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DRAFT

Education and Gaelic Committee

Comataidh an Fhoghlaim agus na Gàidhlig

Tuesday 8 September 2026

Session 7



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EDUCATION AND GAELIC COMMITTEE
2nd Meeting 2026, Session 7

CONVENER

*Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Katherine Sangster (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*George Adam (Paisley) (SNP)

*Duncan Dunlop (South Scotland) (LD)

*Patricia Gibson (Cunninghame South) (SNP)

*Laura Moodie (South Scotland) (Green)

*Angela Ross (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Reform)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Douglas Ansdell (Scottish Government)

Clare Hicks (Scottish Government)

Màiri McAllan (Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic)

Adam Reid (Scottish Government)

Andrew Watson (Scottish Government)

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Education and Gaelic Committee

Tuesday 8 September 2026

[The Convener opened the meeting at 08:46]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Karen Adam): Good morning, and welcome to the second meeting in 2026 of the Education and Gaelic Committee.

The first item of business is a decision on taking business in private. Are members content to take agenda item 3 and all future work programme discussions in private?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Programme for Government

08:46

The Convener: We will take evidence on the programme for government, which was announced last week. I welcome Màiri McAllan, Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic and, from the Scottish Government, Clare Hicks, director of education; Andrew Watson, director for children and families; Adam Reid, deputy director for skills; and Douglas Ansdell, head of Gaelic and Scots. Thank you all for coming.

I invite the cabinet secretary to make an opening statement.

The Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic (Màiri McAllan): Thank you, convener. I will make a brief statement.

Our comprehensive education system represents the opportunity of a lifetime for our young people, and it is my intention as education secretary that it be the basis on which every child has the opportunity to reach their potential. I stressed in Parliament last week that, for me, that means having excellence and equity as core principles in our work over the coming years.

This is a very large portfolio. Its remit starts before a child is born, and it covers all early learning and development; childcare; school-age education; tertiary education and lifelong learning; Gaelic, Scots and British Sign Language; children's services; and child protection, care and the Promise. I am, thankfully, ably supported in the portfolio by two ministers, who lead on their areas day to day, but I am very pleased to have the chance to give the committee an overview today.

As the First Minister's programme for government set out, we will lead a transformation in early learning and childcare from 1,140 hours to a year-round offer from nine months to primary 7. We will enhance early child development, and we will bolster child protection, including through a new public health approach to online harm, a national roll-out of the bairns' hoose model and the highest scrutiny of child sexual abuse. We will undertake the work that is needed in order to keep the Promise by 2030, underpinned by early preventative whole family support.

We will continue to remove barriers to an excellent education by supporting, among other things, Gaelic-medium education, further reducing the cost of the school day and developing a national staged intervention model for additional support for learning.

In our classrooms, we will focus on the ABCs—that is, attainment, attendance, behaviour and

curriculum. On the last of those, we will take forward the largest reform of our curriculum since curriculum for excellence was introduced, which will be developed with the profession and implemented with care. We will also end the intense rise in the presence of mobile phones in the learning environment that we have seen over the past 10 to 15 years.

Our teaching workforce will be supported with additional non-contact time and a new teacher recruitment assistance fund for rural and island Scotland, among other interventions. With increased college and university funding, we will collaborate on future frameworks for sustainability and success, and we will never introduce tuition fees. We will do that while increasing apprenticeships and supporting more parents and carers to train.

That only scratches the surface of activity across our portfolios, and I very much look forward to working with your committee in the coming years, as do my ministerial colleagues, who I am sure will appear before you soon to discuss their areas.

Finally, if you will allow me, I note that this morning we have had the results of the programme for international student assessment—PISA—2025, and we can go on to discuss aspects of that, should you wish. However, it is worth putting on record that the headline findings are that Scotland performed significantly above the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development average in four of the five areas reported, namely science, reading, computational problem solving and environmental science. We are sitting at or around the OECD average in mathematics. We have therefore maintained our competitive international position at a time when reading and maths have declined right across the OECD.

I welcome those findings and others that show a weakening of the relationship between socioeconomic disadvantage and academic attainment. However, I am also clear on where reform is required, and I am focusing in particular on the maths results. We will be able to discuss that in the context of the curriculum improvement cycle and, indeed, public service reform of education.

The Convener: I will start us off with a general question. We had a useful private discussion with your officials at our business planning away day in Stirling, when they provided a summary of the Scottish Government's priorities for session 7 and of the progress that was made in session 6. How does the programme for government address and join up with the progress that the Government made in session 6? What are the main factors that have influenced the priorities that you have set out in the programme?

Màiri McAllan: To a large extent, much of what is in our programme for government across the very broad spectrum of outcomes that this portfolio covers—from before a child is born to their education and right through life—builds on successes to date. There will be continuity—for example, in education, I set out last week that I was determined to continue the Scottish attainment challenge as a key driver of the continued shrinking of the poverty-related attainment gap.

We are building on policies such as the roll-out of free school meals and all the work that has been done to reduce the cost of the school day. The Promise and our work in child protection are very much a continuation of work that was done in previous parliamentary sessions. However, there are also departures from what has been done, and we will undertake significant bits of reform that will be unique to this period. The delivery of the curriculum improvement cycle—the development of the new curriculum and its successful implementation, which I view as of equal importance—will be new to this parliamentary session. We will also roll out significant changes in childcare, moving from the delivery of the 1,140 hours to something that looks very different, is available 52 weeks a year and goes from the age of nine months to primary 7.

I am happy to get into any of the specific areas. There is continuity and there are continuing approaches but, equally, there are some big stand-alone areas. I should also say that public service reform in general in education will be new and substantial in this parliamentary session.

The Convener: The committee has discussed the fact that we often have a lot of input in the Scottish Parliament, but what we want to focus on is the outcomes for people. Therefore, my question is, a year from now, what two or three concrete changes should children, young people, families and learners have experienced that will tell us that outcomes are being delivered?

Màiri McAllan: It is difficult to break it down to only three outcomes, given the breadth of the portfolio, but if I were to name only three, I would go to three points in people's lives that the portfolio affects, starting with early child development. In recent years, we have seen some trends that are a little concerning in respect of early child development and speech and language development. I am interested in the extent to which that is linked to devices, the Covid effect and other factors affecting parents and carers. If we were able to improve those statistics and outcomes in the formative early years, that would be very helpful.

As you asked me to give three examples, I would then look at school-age education. The overhaul of our curriculum that is under way will drive better attainment for young people, better workload management for the teaching workforce and better outcomes generally. Public service reform will do that, too.

I suppose that we could then turn to post-school education. Although we already have good positive destination statistics in Scotland, with 93.5 per cent of learners being in a positive follow-up destination nine months after leaving school, and, for example, higher youth employment and lower youth unemployment than in other parts of the United Kingdom, I would like those aspects to improve, too.

I cannot really narrow it down to three examples, but I have picked three stages in a young person's life.

The Convener: Thank you. I will open up the discussion to other committee members.

Patricia Gibson, do you have a supplementary question, or is your question on a different topic?

