental as we work towards establishing a system for school-age childcare in future.

Recently, an annual impact report on the programme was published, which highlighted the improved outcomes for children who participate, and particularly for those from families on low incomes. That is one of two publications; a more detailed process evaluation report will be published soon, which will explore some of the themes that came out of the first report, such as tackling child poverty, improving school attendance and achieving improved outcomes for children.

I really encourage any members who have not visited one of the projects to do so, because they are fantastic. The children and young people who spoke to me at the one that I visited said that they were having a fantastic time, so expanding the programme is a very positive move.

George Adam: The extra time programme is an example of on-going projects that I, for one, have been very supportive of in all my time in the Parliament and, before that, as a councillor. The approaches of teams such as St Mirren Football Club, and the great work that Gayle Brannigan, the St Mirren FC Charitable Foundation chief executive, does in our area, show how our national game can be used to make a difference in young people's lives.

Instead of talking about the negative aspects of our national game in the Parliament, should we not talk about the good work that our national sport can help to deliver? I remember that, years ago, a chairman of St Mirren FC asked when social workers would be seconded to the club. It seemed a silly idea, but the more people thought about it the more they realised that social workers going in wearing St Mirren polo shirts instead ones with the Renfrewshire Council logo on the back would make a big difference to the attitude of the people they were dealing with. It is almost a third sector ideal. That was my very long-winded way of asking whether there is scope for us to look at the matter and develop it further.

Natalie Don-Innes: I think so. The fact that we have increased our investment in the programme and extended it proves that there are positive outcomes from it, and it could be further extended. As I have alluded to, the evaluation will be key to our understanding and our consideration of a future school-age childcare system. I agree with Mr Adam's point.

George Adam: Finally, I have a question for the Minister for Higher and Further Education. I have the advantage of sitting in sunny Paisley, where I can watch various computers to see what is happening in the news. I have just seen that there has been talk from the UK Government about funding for the Turing scheme being cut from £110 million to £78 million. We have been hearing how wonderful the scheme is, how it will make a difference and how it could be almost a better version of Erasmus+. What is the minister's attitude to the cut? I have just seen the headline, and I am a bit concerned about it.

Graeme Dey: So am I. On Monday, I met Baroness Smith from the UK Government, whose engagement with me I appreciated. I said two things to her about the issue: that I understood that difficult decisions had to be made in government in challenging financial circumstances, but that the decision was deeply

disappointing and concerning. As Mr Adam has alluded to, the Turing scheme has been welcome. It has not been a replacement for Erasmus+, and it was never going to be, but it has been incredibly important and it has also been oversubscribed. I expected that the reduction in funding would be announced today, but I was not sure that it would be this early in the day. It will be the cause of significant concern, particularly for our universities and colleges.

George Adam: How will it directly affect you, minister, and people here in Scotland?

Graeme Dey: Scotland's share of the Turing funding has reduced over the three years that the scheme has been in operation, while the demand from Scottish institutions and organisations has increased. You will forgive me—I need to digest the announcement in its totality and have conversations with those who will be impacted by it, which I am sure will happen over the next few days—but there is no doubt that it is a significant setback.

George Adam: I am sorry, minister, for putting you on the spot. I just saw the announcement flash up on my screen. I am a sad individual who has alerts about anything to do with my committees, and I thought that, while you are here, I should ask you a question about it. Surely Scottish pupils will also have difficulty as a result of the cut, because it will reduce their opportunities.

Graeme Dey: My understanding is that, notwithstanding the cut, the UK Government wants to retain a focus on the disadvantaged, although we have yet to see what that will mean in reality.

One of the worries that the funding cut will create, particularly for the university sector, is what it says about any commitment to returning to Erasmus+. A couple of weeks ago, there were very welcome indications from the UK Government that it would actively explore that option with the European Union. I know that there is an appetite within the EU to welcome the UK back into Erasmus+ but my understanding is that, currently, we are only at the stage where we are having talks about what those talks would look like. I think that the announcement will cause concern for those who were excited at the prospect of a return to Erasmus+ in some form.

One might argue that Erasmus+ was a costly scheme—certainly, some people held that view—and I recall that, around the time that the UK withdrew from the EU, its budget was doubled. Obviously, there will be a financial aspect to the negotiations that will take place about the UK's potential return to the scheme. The UK Government's announcement will not encourage

the view that things are looking hopeful in that regard, but I hope that I am proved wrong.

The Convener: Before I move to Pam Duncan-Glancy, who would like to come in with a supplementary question, I will go back to Mr Adam's first question about the cost of the school day and free school meals. Cabinet secretary, would you like to elaborate on any aspect of your response to the Government-initiated question this morning? *[Interruption.]*

Jenny Gilruth: Convener, I was just checking with my officials that the Government-initiated question has now been published.

The Convener: Yes, it has.

Jenny Gilruth: Eight local authorities will be funded through our test of change work, which allows us to look at how we might be able to scale up the delivery of free school meals in the future. Schools across the country have different needs. The GIQ sets that out in more detail, but it looks at secondary schools in particular.

The Convener: I am very pleased to see that my own local authority, Moray Council, is one of the eight that have been selected from the 17 applicants. What happens to the local authorities who wanted to be part of the scheme but were not selected? What feedback are they given, and what can they do while the study continues?

Jenny Gilruth: I might defer to my officials on that, convener. It is fair to say that the process was oversubscribed with bids from local authorities that are keen to upscale their delivery of free school meals. I might hand over to Graeme Logan on that point.

On your wider point, we want to engage with those other local authorities on how we can support them, because we want to encourage them all to take part in a wider roll-out of free school meals.

Perhaps Graeme could say a bit more on our engagement.

Graeme Logan: There was a process of engagement with COSLA to select local authorities. Initially, we were unsure how much interest there would be. The pilot for children in secondary schools whose families are in receipt of the Scottish child payment was part of the budget agreement. Beyond those eight local authorities, we will aim to work with COSLA and all interested local authorities to share learning on areas such as uptake and engagement with young people in the event of any further roll-out, given that the Government is committed to starting further roll-outs of free school meals when finance is available. At this stage, though, that funding is for the eight local authorities that were identified today.

The Convener: Since you have named the eight local authorities that were successful, will you publish the names of those that applied but were not successful? Will questions be asked as to why a local authority would not want to be part of the scheme?

Jenny Gilruth: It is difficult to say why a local authority might not want to be part of it. We would want them all to be engaged to some extent. However, decisions needed to be made because a limited level of funding was available through the budget negotiation process. Our next steps will need to involve engaging with COSLA about the local authorities that were not successful and, more broadly, to learn lessons from the pilot about how we might scale up the process at national level in the future.

The Convener: I requested the details of those who applied but were not successful, so that members could know whether they should approach their local authority to ask, "Did you apply? If you did not, why did you not apply?". That might be helpful for some members.

Jenny Gilruth: I could take further advice from my officials on that. I have no objection to sharing that detail with the committee, and I could provide that in written form following today's session.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I want to build on some of George Adam's questions on the SFA programme with questions for the Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise.

There are really good examples of that programme in Glasgow. However, one issue that has been brought to my attention is that some childcare providers have been providing services at reduced rates for families for a long time, but now the SFA is providing another opportunity, which is free and entirely useful and helpful for a lot of those families. How does the minister see both parts of the system working together so that they do not displace each other? What obligations are being placed on the SFA programme that are similar to those that are placed on other early years or childcare providers to ensure child protection, safeguarding and so on?

Natalie Don-Innes: In a moment I will bring in Andrew Watson to speak about those obligations. I say to Ms Duncan-Glancy that I have heard about that issue frequently, and not just in Glasgow. I know about the specific issue that she raises with me. Concerns have been raised about that by stakeholders across the school-age childcare sector.

We are doing work on the regulation of school-age childcare, and we are trying to take a more balanced approach to allow for a system in which both those alternate models can work together. We do not want a situation in which providers are

displaced. As I made clear to Mr Adam, we want to ensure that the school-age childcare systems that we have in place now benefit us in terms of the learning that we take from them and, most importantly, that they provide good experiences for children and young people and support families who are part of our country's workforce.

I am actively involved in looking at the regulation of the sector, and I am considering whether we can strike a more balanced approach in some areas. I will bring in Andrew Watson to elaborate on that.

10:30

Andrew Watson (Scottish Government): Ms Don-Innes has made a key point about balancing our approach to regulation. Overall, we have about 20 projects in the school-age childcare programme, which reflects the fact that there is a mixed model of delivery provision at the moment. In setting out our future vision for school-age childcare, we need to understand a range of elements, including regulation. We are working with the Care Inspectorate to take that piece of work forward.

The outcomes of both the workstream on regulation and the evaluation that Ms Don-Innes mentioned earlier, on the impact of the extra time programme and other aspects of the school-age programme, will enable us to determine how to take forward the overall model of provision. We are aware that there are some issues there.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: The organisations that have been operating in this space for a long time might feel that they already have quite a bit of regulation around them, but the newer system might not have as much. In which direction is regulation likely to go?

Natalie Don-Innes: I probably cannot go into detail right now because, as Ms Duncan-Glancy would agree, safeguarding children is the most important thing. However, I hear what she says about providers who have been around for a long time potentially facing quite a bit of regulation. I am looking at the legislation and various approaches that we could take to try to strike a more balanced approach. Although I cannot give any more detail on that just now, I will be more than happy to share it with the committee once I have a bit more to say. I reassure Ms Duncan-Glancy that I have heard about the issue directly from a number of school-age childcare providers when I have been out on visits to them, and I am actively working on it.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Thank you.

The Convener: This is probably an appropriate time for us to take a comfort break.

10:31

Meeting suspended.