Patricia Gibson (Cunninghame South) (SNP): My question is slightly related to what the cabinet secretary just said. You have spoken a lot about the very good work that the Scottish Government is undertaking to improve the life chances of less advantaged children. We have heard successive education ministers and other members of the Government talking about closing the attainment gap. What is your response to the view that it is really difficult—some would say impossible—to close the attainment gap?

Although the ambition to narrow the attainment gap is one that everybody should strive for, some argue that it cannot be fully closed, because children start from very different circumstances. Despite Government mitigation measures and the good work that is done to level the playing field, some children have very difficult—even chaotic—home lives, while others have highly supportive parents. Given the vastly different circumstances into which children are born, is it possible to close the attainment gap?

Màiri McAllan: I do not underestimate for a moment what you have said about the vastly different circumstances into which a child can be born or that they may experience as life goes on. There will always be challenges and difficulties in our society that can have a bearing on our young people. However, the First Minister has made the eradication of child poverty a principal objective of the Government. The aim is not to reduce it or to tinker around its edges but to eradicate it. I take my lead from the First Minister in that regard, and I am committed to working to close the attainment

gap, difficult though that may be. I am not short-sighted on that at all. By working towards that goal and striving to achieve it, we will get closer to doing so. Of course, this is not just about statistics; it is about improving children's lives.

Eradicating child poverty is an objective for the whole Government. I have this incredible tool in the comprehensive education system, and I must ensure that it works as effectively as possible, alongside Government support, to create a level playing field. We will not achieve equality of outcome, but we must strive for equality of opportunity. Our work to reduce the cost of the school day, bold interventions such as the Scottish child payment and our work on the Promise aim to provide strong relational support for families as early as possible, helping to create a level playing field for young people. Difficulty will ever be present in our society but, as a Government, we have a responsibility to try to bear down on it as hard as we possibly can.

I do not want to take up too much time on each answer, but there is really strong evidence that aspects of the poverty-related attainment gap are closing. Our achievement of curriculum for excellence levels data speaks to the gap in literacy and numeracy, in both primary and secondary education, being at a record low. I also mentioned the positive destinations that young people move into after leaving school. The latest figures show a two-thirds reduction in the poverty-related attainment gap over time, which is brilliant. I also put on record the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service data from this year, which shows that more young Scots are going on to university than ever before, including more from deprived backgrounds than ever before.

Those are just three ways in which we are already arresting the rise in the poverty-related attainment gap, although there is more to do.

Angela Ross (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Reform): Several different funding streams go into the Scottish attainment challenge. We have pupil equity funding, strategic equity funding and care-experienced children and young people funding. They all have different decision makers and slightly different philosophies. Given that, how do we ensure that there is an aligned outcome? What are the metrics that we are striving to achieve? How are we ensuring that each pound is spent effectively?

09:00

Màiri McAllan: Over the past 10 years, the Scottish attainment challenge has seen about £1.75 billion of investment. About £1 billion of that has been in pupil equity funding—the PEF—which goes straight to school leaders to decide how best

to address the poverty-related attainment gap in their schools. We can discuss that, but I think that that has been one of the breakthrough differences in approach in Scottish education in the past 10 years. It brings the question of what Ms Gibson asked about right to the fore and says that we all have a responsibility to tackle that. Another part of the £1.75 billion supports care-experienced young people directly and goes through councils.

I said in my statement last week that I remain committed to the model of the Scottish attainment challenge and to its continuing. I am looking carefully at the balance between what goes straight to schools and what goes to local authorities, but I am committed to the idea that it is for school leaders to decide what it is best to do in their schools. That might be supporting care-experienced young people or, if there are particular problems with attendance, really leaning into that and working out what is going on in families. There is a range of things that can be done, but the beauty of it is that it is up to the school leader.

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): I have questions on the back of what you said in your opening statement about taking forward the biggest overhaul and reform in education since the curriculum for excellence. Having been here for a long time, I have the scars from when we went through curriculum for excellence initially in a previous committee. There will be those in the sector, including teachers, unions and others who, it could be argued, are reluctant to change and find it a bit difficult to deal with—that is human nature, after all.

Could you give a wee bit more detail on where you are going with that? How will you measure the outcomes? What will you regard as success when we are going through that? What is the actual plan?

Màiri McAllan: I am very conscious that it is a significant change. The work has been under way for some time. In 2021, the OECD confirmed that curriculum for excellence was the right approach for Scotland but said that it would benefit from routine strategic overview, and this is the first instance of that. The main changes that we are seeking to implement are to clarify the role of knowledge in the curriculum and to make clearer a young person's progression through the curriculum—that is, what they ought to know at certain levels—without taking away the autonomy of those in the teaching workforce to decide on what to teach in their classrooms. I think and hope that that will have a significant impact on attainment.

One of the very early bits of curricular content that was worked on was maths. That was in

response to PISA 2022, in which we were above average in all four areas apart from maths, which is exactly the same as the situation today.

Implementation is also really important, and that is being developed by Education Scotland, working with the profession and unions. As far as I am concerned, implementation is just as important as the development of the curriculum, so it is my intention that there will be structured support for it. The finer details of that have still to be confirmed, but I would like it to be peer to peer, so that the workforce has leaders who can go out and support the implementation of the new curriculum in schools. The provision of non-contact days will be confirmed as part of that work, to ensure that we implement the lessons that we have learned from the roll-out of curriculum for excellence in the first instance.

George Adam: You talked about clarifying the role of knowledge. This might be me being a bit thick, but what exactly does that mean?

Màiri McAllan: Clare Hicks, the education director, can come in on that, but it means making clearer the aspects of a certain subject that a young person ought to know or be being taught at a certain stage. What that means for maths will be different from what it means for art—there will be varying specificity—but it is about setting out what young people ought to be being taught and what progression there ought to be through the levels. I do not know whether Clare Hicks wants to expand on that.

Clare Hicks (Scottish Government): The cabinet secretary has described the position very well. Maths provides quite a good example. Foundational knowledge needs to be built at a certain stage, and young people can then develop and learn more on top of that through linear progression. There will be greater clarity on the age and stage at which a young learner needs to learn certain concepts to support them as they move through the curriculum.

The Convener: We have a supplementary question from Duncan Dunlop.

Duncan Dunlop (South Scotland) (LD): Good morning, cabinet secretary. Thank you for coming along. I will go back to the issue of decreasing child poverty. All of us agree with the ambition to eradicate child poverty but, given that money is increasingly tight and that the Scottish Government's budget will be constricted during this session of Parliament, why are you rolling out universal service offers rather than targeted offers? For example, last week, the First Minister opened a breakfast club at East Linton primary school. That town is almost exclusively middle class, and parents are openly using the provision as a way of alleviating pressure on their commute,

so it is not being used to eradicate or address child poverty. Why are we not targeting resources in the areas that really need them?

Màiri McAllan: On the general issue, the Scottish Government takes a mixed approach. We invest in universal services when we think that all of society will derive benefits from those services. If taxpayers are contributing to services, we think that there is good reason for them to benefit from those services on a universal basis. Equally, there are instances when we provide targeted, means-tested support.