10:45

On resuming—

The Convener: We continue our session with the cabinet secretary and ministers.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): First, perhaps I could touch on one or two issues that have been raised already. On mainstreaming and ASN, Mr Logan answered the point about inconsistency across the country. I have seen a number of constituents whose children have additional support needs and who feel that, because they are in Glasgow, their children have to have much greater need in order to get into a special school, whereas they would get into a special needs school more easily if they lived in one of the surrounding authorities. Do you have any thoughts on that?

Jenny Gilruth: I might bring in Mr Logan, because Mr Mason mentioned him. To answer the point, we might argue that the variance on ASN that we see across the country—this relates to Mr Rennie's point on teacher contracts—has been a feature of our educational landscape for many decades. It is what happens when, sometimes, 32 councils are doing 32 different things.

That is not always good for parents and children, particularly children with identified additional support needs, who need consistency. There is a feeling among parents groups in particular that support might look different in different local authorities and, as a result, might be better elsewhere, which I do not think is fair. The revised code of practice, which Ms Dunbar asked about earlier, is about giving a clearer, consistent message. For example, it will provide further clarity on the previously addressed point that a diagnosis is not needed to obtain support.

To respond to Mr Mason's point, the code will also give further clarity on the reasons for placing request decisions that fall under the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004. The transitions chapter will also be strengthened, reflecting concerns about ASN pupils moving from primary into secondary.

The code will also look to clarify the relationship between co-ordinated support plans and other children's and young people's plans through a staged intervention model. That goes back to the point that I discussed with Ms Dunbar about whether we should have a national staged intervention model, which would be quite a radical departure from where we are currently. However, it is important that the Government reflects on that and responds to it accordingly, given the concerns

that MSPs have recently raised and debated, so that we can consider it all in the round when we agree the scope of the ASN review that we have committed to.

Graeme Logan: That covers it, cabinet secretary. As you said, Mr Mason's point is largely about placing requests for specialist provision. It is also worth highlighting that individual needs are being met by many local innovations, such as nurture spaces, specialist classes and units in mainstream schools and the use of technologies as alternatives to specialist provision.

As you said, cabinet secretary, the code of practice will provide further clarity on the reasons for the decisions around placing requests. There will be a public consultation exercise on that, so that we get a range of views before the code of practice is finalised.

John Mason: Thank you very much.

Another topic that has been mentioned is the inability of teachers to get a permanent job. My feeling is that, once teachers have had their training in cities such as Glasgow, they are reluctant to leave. That might be for good reasons if they have built up friends or have a family and all the rest of it. I think that I saw in the media this week that Papa Westray has struggled to get a teacher for its school for six years, so there seems to be a bit of an urban-rural split. Do you agree that that is the case? Once young teachers have trained, how do we encourage them not to stay in the city but to move into rural areas?

Jenny Gilruth: We took up that case directly with Orkney Islands Council, which was very clear that what Mr Mason suggests is not what happened. As I understand it from what my officials have said, the issue relates to the movement towards spending 0.1 of the school week on management time, so I am not sure that what Mr Mason said is accurate.

The wider point that Mr Mason raised is live. I did my teacher training in Glasgow many years ago, and I ticked the box that said I was willing to work anywhere in the country, as people will be fed up of hearing.

The preference waiver scheme that we operate, which offers £8,000 to secondary teachers and £6,000 to primary teachers as a golden handshake, is not being taken up in the way that it was before the pandemic. Part of the challenge is that, during the pandemic, we gave probationer teachers a job in their local authority, which I think has fed into the belief that there will be a job for them in their local authority at the end of their training. That has never been the case; it has always been a competitive marketplace. I remember what it was like for me many years ago.

I had to apply to a multitude of local authorities across the country, and I had to move.

I accept Mr Mason's point that moving is much easier for some people than it is for others. If you are single or do not have a family and—to be blunt—you have the money to do it, you can move.

There are other incentives that we need to build on. We need to work with local authorities to encourage people to move to different parts of the country.

We have challenges in Aberdeenshire Council and Highland Council. I have addressed those challenges directly with both local authorities. In the past, local authorities such as Aberdeenshire have worked with us on part funding programmes that encourage people to resettle. Additional funding is available for people who work in rural schools. In the round, in reviewing the probationer scheme, we will have to consider the preference waiver scheme, which we know is not as popular as it arguably should be, if we are to fill the gaps that we accept exist in some of the rural and remote locations that Mr Mason spoke about.

John Mason: The Promise bill has also been raised. I accept that you cannot say exactly what will be in it, but I met Who Cares? Scotland last week and its big ask is that the bill should include the right to independent advocacy. Is the minister able to say anything on that score?

Natalie Don-Innes: I can tell Mr Mason that, although I cannot disclose the contents of the bill at the moment, that has been considered in the process of its introduction. However, I am aware of the calls from Who Cares?, from care-experienced children and young people, and from other organisations that are involved, and I will be happy to discuss the contents of the bill—

John Mason: That is fine—just as long as the issue is on the minister's radar. The convener and I met a group of care-experienced young people from Wales the other week, and it appeared that they already have the right to independent advocacy. I am not sure whether that is exactly comparable with the Scottish situation, but that is what they told us. It will be interesting to see the bill.

I will move on to another sector. I realise that Liz Smith is here today and may want to raise points about her bill, but I want to raise this issue myself. The committee has been copied into a certain amount of correspondence between the minister and Liz Smith about her Schools (Residential Outdoor Education) (Scotland) Bill. The committee was very enthusiastic about the idea of residential outdoor education, but, for me, cost was the big issue. Could we forget about the bill and put some money into a pot that would top up the existing

system? Is that an option? Ms Don-Innes's letter of 10 June said that Liz Smith had to engage with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the trade unions, which seems an impossible barrier to me.

Natalie Don-Innes: We discussed the bill at length the last time that I was at the committee, and I am aware that Liz Smith is here and may want to discuss it during her questioning.

I have been clear about the Government's position, our support for outdoor education in all its forms and our support of the principles in relation to outdoor education. However, there are very clear concerns about not just affordability but equity of provision as well as the workforce implications. I have been having productive conversations with Ms Smith in person and via correspondence about how she could amend the bill to combat some of the concerns that have been raised by the committee and the Government. I am also looking at non-legislative options that I have been discussing with members, and I am more than happy to discuss those with Mr Mason outside the committee.

John Mason: At the moment, I am just looking for an assurance that things are moving forward, because the bill seemed to get a little bit stuck at one point.

Natalie Don-Innes: Very productive conversations about the bill are on-going with Ms Smith, and I will arrange another meeting with her—as long as she is happy with that—prior to the summer recess.

I assure Mr Mason that we have been working at pace, because I am aware that recess is a long period during which we might be more limited in what we can do. I have been trying to be as proactive as possible before recess.

John Mason: Thank you for that.

I have a much more general question about young people going into careers. I go into schools and ask how many girls are thinking about engineering, and the number is still very few. There still seem to be gender stereotypes. Further, some schools still have a big emphasis on university—in some schools, apprenticeships do not seem to be pushed quite so much. Teachers cannot know about every single job that is out there, but we have picked up in the committee and elsewhere that sometimes the advice that young people get does not cover the broad range of options. I realise that this is a very general question, but do you have any thoughts about where we are going in the long term in trying to get young girls into careers such as engineering?

Graeme Dey: I know that we have three and a half hours, but I could take up most of that time on

this subject. I have said before that, in the long term, the careers element of the Withers report will be the most important part of the entire review that he carried out. There is absolutely no doubt that we are coming up short in our careers offering. There is a collective responsibility for that—it is not just the responsibility of careers advisers or teachers. One of the biggest influences—indeed, the biggest influence—on young people when it comes to making career choices is parents. It is a real problem if parents are not alive to all the opportunities that are out there—for example, if they are prejudiced against apprenticeships. We see the result of that in the apprenticeship attrition rates and in the college and university drop-out rates.

Funnily enough, quite a lot of work is being done on the issue, but it is the area of reform that I am most optimistic about delivering on quickly. We have a vehicle that was put together—the careers services collaborative—to bring every aspect of the careers service and everyone who should be influencing people's decisions on their careers around the table. Over the next few weeks and months, I will announce the new co-chairs of that group and meet with them to pursue the very points that you made, Mr Mason.

There is no doubt that the gender point remains a huge issue. Prejudices exist in schools and in families—the idea that there are some careers that are for boys and some careers that are for girls. A useful piece of work was done by the Scottish Apprenticeship Advisory Board's gender group. I intend to weave that into all our reform as a matter of course, because it was really useful in relation to looking at and addressing these issues.

On the point about universities, we all know that the push for academic performance with a view to young people going to university remains the overarching approach in some institutions. However, that is not the case in many schools; there are many enlightened schools that are embracing different ways of coming at the issue. That works best where there are careers advisers sitting in the school, doing what they do with the knowledge of the landscape; where Developing the Young Workforce is operating in the school to complement that work; and where the school leadership is focused on the right outcome for every child and not simply on trying to get them to go to university.

There is lots of good practice. My job over the next few months is to try to pull that together and to get everyone to take responsibility for their part in this. It is not just about schools; it is about the careers advice that is available in colleges, universities and the home. We need to fundamentally address and meet the challenge of making sure that our young people have the best

information available to them so that they can make the right choice for them.

John Mason: I realise that it is a big subject, so thank you very much for that response.

The Convener: Before I go to Joe FitzPatrick, I will go back to the Minister for Children, Young People and the Promise. Minister, do you agree with John Mason when he says that expecting Liz Smith to meet and almost negotiate with trade unions and COSLA over teacher contracts with regard to her bill is an almost impossible barrier? Is it appropriate to ask the member in charge of the bill to do that, or are there other mechanisms that could be used?

Natalie Don-Innes: I do not think that it would be appropriate to negotiate. I certainly would not class that as appropriate for either myself or the member in charge. However, as I have said in my correspondence with Ms Smith, it is appropriate for her to engage with COSLA and trade unions so that she has more of an understanding of some of the bill's implications and is able to relay that to the Government. However, I do not think that it would be appropriate to negotiate.

The Convener: Would you be satisfied with Ms Smith meeting representatives from COSLA and the trade unions, listening to them and reporting back? That would effectively be her element of that request satisfied.

Natalie Don-Innes: I do not know whether I could say that I would be wholly satisfied with that, but it would be significant progress and very helpful.

11:00

The Convener: If that did not satisfy you, what more would Liz Smith need to do with regard to those meetings to meet your aspirations of her as the member in charge? I agree with Mr Mason that, on paper, it seems as though a barrier has been put in place. I am encouraged by what you are saying, but I want to be clear about your expectations of those meetings.

Natalie Don-Innes: As I say, at the moment, I would just like those meetings to take place. I have relayed that to Ms Smith in correspondence. I will consider the position once those conversations have taken place.

The Convener: Thank you. We now go to Joe FitzPatrick.

Joe FitzPatrick (Dundee City West) (SNP): My substantive question will be about the University of Dundee, but I will first pick up on a few areas that other members have already touched on.

The convener has talked about the additional pressures that teachers are facing and how we

support them in tackling them. Although you, as cabinet secretary, are responsible for setting national education policy, as you said in your response, one of the challenges for the Government is that local authorities are directly responsible for delivery. The issues that have been raised by the convener are important and they are having an impact on children and young people's education. How do we ensure that the Scottish Government, local authorities and, crucially, our trade unions and staff members work together as one to tackle some of that, when there are sometimes conflicts in what people want to get out of the process, even if everybody wants to do what is best for the young folk?

Jenny Gilruth: We have talked today in the round about some of the pressures that our teaching workforce face, not least with regard to behaviour, additional support needs and expectations. More broadly, I have engaged substantially with our professional associations on all those points, and they have been key to driving some of the change that we have seen.

The national action plan on behaviour was quite a departure and a shift in tone from the Government on the issue. I do not know to what extent members have reflected on that, but there has been a shift with regard to talking about behaviour in schools. We need to accept that and accept that there is a challenge. I have been up front about that for the past two-and-a-half years, because I know—from my friends who are not politicians and because of my engagement with trade unions and headteachers—how difficult the situation is in schools just now.

Something is happening in our schools in the post-pandemic period. We saw that in the behaviour in Scottish schools research, but we also see it across the world. I alluded to the work that has been done by the UN, changes in behaviour, dysregulation and changes in the type of learning and teaching that we have.

Mr FitzPatrick's substantive question was about support for teachers, and I have a couple of points to make on that. First, in 2023, I announced the establishment of the new centre for teaching excellence, and we know now that the host institution is Glasgow. In the coming weeks, we will announce opportunities for staff to take part in that centre, which I think will be key. That is an offer to the profession. It is quite unique. It is about pedagogy and excellent learning and teaching. We know that that makes a difference. We have forgotten some of that in recent times, but we need to go back to the bread and butter of quality classroom teaching that makes a difference at the chalk face. The centre for teaching excellence is an offer for teachers to come out of school on secondment and have an opportunity to engage in

academic practice, then to go back out into the system.

The second point is about reducing class contact. To me, that is fundamental. We have to free up teachers to engage in the processes of educational improvement and education reform that we want to drive. We will do that by reducing their workload and class contact. In order to deliver that, I have to work through that tripartite structure with our professional associations and, of course, with COSLA. That process has not been without its frustrations—I think that members know that.

The point that Joe FitzPatrick made about teacher numbers is in a similar space. I can talk about how I have protected funding at national level for teacher numbers, but it is challenging when local authorities then decide to take that extra money and make cuts regardless. The budget agreement that we have reached with COSLA was agreed in good faith, so I expect local authorities to go back to 2023 levels, because that is what the budget, with extra funding, provided for. In so doing, councils had to make substantive progress in relation to reducing class contact.

In February, we put a suggestion to the tripartite group about how that might work, but COSLA said it needed more time. I understand that COSLA will come forward with a paper in the coming weeks, before the end of this term, that will contain proposals about how that might work. We need to talk about the practicalities. The arrangement will look a bit different in primary schools, where it will arguably be more challenging to deliver than in secondary schools.

On the broader working relationship, the new education assurance board, which was a key part of the budget agreement, brings the Government and COSLA to the table. We must work together to respond to challenges, whether on teacher permanency, on how we support ASN pupils, or on reducing class contact. We must have a partnership with COSLA or we will not be able to deliver the change that we all want to see in our classrooms.

Joe FitzPatrick: You are absolutely right about the need for teachers to have space to do other things. One challenge that teachers are facing, in addition to the particular one that the convener raised earlier, concern the increase in the number of children who are neurodivergent and require support with that.

I recently visited Sidlaw View primary school in my constituency and the headteacher told us about how she is trying to go the extra mile by using the together to thrive model, in which teachers work together with parents. The model recognises that, as you said, schools now do far

more than just educating and that, for some families in particular, schools are almost the centre and the one stable part of family life. The headteacher is working with parents and third parties to ensure that there is holistic support for children. Are you aware of together to thrive, which is running not only in Dundee but in a few other schools too? If not, would you like to join me in visiting either the school that I went to in Dundee or another school somewhere else?

Jenny Gilruth: I am not aware of the specific together to thrive programme, but I would be more than happy to engage in a visit with the member, perhaps during Parliament's summer recess, after schools have gone back, to learn more about how that works.

On the substantive point about engagement with parents, no behaviour improvement plan will work without buy-in and support from parents. We have consistently seen that in relation to the way in which teachers have taken forward mobile phone bans. That will not work if you do not get the buy-in of mums, dads, parents and carers—you have to get that buy-in from home. When I launched mobile phone guidance back in August, I spoke to the head teacher at Stonelaw high school about the work that she had undertaken with the kids and with the school community, parents and carers to mine their own data so that they could look at how much time they were spending online and on screen. She got the buy-in of her whole school community by doing that, which took time but was the right approach for her school.

The same approach should apply in relation to behaviour. Many parents and carers are struggling after the pandemic and they turn to the school because that is often the service that is open. School is a constant in a young person's life, but it is also a constant for many of our parents and carers who are unable to obtain support elsewhere. I was in a school in Dundee last summer and learned about approaches that they are using, through PEF, to support income maximisation officers who can support families with the cost of bills. We would not have countenanced using SAC funds for those things 10 years ago, but that funding is undoubtedly now being used to meet a wide range of family needs. That helps to close the poverty-related attainment gap, but we must be mindful not only of how support goes out to parents but of how it comes back to the school.

As I said, I would be happy to go on a visit with Mr FitzPatrick in the near future.

Joe FitzPatrick: My next question is for the minister. My Dundee constituency is one of the Government's early adopter communities for the work on ELC, so can you give the committee an

update on or insight into what is being done and how it is going?

Natalie Don-Innes: Of course. Our six early adopter communities are backed by £16 million of Scottish Government investment. That goes back to what I said earlier about the extra time projects, which are providing really valuable insights into what families require. Our early adopter community projects are involved in a number of things over and above childcare in order to support families, and that will be key to the learning that we will take forward.

In relation to Joe Fitzpatrick's constituency, I know that Dundee City Council is working in partnership with local providers such as the Yard to deliver services that are designed to respond to local needs and to support families who have children with additional support needs—something that has been much discussed at the committee today.

The Yard not only provides activities during the school days and holidays but also supports families through weekend sessions, which provide opportunities for families to come together and play with their children and to meet other families and gain a form of peer support. Such opportunities to come together and garner support from peers—and to share information, although that sounds too formal—are really key for families, especially in our post-pandemic world. Equally, there are opportunities for children's development and for them to play. The Yard is doing fundamental work, which stretches over and above the services that it carries out—indeed, I know that it has helped to provide additional training to other school-age childcare projects in Dundee, so it has a much further reach than it would appear to have on paper.

The early adopters work has been really positive, and the learning that we will get and the outcomes that we will be able to evaluate from it will be instrumental in improving school-age childcare more generally.

Joe FitzPatrick: Excellent. Increasing access to pre-school childcare hours is really helpful to parents, particularly in relation to their being able to get back to work. One of the challenges is that that provision can sometimes be rigid and not work around the real-world demands of having a job.

A couple of weeks ago, Shona Robison and I visited the Fintry Mains nursery—not in my constituency but in the patch for which I used to be a local councillor—where Flexible Childcare Services Scotland supports childcare that wraps around parents' needs. We know that parents' ability to get out and go to work has a huge benefit in relation to tackling child poverty and all the

challenges that come with it. How can we support that kind of model to be more accessible? The parents there were amazing, and all the folk who worked there were passionate about what they were doing, but, clearly, not all pre-school provision is as flexible.

Natalie Don-Innes: In relation to the specific example that Mr FitzPatrick has raised around the provision of 24/7 childcare, cost is an issue. However, we are trying to provide, understand and build that system of flexible childcare through the actions that we are taking, some of which I have already alluded to, such as the early adopter work and the extra time programme.

One of the key priorities in relation to the 1,140 hours expansion was flexibility and ensuring that parents were able to access the childcare that they required and for it to fit around their working life or whatever their needs might be. I have already alluded to the point that no family is the same and that one size does not fit all in relation to that issue. A system to evaluate our ELC 1,140-hours expansion will be published later in December this year, but before I go on to that, I should say that although flexibility is one of the keys of the 1,140 hours expansion, we know that we have further to go to ensure that all parents have the ability to access that flexible childcare. Many issues impact on that flexibility—for example, our rural and island communities face different challenges—so a number of factors need to be considered.

We are taking action in several different ways. I have already spoken about some of the pilot projects, and we are also looking at how to overcome some of the barriers and challenges for rural and island communities. A number of things are in progress that will help with that issue. However, for us to understand how that flexibility is playing out on the ground overall, our evaluation later in the year of the 1,140 hours expansion will be absolutely key, as it might allow us to build on some of the actions that we are already taking to try to ensure that parents have that access.