To give examples, free school meals are universally available for those in primary 1 to P5, and we are looking to extend that provision. However, the Scottish child payment, which is available only in Scotland and helps to drive down child poverty, is means tested.

I defend an approach that pursues both those things at the right moments. We want to foster a social contract in which everyone in society feels that they have a stake in the services that are provided. Equally, we understand that, at times, targeting is needed in order to use resources effectively.

Breakfast clubs are very much about ensuring that every child has a healthy meal so that they are able to learn, but we are also clear that they support parents and carers to get to work earlier if that is what they need to do, because that is the right approach for the economy.

Katherine Sangster (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab): Good morning. In your statement, you mentioned transforming childcare several times. Back in May, we had a very good debate on the issue, and we established consensus on a motion. We agreed that we would have a fully costed delivery plan and a timeline for the childcare offering for every child from nine months to P7. In relation to fixing what we need to fix at present, you made a commitment to speak to the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities about the cross-boundary issue and about childcare being available after a child's third birthday, not the term after their third birthday. What progress has been made on that? Can you make any commitments on timelines?

Màiri McAllan: I will try to address all those points, but come back to me if I do not manage to cover them all.

The childcare commitment is really significant. Everybody here will know and appreciate how much work and funding went into the delivery of 1,140 hours of funded childcare. We have always been clear—it was set out in our manifesto, and it is in our programme for government—that the

transformation of childcare is a five-year project, over this session of Parliament.

Our PFG takes us forward a bit by clarifying some of the staging posts to delivery, with breakfast clubs in every primary school by next August and after-school and holiday provision to have been rolled out by August 2029. That was a very deliberate attempt on our part to give the committee and others those staging posts, but this is a five-year piece of work.

What I and the children's minister, Siobhian Brown, will be doing, along with Andrew Watson and colleagues, is publishing and consulting on a blueprint. We are still in the process of deciding exactly what we want to put out to consultation and ask people about, but we will be doing that next year, I think—

Andrew Watson (Scottish Government): By April.

Màiri McAllan: By this coming April, the blueprint will be available and will be consulted on, and at that point more detail will be made available.

As for free at three and cross-boundary provision, I said during the debate—which I thought was excellent—that we will take free at three into account in transforming the 1,140 hours of provision. Of, course, I hope that the expansion of provision from nine months to primary 7 will negate the problems that we have seen with regard to free at three.

I must again put on the record that one of the things that some providers have put to me is that having new children starting every Monday, for example, could be logistically challenging for teaching staff et cetera in managing induction, and bringing cohorts in at certain points will be easier. However, we have to try to overcome this issue, because we want parents, carers and, indeed, young people to benefit.

My view is that cross-boundary provision should already be provided. As you can imagine, I meet COSLA regularly to discuss a suite of issues, and I am raising that matter with it. In many instances, it is being provided, but again it is an issue to be solved when we expand childcare.

I suppose that this is another issue for the committee to consider with regard to public service reform. How local authorities co-operate or otherwise, how boundaries work in our system and what such matters actually mean for parents and carers are things that we can try to overcome through public service reform.

Katherine Sangster: That was really helpful, but I want to be quite clear about what you have said. For a start, are you saying that every primary

school will have some form of breakfast club by August 2027?

Màiri McAllan: That is what we are working on just now. COSLA is the delivery partner, but we are investing £15 million this year in enhanced provision and £44 million a year thereafter. I have been clear with COSLA that the commitment is to an offer in every primary school, but I understand that flexibilities will be required with regard to, say, rurality. Were you going to come on to that?

Katherine Sangster: Yes, I was going to ask what the challenges are in that respect. To go back to Duncan Dunlop's point, I note that your launch was in East Linton, and I totally agree with him that that seemed a slightly odd choice. I presume that that primary was chosen because it is a small school. I am hearing from school leaders that this sort of thing is easier to do in a small school, while with larger schools, issues arise with the building, staff and so on. I want to get a bit of a sense from you, cabinet secretary, or anyone else of what you think the challenges are.

Màiri McAllan: I do not know why East Linton in particular was chosen and whether that was because of logistics and the First Minister's whereabouts. Andrew Watson and I were just conferring about coverage, and I point out that there is already about 50 per cent coverage in the country. It is not the case that we have prioritised East Linton or whatever—that is a quite separate issue.

I have a balance to strike between committing to and wanting to see full roll-out—and funding it, which is what we are doing—and understanding that councils face different circumstances. We have talked about rurality; in my constituency, which has a large rural population, people spend most of the time between 8 am and 9 am travelling to school, so I understand that there are differences in that respect. Equally, in our special schools, the logistics of running a breakfast club are very different again.

That is why I have been clear with COSLA that I want to see this rolled out in full. However, I am aware that flexibility will be needed—I just want that to be based on evidence.

09:15

Katherine Sangster: Finally, before I let in my colleagues, we should be wary. I have been campaigning on this for 10 years. We were told that 1,140 hours of provision would solve issues that have not been solved. I am clear that it is very important that we solve the existing issues before we start building on that.

Màiri McAllan: I take that on board entirely. Although it is early days and the blueprint that will

be consulted on next year will clarify matters, our mindset is not of tagging something on top of what is already there. It is about looking across the board, expanding significantly and addressing some of the outstanding concerns with the 1,140 hours. I should say, and I hope that the committee agrees that, on the whole, the 1,140 hours has been a successful and fulsome provision for young people in Scotland, which is evidenced by the almost universal uptake for three and four-year-olds.

Laura Moodie (South Scotland) (Green): I will go back to the point that you made at the start about assessment and the PISA results. I know that that is an international comparison, which is always difficult, but we can compare with our nearest neighbours. We are now performing significantly below England.

My question is about Scotland's assessment programme. Why are we persisting with a system that is clearly not improving outcomes? Can we move to a system that is more about meeting the needs of pupils as they are? I absolutely agree that there should be a degree of standardisation, but it should be focused on the reporting and data end, rather than the measuring children end, if you see what I mean.

My colleague Ross Greer commissioned a report on testing, and the Mark Priestley report was issued last year, which very much emphasised my point. How are the PISA results informing our approach to assessment and standardised data and reporting in schools?

Màiri McAllan: I can answer specifically about PISA. From my perspective, it is just one way of measuring one strand of success in an education system. It is important, and I will take it into account, as I do all the ways in which we measure success, including ACEL data, exam results, positive destinations, the number of young people going to university and the widening access work that we do with universities. There are many ways of measuring success, and I do not put one above the other.

I believe that our education system should be capable of driving academic excellence as well as supporting strength in vocational excellence and readiness for the world and the world of work. PISA looks particularly at reading, mathematics and science, which are very important in our system. However, Scotland's curriculum for excellence also looks at artistic expression, problem solving and moral education. Frankly, I would not have one without the other. I want to draw on the evidence that we have to ensure that our education system is capable of providing academic excellence, as certain bodies will encourage us to do, as well as producing well-

rounded individuals who are ready for the world and are capable of being resilient. PISA is just one factor.