11:15

Joe FitzPatrick: I turn to the Minister for Higher and Further Education. It has been some time since the situation at the University of Dundee came to light. Although there is perhaps less immediate stress than there was at the start, the situation is still stressful for staff and students, and there is still a lack of understanding of exactly when there will be clarity about how the university will move forward in a sustainable way and what that will mean for individual staff and students in relation to their courses. It would be good if you could give us a bit of an update on that and some

assurance that what feels like a protracted timescale might be coming to an end soon.

Graeme Dey: This might take a bit of time, convener, but I hope that you will indulge me.

I entirely understand the stress and frustration that has been felt by the staff and others at how long this has taken and how long the situation has dragged on. I can speak for the cab sec as well and say that we have certainly been frustrated by the time that it has taken. We have had to, at various points, recognise that the role of ministers in the context of legislation and our relationship with universities is at play here, as is the need to protect the Office for National Statistics classification. The situation with the finances of the university is a complex one, and understanding how it got into that situation also took a bit of time and contributed to the delays.

As we moved through that, there has also, to be candid, been an element of everybody involved wanting to be absolutely sure of the numbers in front of them, with regard to the asks, in particular, but also the robustness of two iterations of a financial recovery plan. More recently, the university has rightly been expected by the SFC to bring forward a certain level of detail to underpin what has been placed in front of it. That, in turn, has rightly seen the court of the university take a keen interest, and that has contributed to the delays, too. The plan now goes to the SFC, and the SFC's board is involved. That is the background to why it has taken this long.

Just to bring this more up to date, I think that people are aware that, on 28 May, the SFC received a further financial ask that had gone through the university's processes; that has been going through the processes of the SFC and its board, which have been interrogating the nature of the ask. The Scottish Government formally received a notification of the request on 6 June, and we are working on that at pace.

This is an on-going situation within the Government; indeed, the cross-ministerial group will be meeting this afternoon—we meet regularly on this matter. I should also say that the cab sec has led a lot of the direct engagement with the trade unions, which have been an important part of all of this.

The additional ask to the £22 million that has been brought forward has two elements to it. The first is to avoid the scale of disruption proposed, particularly in respect of employment, in the first iteration of the financial recovery plan. That would have been quite destructive to employment levels and nobody was in any way comfortable with that.

The second element is liquidity. It is self-evident that the institution got itself into difficulty, because it was essentially living beyond its means, and that

position will not be recovered overnight. While the financial recovery plan is being implemented and taken forward, the institution will gain a degree of further support, whether from commercial sources, the Government or a combination of the two.

As I have said, those elements are being progressed at pace. We ought now—famous last words—to be capable of moving into a phase in which a greater pace will be injected into taking the issue forward. Clearly, we now have an ask that we can assist the university with in whatever form. The voluntary severance scheme has finally been launched, which will allow that element to be progressed.

I commend Sir Alan Langlands and his team for their patience and commitment. The task force is conducting specific workstreams to assist the university, and its members have had no shortage of appetite for that, for which I commend them. However, they have needed information and encouragement in order to deliver in the way that they would hope to, and they are now taking that work forward.

With regard to progressing the matter and bringing things to a head—if that is the correct term—there is the Gillies report, which is due to be published next week. Primarily, it will be for the SFC, which commissioned the report, to respond to it, but the university will also have to respond to the findings. As I understand it, at lunchtime on the day of the report's publication, the university will hold a town hall meeting with its staff to give them an insight into what the review has found and, I would hope, any actions that the university feels that it is necessary to take in the immediate term.

As I have said previously at committee, it is also for the Government to reflect on the report's findings. If there are any clear issues related to governance and oversight which will have repercussions and ramifications beyond the University of Dundee, the Government will consider them. As I have said before, the Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) (Scotland) Bill will provide a vehicle for us to consider introducing further powers for the SFC, or whatever, in legislation. We await the report.

Joe FitzPatrick: It is good to hear about the engagement between the cabinet secretary and the trade unions, because I think that there is still a concern, certainly locally, that the trade unions do not feel that they are being properly and meaningfully engaged in the process. Therefore, it is good to know that the Government has been reaching out to them.

You mentioned that you now have an ask. Has that ask been agreed to, or is there a timescale for getting clarity on that?

Graeme Dey: There is no doubt that there has been a long-standing mistrust and distrust between the trade unions and senior management, which has not been helped by the events that we are discussing. The nature of some of the engagement with the trade unions has been quite concerning and it has not necessarily matched what we would have hoped for or expected. More recently, there have been some hopeful signs that it is improving.

With regard to the timescale, I should say, by the way, that I was not hinting that the meeting this afternoon would be to decide on that ask. All I will say is that we have been well aware of the urgency of the matter and the need to provide a bit of confidence and certainty. The Government will move as quickly as it can to deal with the ask. As I have said, there are two elements to it, and one might take a bit longer to deal with than the other.

Joe FitzPatrick: It might be helpful to hear from the cabinet secretary about the engagement with trade unions, because what I have heard is concerning.

Jenny Gilruth: Engagement with the trade unions throughout the process has been fundamental and key to all that we have done. As Mr FitzPatrick will know, I went to Dundee some months ago to meet with the unions directly; the breakdown in the relationship is historical, to some extent, but it has been crystallised by the events in recent months. I have been very keen to meet the trade unions directly every other week to hear from them, to test their thinking, to ensure that the information flow is what they would expect, and to hear their members' views throughout what has been a challenging time for them and for staff across the university. I want to put that on record, because it has been really challenging for them.

Ministers are here to help and support—that is the role that I have been playing as cabinet secretary, alongside Mr Dey, as minister. Most recently, we met the trade unions last Thursday, and at that point, it felt as though things were in a better space. The VS scheme launched on Friday and I hope that that has helped, too.

Mr Fitzpatrick has raised an issue about the Government's ability to say something on this matter. We are very keen to say something as soon as we are able to, but we have to respect the processes. As he will understand, this is about public money and, therefore, it is essential that the SFC is able to carry out its work in accordance with its governance processes, regardless of ministers. That needs to be set aside, but we hope to be able to say something as soon as we are able to about the support that we can provide the University of Dundee.

Joe FitzPatrick: That was really helpful.

I note that there is still a significant reliance on international students. We had some principals in last week who told us about some of the challenges in that regard, and we now have the new UK Government's approach to migration, which, instead of helping the situation, might make things more challenging. Has the Government made an assessment of the white paper and the potential harms arising from further restrictions on our international student populations at universities?

Graeme Dey: The reliance on international students that might be baked into the financial recovery plan is a matter for the SFC to look at—and it has been doing so, because it is a valid point. However, you are right to point to the factors that are outwith what we might have reasonably expected to be factored into the FRP, such as fresh pronouncements on the direction of travel in relation to inward migration. As universities will tell you, it is a fact that even conversations instigated by Government around international students have a detrimental effect. Universities pick that up in their numbers; people say, “We’re not wanted there, so we’ll go elsewhere.” There is no doubt that the pronouncements in the white paper fall into that space and, if enacted, certainly have the potential to deliver further detriment to the sector.

So, you are absolutely right. Making that sort of assessment might take a bit longer as we look at the projections underpinning some of this and interrogate whether they will hold up under the stressors that are potentially coming down the track in the next six months to a year. That level of interrogation is going on.

Joe FitzPatrick: I have other questions, but I know that Mr Rennie wants to follow up in relation to the University of Dundee, so I am happy to wait and see whether I get some time later.

The Convener: I will take questions from a couple of members on the University of Dundee, and I will bring in Willie Rennie first.

Willie Rennie: I understand that the minister cannot tell us whether there will be a financial agreement with Dundee, and I understand that there is still an awful lot of work, including due diligence, to be done. However, it has been reported that the figure involved in the ask is about £100 million. Will the minister confirm that? Secondly, will he also confirm that, if the due diligence goes well, that money will be available to be awarded?

Graeme Dey: Willie Rennie is right to talk about the need to carry out due diligence. I am not going to get into specific numbers; there is, to be blunt, a range of numbers at play here. The liquidity element of what might be asked for can, as I have alluded to, be delivered in a variety of ways; for

example, I have mentioned commercial lending and how that might be unlocked.

I would separate the question into two component parts, as I did a moment ago. We have been very clear about our commitment to deliver for the future of Dundee. We will see how exactly that is done, but we are, as we have been throughout, absolutely clear about our support for the institution.

Willie Rennie: There is an assumption that the bank will come back on board if the Government provides that level of support. I assume that, as part of that due diligence, there will be a discussion between the university and the bank, or between the SFC and the bank. Can you guarantee that that discussion is happening and that you have confidence that the package, if agreed, will be able to be delivered?

Graeme Dey: I will reiterate what I said earlier about ministers and their distance from this matter, in terms of legislation and issues such as ONS classification. My understanding is that there have been, and continue to be, conversations between the institution and commercial lenders.

The Convener: Following up on Willie Rennie's questions, minister, you said that the SFC has interrogated the request. I will not ask you to confirm what the initial request was, but was the request that went from the SFC to the Scottish Government on 6 June for the same quantum as that requested on 28 May?

Graeme Dey: In a broad sense, it was, but there is a bit of variation in the figures, if I can put it that way. There are two ends to this, and there are two elements, as I have made clear. There is the adjustment element, which is the approach that the university has taken to protect employment levels, and there is the liquidity element, which is the bridging that it is doing while it implements the FRP and gets back to a position in which it can not only survive but thrive.

11:30

The Convener: On the request, some of the money that the SFC found would have had to have been returned to the Scottish Government anyway, and then there was a further top-up by the Scottish Government. This time, is the indication that the SFC will provide any of the funding that has been requested, or will it all be borne by the Scottish Government and then sent back through the SFC, because of ONS classification?