Laura Moodie: Absolutely, and I completely agree with that, but it does not answer the question about how we are measuring those factors. You have reeled off a list, but how do we, as a committee and a country, assess and measure success for each individual child? How are young people going out into the world and demonstrating their success to future employers or on vocational courses? The Hayward review recommended a national diploma of achievement, but that has not been rolled out nationally yet. I accept that it is great to have a broad range of goals, targets and achievements, but how are we measuring those things and keeping the measurement consistent across local authorities?

Màiri McAllan: It is quite hard to boil down a child's whole offer academically, vocationally and extra-curricularly—if that is a word—into one presentation of facts about them. I know that there are recommendations about the certificate of achievement.

There is much in the Hayward review that I support, and we already have a system that does not unnecessarily require final examination in areas where it is clearly not required—in technical subjects, home economics and others. However, to be absolutely clear, I still support final examination in a range of areas not only as a means of doing what I think you are challenging me to do, which is to help our young people to demonstrate their capacity, but because many young people will go on to do things in life that require them to perform under pressure in that way. That is why I support having a mix of assessment.

As I say, it is hard to distil a child's ability down to one measure, but I will continue to use achievement of curriculum for excellence levels data, which is teacher led. We will use our national exam results, which this year showed, for the second year running, increased academic attainment across the board; we will use vocational awards, which have shown a quite remarkable increase—they have gone up by 121 per cent since 2019—and we will record what our young people are doing after school.

A senior officer in an education authority recently said to me, "Our positive destination levels are now so high that I could chap the doors of the young people who I know are not currently in education, training or work." That is a really successful position. We will keep working on all those issues, but the approach is different for different young people.

Patricia Gibson: I have a couple of questions about what happens in schools. First, there is the new probationer offer. To me, it is pretty gold standard in offering three years of secure employment, one of which is the probationary year, and it is a really positive development for people who are thinking about entering teaching. However, I suppose that every benefit might bring a cost. One of the concerns that has been raised is what the probationer offer means in terms of employment prospects and permanent contracts for people who are currently qualified and looking for such contracts, but who find that a lot of the capacity is taken up with the three-year probationary placements that are being given. What discussions have you, as cabinet secretary, had with local authorities about managing that?

Màiri McAllan: The dynamic that you have expressed is very live and is at the top of my mind as we are thinking about the three-year guarantee. Exactly as you say, the offer is a response to a concern from newly qualified teachers whom we want to encourage to be in the profession—and we want to encourage others to come through—but who face uncertainty in the first few years of their work, as well as things differing across council areas, which we need to remember are the employers here. The offer is about providing certainty and shoring up the future teaching workforce.

However, I am very aware of the concerns, as you have described them, from established teachers about capacity. We will have to manage our way through those, and we will have to take cognisance of the points that are being raised with me by established teachers.

I believe that we can do both. We can offer certainty and better planning, including life planning, for our young teachers, as well as provide opportunities and support for established practitioners. I say that because there are other dynamics at play. When we roll out the reduction in class contact time, as we are doing now, that will create the need for more teaching positions across both primary and secondary.

Just now we are trying to drive uptake through bursary and recruitment campaigns for hard-to-fill subjects, so I take comfort from the fact that we have work to do to fill teaching spaces, and that will be increased by the reduction in class contact time, which means that we can support newly qualified teachers without that having a detrimental impact on the existing workforce. We have to be able to do both.

Patricia Gibson: I will ask a slightly different but related question, sticking with the theme of what happens in classrooms. I have already raised the issue of mobile phones in schools with you. There

is not a teacher in the world who would not be happy to see a ban being given statutory underpinning. However, teachers have contacted me about the issue, and my concern relates to the caveats and opt-outs that we know there will be.

There are two concerns about the proposal. The first is that there will be so many opt-outs that it will, in effect, become meaningless. The second is that, if the policy is to be enforced, schools will face pushback, whether it be from pupils, parents or both. Should that happen, schools will need to know what their position is and what powers and sanctions they can use to—I am going to say the word—force compliance. There needs to be compliance if the policy is to mean anything, and that needs to be consistent across the country.

Are any discussions being held among schools, the Scottish Government and local authorities about giving schools the powers that they will need to enforce the mobile phone ban in the way that will be required, so that they can create a better climate for learning and teaching?

Màiri McAllan: I will very much take the advice of you and other former teachers on the issue. What you said reflects the conversations that I have been having with teachers, as well as with pupils. This is anecdotal and just my experience of having met people, but it is no exaggeration to say that I have not yet met a pupil or a teacher in schools where mobile phones have been banned who has said that the ban has not been positive for learning and teaching.

We are complementing that anecdotal evidence with a consultation. As the director of education was just reminding me, we have already had about 5,000 responses to that consultation, which is really significant. Therefore, we are gathering views in that way as well.

On the particular question of enforcement, it has not so far been raised with me that schools that have taken a fulsome approach have had exceptional difficulties with enforcement. Most of those schools reflected to me that there was a bit of pushback at first—we all recognise that this is a big change for young people—but, once it was understood what was required and everybody was doing it, it became like other things that people are required to do in class.

For example, I remember that when I was in school I had to sit down, take my jacket off, not chew gum and not talk when the teacher was talking. Although the mobile phone ban is a big change, we just need to get to a point where phones do not exist in the learning environment, in the same way as other things happen when people follow those other rules.

I have seen how some schools have managed enforcement, and success has been closely linked to taking a whole-community approach to the development of the policy. Those schools went out and spoke to teachers and the community and they involved young people in shaping what they intended to do. Everyone then has a stake in the policy when it is introduced.

The reflections that I have heard so far have been that, when such preparatory work is done, the policy has not led to massive resistance from young people. In fact, many of them are saying, “I’m so glad I don’t have that constant distraction.” Even if the phone is in a person’s pocket and they are not reading what it is saying, if it is buzzing, it will be distracting them from what they are doing. In our behaviour in Scottish schools research, the main issue that secondary teachers raised with us was disruption from mobile phones. Therefore, I am quite committed to the policy.

That brings me to your first point about exceptions. Much like the need for flexibility with breakfast clubs, I understand that there will also need to be flexibility with mobile phones. For example, if a young person is managing diabetes, they will need to use their mobile phone to address their blood sugars. Equally, a young carer must be able to contact home on a different basis from other children. There will be exceptions, but my expectation, hope and intention are that there will not be so many that they undermine the core approach of drawing a line in the sand in relation to mobile phones being in our learning environments.

Duncan Dunlop: I support the removal of mobile phones from classrooms, but will we commit to removing them from the school estate and monitor how they enter it? There is a whole issue regarding children’s social time—playtime, lunchtime and so on.

While you are consulting on mobile phones, will you please go further and review the proliferation of screens as a de facto learning aid? For example, Apple now has a long-term contract with Scottish Borders Council, whereby children in primary 4—which means those from the age of seven—are now given an iPad and are expected to take that home. I have concerns that that is enabling a reliance and building an addiction that will lead to disruptive behaviours, which is a point of concern right across Scotland. What are your views on that?

09:30

Màiri McAllan: I will take those two points in turn. First, on whether there should be a classroom ban or a whole-campus ban, I have visited a school that has implemented a whole-campus ban

but which allows the young people to use their mobile phones when they are outside for lunch or when they are travelling to and from school, and that worked well there. Equally, I have spoken to staff in some schools where phones cannot be used in the classroom and must not be seen in the corridors, but the young people can have them out when they are inside at lunchtime. In the schools where mobile phones were banned across the whole campus, young people reported enjoying more social time at lunch and break, as they would interact with one another rather than turning to their phones. Also, it seemed that, because they had not looked at their phones all day, they were less inclined to look at them all night—it was almost as if the habit had been broken. However, I will see what the consultation says and respond to that.

The question of digital devices generally is separate from that of mobile phones, and I am not treating them in the same vein. The ban will be on mobile phones. How much screen time pupils should have, and at what age, is a huge question in education. Clare Hicks can tell me whether it is the OECD that gives us guidelines on children's screen time.

Clare Hicks: It is the chief medical officer.

Màiri McAllan: The chief medical officer and others are developing guidelines on what should be used and at what age, and I want us to stick with that approach. I may be old-fashioned in this view, but I think that outdoor learning and face-to-face learning with a teacher, particularly in the early years, are really important for speech and language and for dexterity and motor development, and I will be guided by international evidence on all of that.

Duncan Dunlop: My point is that it appears that Scottish Borders Council has signed a long-term agreement with Apple that binds it to a contract for learning for pupils from primary 4 onwards. I understand that that might have been done with good intentions on the part of the council, particularly following on from the Covid period. However, countries such as Sweden have gone in completely the other direction, with pupils doing computing only in information and communications technology suites, and only when they require to do those subjects, particularly in the primary years. As a parent of young kids, I have a concern that we are now using those devices as a crutch to manage classroom behaviours rather than to ensure that core skills are learned. I would appreciate hearing your comments in that regard.

Màiri McAllan: I actually wrote to my counterpart in Sweden last week to seek support, because, like you, I am conscious of the work that

is being done there and I want to understand how it might apply in Scotland.

We have to strike a balance, given that this is a digital world. Our young people are going to have to grow up and find careers that are digitised—that is just the nature of the world—but I agree that there is a time and a place for the use of those devices, and we do not want that to take the place of person-to-person learning.

Angela Ross: I want to ask about the curriculum improvement cycle. I have gone through the draft document that came out in June, and I think that the policy is a bit of a Trojan horse for sneaking knowledge back in after you removed it in 2010. We need to be careful of the workload pressure, as I know from my teaching experience.

As well as having started teaching in classrooms 25 years ago this week, I have been involved in curriculum design, and something on page 33 of the document concerned me greatly. It says that knowledge that is presented in education “is not neutral” and it refers to embedding an “anti-racist curriculum”. I want to raise a concern about that, because I think that having any political ideology embedded in a framework in that way can be extremely damaging. We should not have political ideology embedded in such a way. Doing so also implies a dichotomy: if you put anti-racism elements in there, the opposing racism elements exist as well. We should be careful about that, because that can cause inherent division, and I would not want to see that in schools. I think that it is a flawed design element, and you might want to review that page. It also implies that children might be inherently racist and need it educated out of them—I hope that my inference is not true.

Can you explain why you do not think that a neutral education is achievable? Do you agree that we do not need politics in education?

Màiri McAllan: You mentioned workload pressures. Once it has been developed and implemented with support, I hope that the curriculum improvement cycle will alleviate workload pressures because of clarification and more structure in and information on what teachers will be dealing with. I hope that that will come of it, but I appreciate that it will depend on good implementation.

I do not consider anti-racism to be political ideology. That implies that racism is an appropriate political ideology, which I would hope that, in 2026, we all agree is not the case. Racism is fabricated; it is based on nothing at all but prejudice; and it is the education system's responsibility to point out when something is false, divisive and dangerous. You talked about anti-racism teaching having to include aspects of racism, which I think you are suggesting could drive racism. I disagree. Part of

education is about presenting both aspects and helping our young people to understand why one is total nonsense and one is a way in which we should all seek to understand and be kind to one another.

Angela Ross: To clarify my point, I note that, when you have one, the other exists, and that causes division because it suggests that, in society, the two are very prevalent. If that is embedded into every aspect of curriculum design, I would be careful of sowing that into such a deep and profound experience for young people.

How would you embed the act of decolonising the curriculum? That question might be more for Clare Hicks. You cannot sanitise history. I suggest that we should learn from it and not remove it.

Màiri McAllan: I will hand over to Clare shortly, but I say that the approach is not about removing anything; it is about actively facing up to things that have happened in the past that Scotland has been involved with, and understanding our role in that, why aspects of it were wrong and what the motivations were for certain aspects of it, to help us to understand the past and, therefore, the future. I think that your point is: if we do not understand our past, how can we hope to build our future? That is what it is about. However, I will defend anti-racism to the hilt.

Clare Hicks: I will add to what the cabinet secretary has said. Aspects of building racial literacy have been embedded in the curriculum for excellence for a period of time, reflecting United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child commitments to have a curriculum that fosters mutual understanding and respect among our children and young people. Throughout the period of the curriculum improvement cycle and subsequent qualifications reform, keeping a vibrant and reflective curriculum—with the qualifications that follow it—that reflects both our children and young people's experience and academic knowledge as it changes and grows over time has been a fundamental part of how reform and improvement have taken place across the education system.

Katherine Sangster: I will briefly return to the mobile phone ban. I think that we are all pretty much in agreement that we need to find a balance between flexibility and consistency. The 12-week consultation is out now. When do you think you will introduce the proposed legislation in the Parliament? I am hearing concerns from school leaders because, although we want to give headteachers flexibility on how the ban works in their school, we do not want a patchwork of implementation and procurement, especially with schools spending money on different types of pouches and everyone having a slightly different

system. I am slightly concerned that, by the time the legislation comes, we will already have piecemeal implementation across schools. I want to get a timescale and hear your thoughts on that.

Màiri McAllan: I cannot confirm an exact date today, but I want to do it as quickly as possible. I recognise that there is, to a large extent, cross-party support and support among parents and teachers, although I understand that that is to varying degrees. I want to move quickly, but it is incumbent on us to consult and to do so properly. That needs to be done, analysis of the consultation will be done and I will then be able to confirm when we will move forward.

Patricia Gibson: I have a couple more questions. The first is an easy one. You have spoken a lot today about the roll-out of breakfast clubs, which I think is welcome. They are very important for pupils and their wellbeing during the school day.

When will we see the roll-out of free school meals to all primary school children? Although many parents welcome the free breakfast offer, they are concerned about the gap in provision for older primary pupils during the school day.

Màiri McAllan: I understand that completely. We are working to complete the universal provision of free school meals in primary schools by extending it to P6 and P7, and to develop our manifesto commitment on school meal vouchers for high school pupils.