Graeme Dey: That matter is being looked at, but given the SFC's financial pressures, it is fair to say that it is more likely that public funding

provided for such a purpose would have to come from the Government via the SFC.

The Convener: I have another question on the University of Dundee, but on the general theme, the University of Edinburgh, which was in front of the committee last week, is looking to make £140 million in savings. Given that £90 million of those savings will be made in staffing, hundreds of staff—potentially more than 1,000—will be made redundant. Previously, when the University of Dundee was looking at making more than 700 members of staff redundant, the Government stepped in and said that it could not support that. As far as we are aware, there has been no request at all from the University of Edinburgh for funding, but if the Scottish Government did not want to see 700 people lose their jobs in Dundee, does it share similar concerns about people losing their jobs in Edinburgh, and would financial support be available to an institution such as Edinburgh, even though it is not asking for it at the moment?

Graeme Dey: We do not want to see job losses on any scale, but one issue that we have in our universities—and which I alluded to when I was last before the committee—is that a number of them have adopted the approach of taking on several hundred staff on the back of an emerging market, and then shedding several hundred staff if circumstances change. Frankly, the universities need to get out of that situation, because it is not healthy at all.

The difference between Edinburgh and Dundee is that substantial job losses were required at the University of Dundee, but the situation was so serious that there was a question mark over the institution's future. We were talking about saving a critical university in Scotland, so the two examples are not comparable, but I take your point about the scale of the job losses that are being talked about at Edinburgh.

The Convener: Back to Dundee university, you said that the Pamela Gillies report is due next week. Have you had any indication that it will definitely be delivered next week, or are you aware of any delay, as far as you can tell us?

Graeme Dey: I am laughing, convener, because we have just been talking about how long some of that has taken and how it has dragged on. All I can say is that our understanding and our expectation—we have had nothing to suggest otherwise—are that it will be published next week, which will be of interest to the committee.

The Convener: That will be very much welcomed by the committee.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): I am afraid that my questions are probably all for the cabinet secretary. I will start by asking about teacher workload.

It is about a decade since a real drive was made to reduce unnecessary bureaucracy for teachers. That was just before the cabinet secretary and I were elected to Parliament and it overlaps with that period. Cabinet secretary, you directly experienced that bureaucracy as a teacher before you came here. We can all point to examples of specific areas in which bureaucracy has been removed, but every teacher that I speak to and every union that represents them says that, overall, the bureaucracy issue has got worse over the past decade. Do you agree with that? Is there too much bureaucracy for classroom teachers and those in management positions?

Jenny Gilruth: Yes. I broadly agree with the member's point. I remember the work on reducing bureaucracy, which I think was led by one Michael Russell back in 2014, because I was a principal teacher at the time. I remember running a department meeting in which we were broadly re-evaluating general education, looking at all our units across the course and considering senior phase arrangements. At the end of it, I thought, "We have to reduce bureaucracy."

We have to look in the round at what we are asking our classroom teachers, headteachers and principal teachers to deliver. I am really keen to talk to the professional associations about what we mean by unnecessary workload at the local authority level. I was discussing the issue with officials earlier, and there is very little that the Government asks for at national level that drives teacher workload. Much of it, certainly in my experience, is driven at local authority level through things that the professional associations might quite rightly argue are not about learning and teaching but more about administration. There is a body of work that we need to undertake.

I recently discussed revisiting the reducing bureaucracy agenda with the NASUWT. That speaks to the work on reducing class contact and teacher workload to create the time that is needed. Many of those tasks should not necessarily be for the working day of classroom teachers. They are driven at local authority level. They differ across the country in terms of reporting requirements, what systems are used, how information is inputted and how often it is required for each and every class that teachers teach. We do not have a national approach to that, which has been a key theme of today's discussions.

I will bring Graeme Logan in to talk about the specifics that we ask for at national level. Anything else is being driven at local authority level. However, I accept the point that Mr Greer raises about reducing bureaucracy more broadly.

Graeme Logan: Mr Greer is right to point out things that have happened over the past 10 years, such as the His Majesty's Inspectorate of

Education review of unnecessary bureaucracy and the definitive guidance on the curriculum. We discussed the matter with the International Council of Education Advisers and, as the cabinet secretary said, it encouraged us to identify the specific things that are driving workload. The cabinet secretary is correct that the data that we collect nationally is a very small part of what we ask for from schools. That is data that goes into SEEMiS, largely, on attendance and on curriculum for excellence.

We need to look at the issue not just nationally but through local negotiating committees for teachers and with local government colleagues. We also need to look at the issue at school level when schools look at their working time agreements.

We are taking forward some innovative work to try to reduce workload, such as our CivTech challenge. As colleagues may be aware, that is the Scottish Government's technology accelerator programme, which brings together the private sector, academia and experts to solve public sector problems. We are working with them and local government partners to develop tools using artificial intelligence to support teachers with administrative tasks, for example in relation to additional support for learning. The aim is to save time and improve the quality and accuracy of information while also, obviously, complying with ethical and data protection requirements.

We need to look at such opportunities to reduce workload in administration in particular, and the next phase of that programme will look at other opportunities where technologies could reduce workload.

Ross Greer: I agree with the broad thrust of your answers. A lot of the additional and unnecessary workload—in particular, the bureaucratic workload—is being driven by local authorities, but not all of it is. There are some areas where it is driven by the Government, and there are some areas where local authorities are only able to add on all that bureaucracy because of a particular Government initiative.

I will use as an example the Scottish national standardised assessments, which is a very politicised matter. There is a parliamentary majority against primary 1 SNSAs. In a vote in the previous session of Parliament, Parliament decided that there should not be a continuation of primary 1 SNSAs, yet the Government has continued them. When I speak to teachers, they give me examples of the unnecessary bureaucracy that they have to deal with, and SNSAs come up a lot. That is not because the test is, in and of itself, particularly time consuming—although the cabinet secretary will be aware of my position that it does not add much value and

causes a lot of stress and anxiety—but because of the bureaucracy that schools and local authorities add on top of that. A number of local authorities have bolted on significant additional reporting requirements to SNSAs. Will you reflect on that?

As much as a lot of the bureaucracy is driven by local authorities, there are many examples where they would not be able to do that if it was not for a particular Government policy. In the case of primary 1 standardised testing, Parliament told the Government to stop, yet it has continued with those tests.

Jenny Gilruth: I will address Mr Greer's point before I bring Graeme Logan in to talk about the changes that we have made to the SNSAs and reflect on the points that he has made.

Mr Greer talked about significant additional reporting being required. I am so old that I remember sitting around this exact table with Mr Greer in the previous session of Parliament and talking about these exact issues. The workload that we talked about then was associated with local authorities doing many different things in relation to how they measured attainment.

We must remember the rationale behind the SNSAs. I accept that there was a lot of debate about them at the time, but the rationale was to have a consistent approach across the country. We have heard today about what inconsistency does to children, young people, parents and teachers, so it was important to have a consistent approach to gathering that data.

However, regarding Mr Greer's point, I am aware that some local authorities have kept their own reporting mechanisms in place in addition to using the SNSAs, which has resulted in an increase in workload. We have reflected on that through some of the changes that we have brought forward for the SNSAs. I will ask Graeme Logan to speak about that in a moment, but I do not accept the fundamental point that the broader workload is being driven by asks from the Government.

I am happy for Graeme to talk about some specific details of the SNSAs, but I will first reflect on a crude example from my experience in school some time ago. Classroom teachers are often asked to do administrative tasks, and my department used to have support once a week for data entry. For example, someone would deal with the administrative aspect of pupil reports, taking that task off my desk, which was really helpful in freeing me up and allowing me to do more planning, marking and other things during my free periods.

There are ways in which local authorities can drive workload, but they can also assist with it. The budget, which Mr Greer's party voted for,

provided extra funding to support ASN and extra teachers, which we know will make a difference, and some of that funding can be used by local authorities to alleviate teacher workload.

I will bring Graeme in speak about some of the substantive changes to the SNSAs.

Graeme Logan: One reason why the SNSAs were implemented was to try to reduce bureaucracy and workload. For example, schools can choose when they use those assessments and there is no fixed window as there is for standardised assessments in some other parts of the UK and elsewhere. Teachers and schools can decide when it would be helpful to use the SNSAs as a diagnostic and flexible tool and can integrate that into classroom practice so that it is not an extra task. They can also use the data to inform their actions.

Mr Greer is right that some of the tracking and monitoring systems that are layered on top of that can add to workload and bureaucracy. We are really keen to continue working with local partners and Education Scotland to look at how tracking and monitoring can add value while being light on bureaucracy, because we want all the data that teachers use to be actionable and to make a difference in improving children's progress and achievement.

Ross Greer: That all sounds good, but my frustration is that there is a lot of talk about work that we need to do or will continue doing. The cabinet secretary has just reflected on the fact that she was sitting at this table talking about this almost a decade ago with me, Liz Smith and others, and that it was an issue before then, when she was a teacher. Why is it such a perennial issue?

It is ultimately resource constraint that underlies a lot of the issues that we talk about, such as additional support needs or the need for schools to have administrative support staff. However, a lot of the issues about the bureaucratic element of teachers' workloads either have no-cost solutions or would generate savings if the workload was reduced. I accept that some of that would involve national Government being far more prescriptive to local government than it currently is—and doing so in a way that would cause a lot of tension.

However, without getting into the specifics of that, I cannot understand the lack of priority that is given to reducing teacher workload, particularly given that it is essentially a no-cost area of work that would generate good will among teachers as well as leading to improvements in the quality of learning and teaching.

Jenny Gilruth: There is a clear focus on reducing teacher workload, but I take the member's point.

Ross Greer: You say that there is a clear focus on that, but you accepted my opening premise, which was that teacher workload has not got any easier in the past 10 years and that the bureaucracy around it has not reduced in those years. If there is a focus on that, why are things not improving?