It is worth saying that the universal offer for P1 to P5 pupils stands. In addition, all eligible pupils from primary 6 to secondary 6 are already provided for. We expanded provision in April, I think, when pension credit was included as a qualifying benefit. That brought thousands more children into the scheme. Provision is ever increasing.

Another piece of work that we are carrying out is a test of change pilot for how the scheme would work in secondary schools. We are analysing the responses to that. That will help us to take forward the next steps of completing universal provision in primary and then moving on to secondary. I do not have a date for that just now, but I will keep the committee and Parliament updated.

Patricia Gibson: This is my final question. There is a lot of emphasis on Gaelic, which is to be welcomed by the committee and more broadly. There will be workforce issues involved in achieving this, but is the Government's ultimate goal for Gaelic to have parity with modern languages in secondary schools, so that any child, in any school, who wishes to study Gaelic in the same way that they might study French, Spanish or German will have that opportunity?

Màiri McAllan: The goal is wider than that. It speaks to culture and population as well as education. It is about enabling the widest coverage possible while connecting that with building communities, supporting areas of low Gaelic population and reversing historical declines. We absolutely want to see the expansion of Gaelic in the education system, but our aim goes beyond that.

Recent statistics demonstrate that progress is being made. We have greater provision at primary level than at secondary level, and I would like to see that start to balance out. You are right to say that recruitment is a significant part of that.

My colleague Douglas Ansdell will be able to say more, but legislation recognises Gaelic and Scots, alongside English, as official languages of Scotland. Our legislation gives parents a right to request that their local authority provide Gaelic-medium education. There are challenges in implementing that, such as ensuring that there are enough teaching staff, but that is definitely our direction of travel. Progress is being made, although I would like it to happen more quickly.

Would you like to add anything, Douglas?

Douglas Ansdell (Scottish Government): There are two streams: Gaelic-medium education and, as has been mentioned, Gaelic learning, which is similar to the learning of modern languages. We are seeking to make progress in both areas. There is increasing parental demand for Gaelic-medium education, and local authorities are responding to that, so growth is taking place in that area.

We are also focusing on Gaelic as a taught language, in the same way that French, Spanish and German are taught. Both streams of work are under way, and we are making progress in each of them.

The Convener: I want to ask about British Sign Language and deaf children. I note that the programme for government refers to BSL training for teachers and specialist deafblind teachers. There are wider commitments on early language acquisition, but the PFG seems to treat BSL primarily as a staff training or additional support issue, rather than as a language access issue, which, generally speaking, it is.

Given that the attainment gap is considerably wider for deaf children than it is for other children, how can we ensure that BSL does not slip between Government portfolios? What is the outlook for deaf children at the end of this session?

09:45

Màiri McAllan: It is definitely not slipping between portfolios. I will say this as often as I possibly can; although Gaelic is part of my title, you will hear me talking about Gaelic, Scots and BSL as languages that I take responsibility for supporting, and I will do that more, to demonstrate that parity.

BSL provision in education is another barrier that we need to pull down to ensure that we provide an excellent education for all our young people. You talked about how the provision of BSL is framed as a training issue rather than a language access issue. I will consider that point, because I do not want that to be the case. If we talk about the provision of training and specialist training, that is because that is the practical way of addressing the language access issues that we want to address.

As you will know from our manifesto, and as you will have seen in the programme for government, we talk about wanting to improve the educational outcomes for BSL users. I will take the committee's view on this, but we believe that an improved pool of specialist deafblind teachers who can be in our schools, utilising BSL and working with young people who require it, should be available. I am focusing on that, because I feel that that is a practical barrier that needs to be overcome, and we are doing scoping work on what exactly we need to do in that respect. However, I will take views from folks on other things that we should be focusing on, too.

The Convener: Thank you for that, cabinet secretary. I appreciate your comment about parity for BSL as a language. It has its own culture, and it should not sit only with additional support for learning, although I appreciate that it needs to. The issue is the crossover, and I appreciate your comments in that respect.

We come to questions from George Adam.

George Adam: I want to ask about additional support needs. To give you some context, I have five grandchildren. I know that it will be a shock to you that someone who looks so young can have five grandchildren, but my daughter Jessica saw "The Waltons" and decided that they were a possible role model for her life.

Three of Jessica's young girls are neurodivergent. It took a while for the oldest to be diagnosed, but once one of them triggered it, the system has been quite supportive to the others as they have gone through nursery and schooling. The new national staged intervention model is extremely welcome, but how do we improve families' experience of going through the initial process? I know that the system then kicks in and that support is provided for additional support

needs for young people, but the issue is the initial diagnosis and getting that support to children and their families. How do you see that progressing over the next couple of years?

Màiri McAllan: Thank you for asking what, to me, is a really big and important question. I will touch on a few areas in response.

First of all, as a result of our greater understanding of children's experiences and of neurodiversity in general, we are seeing a growth in the number of young people who require additional support to ensure that those barriers are removed and that they have an excellent education. I would say, with humility, that our funding is seeking to keep up with that, but the growth is such that there is more work to be done. Of course, the situation is not unique to Scotland—it is happening across the world.

An additional £29 million has been provided in this budget, £28 million of which was for councils and investment there, but we used £1 million to develop specialist training and progression for the teaching workforce. As the teachers in the room will know, every teacher will undergo ASN training in their initial teacher training. We are now looking to bolster that with, in essence, additional continuing professional development to support the workforce.

We also need more additional support teachers in our schools. I am really keen to work on that and on teacher workforce planning. In my statement, I talked about the fact that, quite bluntly, we have a cohort of qualified primary school teachers who are suffering underemployment, and I do not have nearly enough additional support needs teachers in our secondary schools. I want to work on progression for those individuals who choose to do that training—I stress that that should be a choice.

On the national staged intervention model, many councils are using the staged process anyway, but the model is about consistency, intervention as early as possible in a child's life, and parents having an expectation of what is going to happen and how their young person or child will be supported through the process. It is also a case of trying to take some of the complexity out of the system and making the experience better for children and young people.

Therefore, the issues are funding, better professional development, working to provide more teachers to support additional support for learning in our classrooms, and trying to take a really well-informed and national approach to walking with our young people on their journey. All of that is underpinned by an education principle that you should not need diagnosis in order to get support, although, for example, a diagnosis is required for medication for attention deficit

hyperactivity disorder. However, educationally, we should be working to support our young people in advance of, or without, a diagnosis.

George Adam: Those who are working with me here today are probably not surprised that some of my grandchildren are neurodiverse, because I made a big thing about sitting on this side of the room as opposed to that side the room—sometimes, even such simple wee things are the issue.

You talked about there being gaps in the specialist workforce. What is the most proactive way to deal with that and to encourage those in the profession to go down that route? There is obviously a need for that, and we need to find a way to do it, so what are the Government's plans for that?

Màiri McAllan: Different things will appeal to certain individuals or drive their decision making about specialising, and I am not in the business of compelling anybody to do it. The Government's responsibility is to ensure that there is sufficient funding for the provision of additional support, noting what I said about the extent to which that need has grown and the fact that every country is trying to match funding with what we want to achieve.