Jenny Gilruth: That goes back to the challenge that we have been discussing about the relationship between local and central Government and how that is enacted in our classrooms. We have spoken about the reality that workload, in the main, is not being driven by national Government. In the main, as you all know, I do not have many levers that I can operate in my relationship with local authorities, so I have to work in partnership with them.

I have said to the professional associations that we must revisit the agenda with our local government partners to ensure that they are not adding to teacher workload. One way that we can do that is through the curriculum improvement cycle. I do not know whether we are going to talk about that today, because time is short. However, the curriculum improvement cycle allows us an opportunity to re-evaluate what we prescribe at national level and what we allow to be open to choice and local discretion, and a key issue that has come out of the headteacher events is the need for greater clarity and greater standardisation. Teachers want that to be spelled out for them in a way that I am not necessarily sure that we have done through the curriculum for excellence. Arguably, there has been too much fluidity in the system, which has not necessarily been as supportive as it could have been.

11:45

When we talk about reporting requirements, for example, or about tracking and monitoring, a bit more prescription and rigour in the system, particularly in primary education, would help to alleviate some of what is being asked for at the local authority level, given that we see local authorities doing lots of different things. If we had greater consistency on, for example, ASN, behaviour or how literacy levels are recorded, it would automatically alleviate the workload. I have been keen to press that point through the education assurance board.

We have also been in discussions with COSLA about the role of SEEMiS, which Mr Greer will know is the main reporting system that is used in Scottish schools. It is quite clunky and old, and we might be able to work in different ways in the future. For example, that system does not join up with the system for early years education, although we have been developing a new approach to that.

I am keen to revisit that agenda in partnership with local government. I appreciate the challenge from Mr Greer. There are opportunities through curriculum improvement and education reform. Mr Greer will also know about my cautiousness in relation to some of the work on education reform. That is because I taught in a school not that long ago and I know that we need to be mindful about the workload implications of changing our qualifications system. I am not sure that we reflected on that in the right way the last time that we did that, so, this time, we have to work with the profession.

That is why we have people such as Andy Brown, who is a maths specialist and a former headteacher, on secondment. He is leading all our work on numeracy. He is a subject specialist and he has credibility with the profession. It is only by using the profession to drive the curriculum change that we can also reduce workload. The profession must be part of leading some of the change that we need in our curriculum and, in so doing, alleviating the workload issues at the classroom level that Mr Greer rightly raises.

Ross Greer: The solution is more prescription for education authorities and more professional autonomy for individual teachers and schools. The cabinet secretary will be aware that I submitted to the Government a paper that I commissioned Dr Joseph Smith and Professor Mark Priestley to write. In essence, it involved a series of focus groups and some research work with teachers on their suggestions for how to reduce their workload, specifically in relation to bureaucracy. I submitted that to the Government nearly two years ago. Has the Government reflected on it? Will there be a response to it, or will the Government in some other way reflect on the feedback from teachers who have provided specific examples of areas where their bureaucratic workload can be reduced?

Jenny Gilruth: I am happy to engage with Mr Greer on the substantive points in the paper that he submitted some two years ago. More broadly, however, any engagement on teacher workload that has me at the table must also have COSLA there, because we are not going to change things if we do not get local government in the room. I am happy to be here and to give evidence for as many hours as the committee will have me, but if COSLA is not part of those discussions, we will not effect change in our classrooms.

Ross Greer: I entirely agree with that point. I would like to ask about some other issues, including school psychologists, but I am conscious of the time. I am happy to come back to those at the end of the meeting if there is time.

Joe FitzPatrick: Additional money has been given for teacher numbers across Scotland. Are

you aware of any councils that are not using that money to increase teacher numbers? Are any councils cutting teacher numbers?

Jenny Gilruth: As I said in a response to Mr Rennie earlier, as part of the budget agreement, we got an agreement from all local authorities, through COSLA, that they would work back to 2023 levels. I am really pleased that the deal was made. It was made in good faith and it involved a lot of extra public money, including for teacher numbers and additional support needs, so I cannot believe that any local authority in Scotland is taking that additional money from central Government and planning to reduce teacher numbers, having signed up to those conditions and to making meaningful progress on reducing class contact time.

We are engaging with a number of local authorities on the substantive issues, but our understanding is that the budget deal remains absolute and that local authorities will, in good faith, work back to 2023 teacher numbers. If they all did that tomorrow, I could deliver on reducing class contact time in primary schools, because we know through our independent modelling that we would have enough teachers to do that. These things must not be divorced: when we talk about teacher numbers and reducing class contact time, it is really important is that they sit together. Having a sustainable workforce will help to reduce class contact time, which will allow teachers to engage in reform.

Joe FitzPatrick: My understanding is that South Lanarkshire Council has taken the decision to cut teacher numbers despite that additional funding. If that is confirmed, how concerned will you be? I think that it is in the public domain that the Labour authority has made that decision.

Jenny Gilruth: I think that that information in relation to that local authority is in the public domain. I have absolute faith that COSLA will want to stand by the deal, which was made in good faith. We will continue to engage with councils such as South Lanarkshire Council to ensure that it maintains teacher numbers at 2023 levels, which was the condition of the funding that was provided in response to the budget ask.

We do not want to be in the situation that cabinet secretaries prior to my time in office have faced—it is also a situation that I have faced—whereby we get the teacher census in December and there is a cliff-edge moment in relation to whether the Government will claw back funding. I do not want to be in that position again, and it is not a position that any cabinet secretary should be in. We should operate in good faith, and when we make such agreements in good faith, the Government should rightly be able to expect that

they are delivered on. We will continue to work with local authorities to that end.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): Good morning to the ministers and their officials. I am trying to think what the collective noun for a group of ministers is—maybe I will go with “gaggle”.

I have a number of wide-ranging questions, the first of which is about rural schools. There has been a decrease of 136 in the number of rural schools. What impact assessment have ministers made of that? The First Minister agreed in April to review the mothballing guidance for schools and nurseries. When will that review be published?

Jenny Gilruth: I think that Ms Don-Innes gave a response on the mothballing guidance earlier. We are going to engage with local authorities throughout the summer in relation to responding to that consultation. I think that Mr Briggs and his colleagues have asked me a number of written parliamentary questions on the matter recently.

The matter is a concern to me. We have challenges across the country in relation to recruitment, which I think are playing out in some of the challenges that local authorities are experiencing. However, the important point in relation to the mothballing or closure of schools is that, ultimately, that is the responsibility of local authorities. The schools belong to them and not to Government ministers, so we need to respect their autonomy. In doing so, however, we also need to work with them to support local communities.

The matter is a concern, but we are committed to working with COSLA on it. I think that the updated guidance will go some way towards alleviating some of that concern and perhaps to alleviating the concerns that parents and carers groups have raised with me in recent months.

Miles Briggs: Do you expect the review to be published before the recess?

Jenny Gilruth: No. As I understand it, the engagement is to happen over the summer.

Miles Briggs: As we have heard, teacher numbers fell by 598 last year. Can you confirm to the committee that the Scottish Government will now not meet its pledge to recruit 3,500 additional teachers?

Jenny Gilruth: We have to accept that, since 2014, in the round, teacher numbers have increased by more than 2,500. However, it is my clear expectation—I think that this is the point that Mr FitzPatrick was making before he left the room—that teacher numbers will increase in the next year, because we have put in the extra resource to allow local authorities to do that. If they are not able to do that, we will be unable to deliver on reducing class contact time. That goes back to my point that all these things are

inherently linked. Our aspiration is to return to 2023 teacher levels to allow us to deliver on reducing class contact time.

Miles Briggs: My next question returns to the free school meals issue. It is important to look at the situation in the round. Having ditched the pledge, the Scottish Government has re-adapted it in recent years. However, a *Sunday Mail* freedom of information investigation has reported that families whose children are not eligible for free school meals are facing a 20 per cent increase in the cost of school meals. In relation to the cost of the school day, what have the Scottish Government and COSLA done to engage with parents who are not entitled to free school meals in relation to the additional cost that they face?

Jenny Gilruth: I mentioned earlier some of the action that we are taking to support local authorities with funding to help with school trips, for example, and the support that we can provide through the pupil equity fund. Mr Briggs is right to highlight the funding for free school meals, because it has been a challenge for the Government. I accept that and I have discussed it with the committee. We brought forward a Scottish statutory instrument, which I was at the committee recently to debate, and we talked about how we could broaden eligibility by getting children who are in receipt of the Scottish child payment signed up to free school meals. Free school meals are saving families an average of £450 a year, so they are making a difference.

Mr Briggs talked about the increase in the cost of school meals. That has been impacted by inflation. Everything is more expensive now. Wages are going up and things cost more. We work with local authorities in relation to that, but they have statutory responsibilities at the local level. We have given them a significant uplift of more than £1 billion in their settlement this year, so significant extra funding is going to local authorities. We know that many local authorities do not pursue school meal debt. That is in the gift of local authorities; they can decide not to do that.

On the point that the member asks me about, we previously set out guidance on the issue, working with COSLA to be clear about our expectations. We also made extra funding available to help local authorities to write off school meal debt. We have taken a range of measures to work with councils to help to alleviate the costs that are associated with school meals and to support families more broadly.

Miles Briggs: Thank you for that answer. I want to return to an issue that I have raised with the Minister for Housing and with other ministers: the number of children who are living in temporary accommodation and the delivery of education for them. Under this Government, 10,360 homeless

children are living in temporary accommodation. Here in the capital, there are 3,127 such children. I have consistently raised the issue of children moving schools when they are in temporary accommodation and have asked for a presumption against pupils being moved between schools. I understand that that was meant to be discussed in the ministerial oversight group on homelessness—that is what I was last told, on 4 March. Where is the Government on that policy? Will you update the committee on that? Little progress seems to have been made over a long period.

Jenny Gilruth: I understand that the child poverty group will meet next Monday, but I am more than happy to write to the committee to discuss those issues in the round. I know that there are significant issues in relation to temporary housing, and I very much support the member's point on the consistency of educational provision, particularly when a child has had disruption in their private life.

I support the member's point, but I will come back to him on the substantives in relation to my engagement with the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice.

Miles Briggs: I would be grateful for that. If possible, that measure should be put in place before the start of the new school year.

Jenny Gilruth: Absolutely.

Miles Briggs: I also want to touch on VAT on the independent school sector. That is something that I have raised many times with the cabinet secretary and in various letters to His Majesty's Treasury. What assessment has the Scottish Government made of that policy's impact to date, and when did the cabinet secretary last meet representatives from the sector?

Jenny Gilruth: I met the Scottish Council of Independent Schools last year, I think, to talk about some of its concerns, which I have relayed to the UK Government. The UK Government has adopted that policy position, and I have to say that it is one that the Scottish Government supports.

We were originally told that the VAT on that sector would mean consequentials for Scotland—the member has asked me a number of written PQs on that. That seems to have changed in relation to how the budget allocation has been made, so we are now no longer able to make that differentiation. That is quite challenging, because we understood that there would be additional moneys coming to Scotland as a result of that budgetary movement, but that has not been the case.

We have stayed very close to the Scottish Council for Independent Schools throughout and our officials engage with it regularly, and we also

engage with COSLA. Although I do not have the numbers to hand, I recently responded to the member's written PQ with the detail and the data on that.

The issue affects Edinburgh more than other local authorities in Scotland—I know that the member is particularly interested in that—because of the number of young people who are enrolled in the private sector. Our modelling and our understanding is that there is currently capacity in the school estate to absorb any pupils who come out of the private sector. However, if Mr Briggs has examples of where that is not the case, I will be more than happy to hear about those today and to engage directly with the City of Edinburgh Council or other local authorities with cases that he might want to raise.

Miles Briggs: The cabinet secretary will be aware that the City of Edinburgh Council has the highest pupil teacher ratio in Scotland, which is my greatest concern, alongside changes in pupil behaviour. One of the key bits of information that we are receiving is about primary school teacher levels not being what they are in the independent sector. The Scottish Government and the City of Edinburgh Council are maybe not alive to that impact. I would like to take up the cabinet secretary on the offer about data, because it is important to be on top of that for the next school year.

Finally, I will ask the Minister for Higher and Further Education about one of my favourite topics—it is one of his favourite topics, too—which is the clawback of funding to universities. I have recently visited a number of universities, which have outlined that, if there were to be a new model for clawback—which is on money that has already been given to the sector—they would be in a much better financial space. What sort of review will take place on the different models that are being suggested, especially regarding part-time studying opportunities that could be developed, including in relation to social care and the national health service workforce? Given all the issues that we are acutely aware of with higher and further education finances, that proposal seems to be a positive solution.

Graeme Dey: On the topic of recovery—which is the word that is used rather than “clawback”, Mr Briggs—the SFC has done a lot of work on that with the college sector, particularly through the tripartite alignment group. That work has been extremely successful.

However, there is a point at which leaving public money that recirculates in the education system in institutions that have underperformed—I will come back to that point—cannot be justified without evidence that they are seeking not to underperform. There have been some instances in

which that has been the case and some flexibility has been provided.

I am sure that the topic will be explored in greater detail in the tripartite group. There are limitations to what can be done, given the financial pressures that we are all aware of. Nevertheless, where universities are doing innovative things in the areas that you have referred to, and in others, there is an argument for a bit of understanding. I am sure that that will be explored further through the tripartite group.

12:00

Miles Briggs: Would ministers look at reviewing the allocation of credits as part of that? I am thinking about the college sector. I recently met North East Scotland College and discussed the fantastic new net zero campus that it will open. It will have no new credits, so it will have to look towards all its provision. It seems a bit ridiculous that that could impact on other courses in a growing sector, particularly given that the Scottish Government is saying that that is one that we should be doing more to recruit students into.

Graeme Dey: We are talking purely about the college sector now. It is an interesting question, because the work that is being done between the SFC and the sector has three phases and the third phase will look at credit allocation.

That is a thorny subject, Mr Briggs. While you are advocating for NESCol, I am sure that Ms Dunbar and other members would advocate for the colleges in their areas getting more credits, but I am not sure that some of your fellow MSPs would be altogether happy if they were taken off another institution. We need to be alive to that.

We have done a bit of work in the context of universities and the allocation of places. It has not been without its controversy. For example, Glasgow Caledonian University has attracted additional credits because it requires them due to the level that it is performing to.

It is a thorny subject, because there is a parallel with something that we discussed earlier in the meeting about the rebaselining of college funding. It was sought and delivered with the warning that there would be winners and losers, and those who have lost out have been far from happy. In fact, some of those who have benefited have been far from happy.

We need to be alive to the pitfalls of doing that, but I absolutely understand the argument that you make.

Miles Briggs: The committee has heard consistently about the skills gap in our economy and the need to do something different about it, especially in relation to the net zero agenda. Many

companies are saying that they want to be part of funding that. Is there a new opportunity—a new funding model that ministers will look to—to increase the number of credits that are available in Scotland directly to fund those skill gaps?

Several issues with that have not really been addressed in recent times. We know from the recent conference that was held in the Highlands and Islands that there is a huge gap in the workforce, which will not be filled overnight.

Graeme Dey: There is a difference between a gap in the workforce and a skills shortage. If we can train people, there will still be issues with recruiting numbers, not least because of Brexit. We have to be careful about our language around that.

I am acutely aware of the willingness of employers to make a contribution in some of those areas, and I am very much open to that. We are encouraging our institutions to develop their thinking in that regard. There are opportunities here. Governments of all colours have perhaps been guilty of coming up with initiatives such as free ports and city deals, without necessarily allocating funds to build extra capacity for training in the system. We cannot just magic up places, as you explained to me when you spoke about NESCol. Governments of all colours need to get better at recognising that.

On your point about businesses, yes, there is an appetite to support such an opportunity, and we are keen to see what we can do to tap into that.

Miles Briggs: Thank you, I understand that a ministerial reshuffle is going on, so I wish you all well after this meeting.

The Convener: Thank you, Mr Briggs. We now move on to Bill Kidd.

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): Thanks to everyone for everything that has been said. I did not ask Miles Briggs to drop that in, because I do not think that I am one of the ones who will be get a role. *[Laughter.]*

Jenny Gilruth: You never know.

Bill Kidd: Well, I think that you do.

I have not got an awful lot of things to ask, because a lot has already been covered. What is the Government doing to increase support for and recruitment into childminding? What actions are being taken now, and what actions are planned?

Natalie Don-Innes: We know how important childminding is to our overall offering of childcare for families. Childminding offers a unique, flexible—as we have discussed this morning—in-home childcare offering. We have worked with the Scottish Childminding Association to undertake a programme to recruit more and support more

childminders. That is now in year 2, backed by investment from the Scottish Government, and it is proving popular.

I will perhaps bring in Andrew Watson in a second, because I cannot remember how many local authorities are involved in the programme, but I know that, so far, there has been interest from more than 200 childminders.

I am sure that the committee is aware of some of the pressures that a number of childminders face and some of the difficulties in recruiting and retaining childminders. Therefore, as well as that programme being established to ensure that there is flexibility and quality for families accessing childcare, it is also very important to look at some of the different ways of supporting childminders. That could be with time off the floor to complete paperwork or for mentoring.

A number of actions are being taken. As I said, the programme is in its second year. We are seeing extremely positive impacts, and I feel positive about where it is going.

Bill Kidd: Before we move on, one of the big pressures that private providers of childcare face is the UK Government's increase in employer national insurance contributions. Is that having an impact on childminding?

Natalie Don-Innes: The increase in ENICs is an extremely difficult issue for the childcare sector. The committee will be aware that UK Government consequentials did not cover funding for the private, voluntary and independent sector. That is expected to add a substantial cost to providers, and representatives of the childcare sector have brought that issue to me directly. I am very disappointed that that decision was made. Across the nations, we are working hard to improve the situation for the childcare sector for families and providers—for those who are out there supporting our children and trying to give them the best start in life—and the increase in ENICs contributions is having huge consequences.

However, we are trying to provide support to the sector in a number of ways. I have already spoken about what we are doing for childminders, but we are supporting private providers in a number of ways as well. We will continue with the actions that we are taking, but, as Mr Kidd rightly pointed out, the increase in ENICs will have a big impact on providers.

Bill Kidd: Andrew Watson, did you want to come in?

Natalie Don-Innes: Sorry, Andrew, I was going to bring you in on childminding; I was too busy chatting.

Andrew Watson: You asked about the number of local authorities that are involved in the programme: there are 27.

Bill Kidd: Thank you—that is useful to know. I have one last wee question, which is for Mr Dey. What progress has been made in trying to improve industrial relations in the college sector? We all know about the funding elements, but is there any movement on industrial relations?

Graeme Dey: That topic has come up at committee previously. An extensive effort has been made to tackle that thorny issue, which has dogged the college sector for the best part of a decade.

As a positive, I think that everybody who is involved recognises that continuing as they have is not, in any way, to be welcomed, to put it mildly. There is a commitment to try to move things on. We have made considerable progress on what that might look like, and we have progressed things to the point at which trade unions have been working in conjunction with the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service, and there has been a session on behaviours across the national bargaining process. That work is on-going.

Work has also been undertaken with College Employers Scotland to review the national recognition and procedure agreement and to consider how that could be strengthened to support improvements in national bargaining. However, two trade unions have served notice that they intend to resign from the current NRPA, as they no longer feel that it is fit for purpose, which leaves two unions that are aligned with it and two that are moving away from it. Unfortunately, we have an internal issue with the trade unions' commitment to the processes. I would be deeply disappointed if we could not get into a better space. I still see that as an imperative, and the recognition is there from all parties.