Developing continuing professional development is a good example of what we can do. As I said, we spent £1 million on that, and it has been really popular. Lots of individuals from right across the profession have come forward to engage in the training in order to upskill. The staged intervention model is another way of supporting teachers. I also come back to the point about making it as straightforward as possible to transfer from one part of the profession to another, for those who want to do that.

George Adam: What are your thoughts on delivery? Obviously, in this session of Parliament, just about everything will be based on public sector reform. You are right to say that the Government is providing funding for addressing additional support needs, but the support is delivered by local authorities. Is there not a case for saying that that is also a major part of public sector reform? I say that because there is a need and we need to take a strategic view on how we deal with it, so the idea of 32 local authorities having 32 different ideas makes that a bit more complex and difficult.

Màiri McAllan: Yes, it definitely does. We talked about the fact that cross-boundary childcare provision can be difficult and create problems for families. We have talked about local authorities' different practices with regard to teachers' employment and how the three-year guarantee is trying to deal with that. We can also see how, with regard to something as fundamental as ASN,

different approaches could create different landscapes across the country.

We have not touched much on PSR today, but it will be a big topic for us. It is up to the committee, but I will be happy to speak to you about that as the work develops. However, local government reform and its prominence in the PFG is closely tied to education reform, because, as we know, education funding makes up a significant part of local government funding. The delivery of education lies with local authorities, so, as PSR takes place in local government, reforms in education will run alongside that.

We have the opportunity to improve, which is the core of PSR. Where is the system not working for people? Where is it too complicated? Where do boundaries mean that families are left facing in different directions and end up coming to their MSPs? How many times have we sat in round-table meetings with actors from the different public services that support people in Scotland? This is our opportunity to try to bring that together.

George Adam: I have a final question about ASN and then will probably ask some questions about skills.

What metrics and data are you using to show that we are making progress on ASN? How do you do that? Is there a way for the committee to see that? It is a major issue that people are talking about and that families are dealing with.

Màiri McAllan: There are headline ways in which we gauge attainment, and I am always interested in how learners with additional support needs are doing. For example, on results day this year, I was interested to understand how children registered as having an additional support need had done in their exams. Likewise, I always look behind the data to see how children who are care experienced have done. We can use those big annual statistical outputs.

Equally, I have been looking really closely at the prominent reasons why young people are being registered as having additional support needs. Scotland has a very broad system that captures everything from lifelong requirements to bereavement, having English as a second language or having emotional, social or behavioural issues. It is a very broad system, and we are watching carefully to see where patterns emerge. For example, the biggest registration category just now is emotional, social and behavioural concerns or needs, while the fastest growing is having English as a second language.

As we develop the staged intervention model, we are also carrying out a data improvement exercise, which involves looking at how additional support needs are observed and registered in

different schools and different classrooms, and at what that means for young people. I would like to get to a position where children who do not need to be registered are not registered. If a child who has bereavement is supported and moves on, they need not still be registered as having an ASN. However, I want the children who are registered to have excellent support: ultimately, that is my goal.

George Adam: My final question is about skills and, in particular, apprenticeships. In the previous parliamentary session, we passed the Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) (Scotland) Bill at the last minute, and the Scottish Funding Council now deals with apprenticeships and all that. During our evidence sessions on that bill, witnesses from trade bodies that offer apprenticeships came to speak to us, and I asked about the profit that they take from the public money that they receive. They said that they take 40 per cent, which means that only 60 per cent actually goes on the apprenticeship and the 40 per cent is their top slice. When we compare that with colleges, we see that about 95 per cent goes to the student and 5 per cent is spent on admin.

Is there a better or more flexible way of delivering apprenticeships? In many cases, those trade bodies end up using the colleges anyway as part of the apprenticeship. Is there a different, more traditional way of looking at that? The fact that those companies are top-slicing 40 per cent into their sky rocket and walking away with the money causes me concern.

Màiri McAllan: There is an underlying commitment to extend the number of apprenticeships to 150,000. As with the significant changes to childcare, we are conscious of the need to review the picture. To achieve growth on that scale, we need to look at rates, at how relationships are managed and at how things are worked through. We have also committed to the apprenticeship accelerator grant. I am conscious that it must be attractive to industry and that it must be competitive so that companies will do the important job of taking on apprentices.

Equally, we need to ensure that the rates are proportionate, as you said, and that they are in the right place to allow us to achieve the growth that we want. This afternoon, Alyn Smith will be sworn in as the new minister with responsibility for tertiary education. This will be top of what he and I will work together on. We will consider the review of rates and the expansion, in particular.

Adam Reid, do you want to add anything?

10:00

Adam Reid (Scottish Government): No, you have broadly covered it. Apprenticeships will be a

key issue for those of us in the skills directorate throughout this session. As the cabinet secretary said, we will focus on contribution rates and meeting the commitment set out in the programme for government to expand the number of apprenticeships, and we will be working closely across the Government to take that forward.

George Adam: That is important because, although we have committed to ensuring that all young people get the opportunity to go to university and elsewhere, there is still a need for people to go down the apprenticeship route, and we need more flexibility in the system to allow young people to see it as an option. What are some ways of encouraging young people to do that? Sometimes parents will be an issue as well. They might say, “Get yourselves to university, but don’t try and become a plumber or an electrician,” when many plumbers and electricians are earning salaries in excess of any of the professions.

Màiri McAllan: I agree, and Scotland’s education system is doing well at achieving that balance right now. We can see that, under the new Prime Minister, England is wrestling with questions related to the balance of what its education system is pursuing.

Our exam results during the past two years show that national 5, higher and advanced higher attainment has gone up across the board and that there has also been a 121 per cent increase in the number of young people getting awards in vocational studies such as construction, childcare, journalism and personal finance—all the vocational subjects that are preparing young people for the world of work.

There has to be parity of esteem, and we want to ensure that our system is capable of allowing children to achieve excellence in either of those routes—whatever they want and whatever suits them best. Lots of children will do a mixture of both. I want to encourage parity.

Patricia Gibson: Can I ask a question?

The Convener: I have to give everybody notice that it is 10 o’clock and the cabinet secretary has to be at another committee, so we need to finish by quarter past 10.

Màiri McAllan: Yes, I have to be at the Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee in 15 minutes.

The Convener: I see that George Adam has finished asking his questions, but I have three other people waiting to come in—apologies, Patricia. We will have questions from Laura Moodie, Duncan Dunlop and Katherine Sangster. I ask members to be cognisant of the time, because we only have until quarter past 10.

Laura Moodie: I will keep it quick. During the past decade, the Government commissioned a number of reviews, including the Hayward, Muir, Withers, McManus and Morgan reviews. Cabinet secretary, why has implementation of their recommendations repeatedly been partial, and what will change in the current parliamentary session to ensure that we deliver reform rather than only carry out further reviews?

To save time, I will ask my next question, which might be better answered by Clare Hicks. Where are the biggest gaps between current practice in our education system and the Hayward vision?