Touch wood, things have quietened down in the sector. We have a long-term agreement with the lecturers and the employers, and I know that negotiations between support staff and employers have been on-going for some time. I am afraid that that is not much of an update, Mr Kidd, but that is where we are at.

Bill Kidd: Is that something for the Government to be actively involved in?

Graeme Dey: I was very actively involved in that for a period, but we are now in a phase in which things are happening, or not, behind the scenes, in order to progress the situation. You have reminded me to get back on top of it quite quickly.

Bill Kidd: That was useful.

The Convener: All the committee members have asked their initial questions. I will go back to a few of them after we have heard from Liz Smith, who has joined us today.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Cabinet secretary, Kate Forbes made an interesting speech last week when she spoke about the essential need for economic growth in Scotland to be dependent on good collaboration between the public and private sectors for investment. That message was very much at the top of her speech at Panmure house. What discussions have taken place in Government circles about possible collaboration between the public and private sectors for investment in the education brief?

Jenny Gilruth: Is there a specific area of the education brief that you are interested in?

Liz Smith: The Deputy First Minister set out that message as part of Government policy and she has put that on the record in the chamber, as has Mr McKee. I assume that it is Government policy and, in my opinion, rightly so. There must be areas of the education brief where there could be successful collaboration between the public and private sectors.

Jenny Gilruth: There are examples from across the brief. I see Mr Dey indicating that he wants to come in, and Mr Logan has just reminded me of the CivTech work that he alluded to earlier in relation to AI and the points that Mr Greer has raised about reducing teacher workload. Those are examples of public-private collaboration to try to drive a different approach to tackling an ongoing challenge, as we heard from Mr Greeonr.

Graeme Dey: It is not so much about a public-private partnership approach, but I can talk about facilitating additional income from the private sector. In the college sector, the commercial income that colleges have been able to secure has almost hit a ceiling—their income never rises above a certain point. Some of our colleges, such as Forth Valley College and the City of Glasgow College, have done very well to address that challenge, and we have been looking at what they are doing that has been so successful that other colleges struggle with. We have identified a lack of capacity and resource in some of our colleges to get out and engage with the private sector, which is willing to put additional money in, subject to there being the right kind of training for its workforce. We are actively looking at what we can do to facilitate that kind of engagement. Does that answer your question?

Liz Smith: It answers my question perfectly, Mr Dey, because what you are saying is that the approach raises additional funds if it works properly.

Cabinet secretary, does the same apply to the field of outdoor education, where, as I have suggested, there could be better partnerships between the private and public sectors? It is a big ask of COSLA, as the minister knows.

12:15

Jenny Gilruth: I understand that. I see that Ms Don-Innes, who is leading on Ms Smith's bill, onwants to come in on this question, but I will say, though, that we want to progress our engagement with Ms Smith on her bill, and I very much acknowledge the importance of outdoor education in my own responsibilities. Like Ms Smith, I am a former teacher in the classroom, and we know that it makes a huge difference.

With that, I will bring in Ms Don-Innes, who, as I have said, has been leading on the bill.

Natalie Don-Innes: I do not think that I am going to say anything that I have not said before to Ms Smith, but she raises a valid point. I am very much in favour of leveraging private finance to support or supplement public finance; as far as I am concerned—and I believe that my colleagues will feel the same—it is definitely a possibility, especially in relation to outdoor education. There are private financiers who would welcome the opportunity to invest in that sort of thing.

If we are talking about putting in place, say, a public trust model or some other approach that we have looked at before to directly finance something that has been put on a statutory footing, where that funding would have to be guaranteed on a year-by-year basis, that will pose some difficulties. That said, as my colleagues and I have alluded to, there are definitely opportunities in that respect in relation to outdoor education.

Liz Smith: In its evidence to the committee, COSLA made it very clear that one area where it saw potential was capacity in the outdoor sector. I am pleased to hear that the Government still has that as an option, because, obviously, that was one of the concerns that was raised.

I have two more brief questions. The minister has very kindly invited me to speak to her again, and I have already said that, at that meeting, I will be bringing forward some proposed amendments. Can I get it on the record that, at the same meeting, the Scottish Government will be doing the same thing and proposing amendments, as the committee has requested?

Natalie Don-Innes: Absolutely.

Liz Smith: That is very good to hear. Assuming that all goes well, can I ask again whether we can have some confirmation that there will be scope to lay the financial resolution?

Natalie Don-Innes: The Scottish Government will set out our position on the financial resolution in due course. However, I emphasise what I said earlier to, I believe, Mr Ross: I feel that our conversations on this matter have been extremely productive. We have moved forward a lot from where we were at the stage 1 debate, and I will continue to have those discussions with Ms Smith.

Liz Smith: That is very good to hear. Thank you, convener.

The Convener: Thank you.

Ross Greer: One of the areas on which I was proud to work with the cabinet secretary and her predecessor was the expansion of access to counselling in school for children and young people in Scotland. The Government produces a six-monthly report on that, which I think shows the success of the policy in meeting what was previously an unmet need. However, there has been an increasing delay in those six-monthly reports coming out; the most recent one that we have is for January to June 2023, which means that we have now got to the point where there is a 18-month or so delay before those reports are published. That makes it quite hard to scrutinise the implementation of the policy.

There is some really useful data in those reports. For example, the most recent one, from the first half of 2023, shows that twice as many girls are accessing counselling in school as boys. I would suggest that girls do not have twice the mental health issues that boys have and that there are other underlying factors that it would be worth our looking into.

If the cabinet secretary or her officials have the information to hand, that would be great, but given how specific my question is, I am not expecting that to be the case. Will the cabinet secretary look into why those reports have become so increasingly delayed that there is now an 18-month delay in the publication of the next one—at least, I hope that it is 18 months, as that would mean that the next one will be published soon—and look at whether we could significantly cut down that delay to ensure that we get more timely information, so that we can start to analyse the situation and look at what the barriers to access are?

Jenny Gilruth: I think that Mr Greer has raised an important point: the information should be published in a far more timely way than it currently is. I am advised that it is to do with our having to disaggregate all the information and to go back to local authorities, which takes time. We also get evidence from community services and from schools, and we need to bring all that together. However, we should be able to do it more quickly,

and I will take the matter away and speak to officials about how we might do that.

The member has also made an important point in relation to the gender divide and the fact that our boys are not accessing counselling services in the same way that our girls are. I think that that speaks to changes in society more broadly; we have talked briefly about misogyny and toxic masculinity. I am worried about a generation of young boys growing up in an Andrew Tate society and we need to consider what more we can do to support them, whether that be through Government approaches such as the gender-based violence framework or through role models in schools. We have some fantastic male teachers in our secondary schools, and it is important that our young boys have role models in their lives to whom they can relate. When we talk about these kinds of gender splits, it is important that we reflect on that data.

I will take away both points—that is, on gender and on more timely publication of the data. Perhaps I can reassure the member if I tell him that the data set, I am told, will be published in the coming weeks.

Ross Greer: That is great. I appreciate that.

Jackie Dunbar: My questions are for the Minister for Higher and Further Education and relate to some of the evidence—or, I should say, opinions—that we have heard on the Withers review. That review called for an audit of post-school qualifications. Can you update the committee on what progress, if any, has been made on that?

Graeme Dey: Yes, I can, if you will give me a moment. Progress has been made on it, because it is quite an important piece of work and was an important ask of the Withers review.

That work is under way. The initial stage of the project has included wide stakeholder engagement to inform and refine its scope, and we have identified data collection requirements and are working in partnership with relevant agencies and other stakeholders to ensure a solid evidence base. Data gathering is under way.

That initial stage, which I have just outlined, is due to be completed in the coming weeks, and it will be followed by data collation and analysis and further stakeholder engagement—and I mean meaningful engagement—in that space. There is no doubt that there is an appetite to tackle the issue, and it is imperative that we do so. James Withers was absolutely right about that.

Once we get through that, the final stage of the audit will focus on ensuring that insights are available to inform policy development, and advice on that will be coming to ministers. However, we

absolutely recognise the need to move in this space and to get this knocked into shape, because we hear loud and clear the concerns of stakeholders.

Jackie Dunbar: Will you keep the committee updated, where appropriate?

Graeme Dey: I am more than happy to do so.

Jackie Dunbar: Thank you.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I have a brief question about trade unions and colleges. My understanding is that there has been some discontent with the way in which support staff and others are being represented in those negotiations. What is the Government doing to get the best out of this and ensure that the situation does not completely collapse? After all, if that happens, nobody wins.

Graeme Dey: I will say, to be blunt, that I am not going to get dragged into trying to micromanage internal and cross-trade union relationships. We both know that that is what is at play here. I will do everything within my power and authority to encourage people, as best I can, to approach the process of resolving the long-standing issues in the sector, but I am not going to attempt to micromanage those issues.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Have you met the trade unions involved to talk about this particular issue?

Graeme Dey: No, I have not. I had some correspondence from one trade union, and I made it very clear that this was a matter for the trade unions themselves. Essentially, what we are talking about is an internal mechanism that lies behind the national bargaining and, frankly, I think that they need to sort this out between themselves.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: If the trade unions asked you to meet them, would you?

Graeme Dey: As I have said, I am not going to be dragged into a disagreement between two trade unions—that is not the role of ministers. My job is to try to facilitate that overarching piece of work to get the industrial relations within the sector—not between trade unions, but within the sector—to a better place.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Thank you.

The Convener: I thank the cabinet secretary, ministers and officials for their time today. We have had a constructive, wide-ranging and productive meeting, and we are extremely grateful for that.

I now conclude this evidence session and the public part of our proceedings. The committee will move into private session to consider its final agenda item.

12:24

Meeting continued in private until 12:38.

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The deadline for corrections to this edition is:

Tuesday 15 July 2025

Published in Edinburgh by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, the Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP

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