Màiri McAllan: I will be brief. The Government commissions reviews, but ministers make decisions about what is implemented according to our priorities, so there is no saying that, when we commission a review, we will implement its recommendations in full. We choose the areas that we believe will best serve the people of Scotland.

As to whether this will be a parliamentary session for reform, I absolutely intend to be a reforming education secretary. We have talked about the curriculum improvement cycle, reduced class contact time and changes to our workforce. I would say that removing mobile phones from the learning environment definitively also constitutes a significant reform from the past five years. In those ways and more, I am looking to reform.

Clare Hicks: I point to the outcomes of the previous parliamentary session and the Education (Scotland) Act 2025, which established Qualifications Scotland. That body will have a much more open approach to its governance and to how it interacts with learners who are going through the qualification system. That, in part, has been in response to a number of the reviews that Laura Moodie referred to.

In the context of curriculum and qualifications reform, the refocused Education Scotland is leading the curriculum improvement cycle and has worked incredibly collaboratively with more than 1,500 teachers to date to review the curriculum. In partnership with Qualifications Scotland, it has signed a memorandum of understanding so that curriculum reform will drive qualifications reform. That will give us the best opportunity to implement the holistic change that our education system needs for children and young people, and it ensures that teachers in the system know that those national bodies are working together in lockstep and that curriculum reform will drive qualifications reform to meet ministers’ aspirations for implementing the review recommendations that they have agreed should be implemented.

Laura Moodie: I will follow up on Karen Adam’s earlier question about BSL. I appreciate that we are getting a new minister who will be responsible

for further and higher education, but I also want to highlight the challenges of accessing BSL education if you are deaf or hard of hearing, particularly outwith the central belt, which has excellent face-to-face learning provision via charities for adult learners of BSL.

At the moment, it is very challenging to learn BSL in later life if you are deaf or hard of hearing. It is generally marketed as continuing professional development, and you cannot access Student Awards Agency Scotland funding. I am interested to hear whether there is a prospect of that policy changing in line with the 2023 report's recommendations.

Màiri McAllan: In the interest of time, I will say only that I take those insights on board and that we will consider funding as part of the scoping work that I mentioned to the convener in order to support our intended expansion of BSL provision.

Laura Moodie: Excellent. Thank you.

Duncan Dunlop: We have been reviewing and transforming the care system for 10 years—since the care review started. That is as long as a childhood, if we take that as being from the age of about five to 15 years. We have only three and a half years left until we are meant to have achieved success. To summarise last October's Audit Scotland report, we have a lot of intent but not enough action. We still lack a clear implementation plan for our areas and key indicators of success, and we do not even know how much it will cost to guide local authorities on what they should specifically start and stop doing. I am interested in when we will get that detail.

I am conscious of time, but I will follow up on that, as Laura Moodie did with her questions. Given the major governance and implementation review that is under way in Scotland, which includes questions about the structure of national health service boards, social care and local authorities, is now the time to answer the question of who should be responsible for—and who should deliver—care? From what I can see, that has never been answered in any of the reviews. We still have financial directors at local authorities who are responsible for flower beds as well as our care budgets.

While an argument could be made that you should be responsible for specialist provision at a national level, the same questions apply at a regional level for peripatetic social workers, and at an ultra-local level, in order to ensure that families get support and children get love. Will all that structure be questioned?

I am sorry—there was rather a lot in that question.

Màiri McAllan: That is absolutely fine, because it reflects the breadth of the challenge and what we still have to do.

The Promise is a very early challenge of public service reform that we have grappled with for years. Although this year we are focused on the proposed changes to local government structures, on which we are now engaged in intensive dialogue, we have been wrestling with the core PSR challenges that are associated with the Promise for many years.

You talked about the lack of an implementation strategy. There have been different implementation strategies in place for what different levels of government have to do, but as I come into this role and take responsibility for the Promise for the first time, alongside Siobhian Brown, I am very keen that we now put a stake in the ground and say what has been achieved to date—you and I have discussed some of what we think are the most important parts of that—and set out explicitly and clearly what the Scottish Government now has to do and what local partners have to do, bearing in mind the PSR opportunities that are coming.

We could rehearse what we think some of the critical changes that have to be made are: reforming foster care, kinship care and adoption, and providing greater support for those who undertake such responsibilities; increasing uptake; implementing the legislation and everything that it entails, including the national roll-out of bairns' hoose, which we discussed earlier; and giving the highest priority to tackling child sexual abuse.

As well as the advice that I take from The Promise Scotland and from the Parliament, I am guided by looking at the percentage breakdown of the reasons why children are placed on the child protection register. I can see that, of those registered, the reasons related to domestic abuse for 44 per cent, neglect for 43 per cent, parental substance use for 38 per cent, parental mental ill health for 38 per cent and emotional abuse for 32 per cent. That is a clear illustration of the need to direct whole family support to families intensively and early.

Siobhian Brown and I will set out the implementation plan as soon as we can.

Duncan Dunlop: I have a small follow-up question. What worries me about the levels of funding that we give to whole family support—this comes back to my earlier question about targeting breakfast clubs, which I assumed were in place to assist those who could not afford to feed their children—is that Nicola Sturgeon committed £500 million to the whole family wellbeing fund in a previous budget, but only £200 million was spent. This year, the Government is giving only £20

million to the equivalent fund, which is a real-terms cut. We have to focus on that money.

I do not know why we are not looking at family support centres. A recent review of the sure start initiative set out its longer-term benefit, which was to reduce school absences by 15 per cent among the cohorts that went through it. I encourage you to look at investing our spend in the areas in which we most need it.

Màiri McAllan: I take that on board. You and I have discussed family support centres. I support them because they are a physical and tangible manifestation of whole family support in the community, with multiple organisations and support under one roof, meaning that the family only needs to go to one place. We are engaging with that model.

The spend that has been invested to date was helpful and useful, but we understand that we need to go further. I am working with Shirley-Anne Somerville, the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice and Housing, on pulling budgets together and working across Government on budgets more than ever before to support whole family support. Siobhian Brown and I will drive all that work in respect of the objectives of the Promise.

Katherine Sangster: I will be very brief. In the programme for government, you mention a dyslexia passport, which is a fantastic idea. What are the lead times for children getting a dyslexia diagnosis? The passport will help only once the diagnosis happens, so do you know how long children are waiting? Anecdotally, I know that a lot of parents will pay for diagnosis, which leads to inequity.

Màiri McAllan: I understand that completely. I have a meeting scheduled very soon to discuss the matter with experts in the field, because I am keen to see it progressed. The dyslexia passport will be an important way to support educational transitions and lifelong learning.

I do not have the exact figures that you asked for. They are probably in my briefing pack, but in the interest of time, I will write to the committee with that information.

Katherine Sangster: That would be brilliant. Thank you.

Màiri McAllan: No problem.

The Convener: That brings the committee's public session to a close. Again, I thank the cabinet secretary and her officials for joining us.

We will now move into private session to consider the remaining items on our agenda.

10:13

Meeting continued in private until 10:47.

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