Official Report
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DRAFT

Education and Gaelic Committee

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Tuesday 29 September 2026

Session 7

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EDUCATION AND GAELIC COMMITTEE
5th 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:

David Anderson (Oversight Board for the Promise)
David Barnett (School Leaders Scotland)
Andrea Bradley (Educational Institute of Scotland)
Claire Burns (CELCIS)
Simon Cameron (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities)
Alison Gordon (Children's Services Planning Strategic Leads Network)
Tara Lillis (NASUWT)
Joanna Macdonald (National Social Work Agency)

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Education and Gaelic Committee

Tuesday 29 September 2026

[The Convener opened the meeting at 08:31]

Pre-budget Scrutiny 2027-28

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

This morning, we will be taking evidence to inform our pre-budget scrutiny in advance of the publication of the budget documents on 3 December. This year, we will focus our scrutiny on progress towards the reform of the children's care system and on class contact time in school education.

Today, we are taking evidence from two panels, with one on each theme. I welcome the first panel of witnesses, who will speak on class contact time: Andrea Bradley, general secretary, Educational Institute of Scotland; Tara Lillis, policy official, Scotland, NASUWT; and David Barnett, general secretary, School Leaders Scotland. Thank you all for coming and for your written submissions.

I will head straight into questions, and I will start us off. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development envisioned a reduction in class contact time as a way to provide

"dedicated time to lead, plan and support CfE at the school level."

However, the Scottish Negotiating Committee for Teachers agreement is that the 90 minutes should be used for professional time at the discretion of the teacher. How does the SNCT agreement align with the OECD's recommendation?

Andrea Bradley (Educational Institute of Scotland): Everything that teachers do in their 35-hour working week is in support of the curriculum and of achieving the aspirations and ambitions of the curriculum for excellence.

As per the SNCT agreement that has been reached, the time is allocated to planning, preparation of learning, teaching and assessment and is also for teachers to respond to the progress that they see young people making, including provision of feedback for learners. All of those things are fundamental to achieving the aims of curriculum for excellence and apply to all four capacities of the curriculum for excellence and all of the eight areas that the curriculum encompasses.

We do not think that there is a dichotomy between the SNCT agreement and the OECD recommendation. In fact, other OECD recommendations highlight the need for teachers to have appropriate time for the planning of learning, teaching and assessment, and other evidence from OECD research points to the negative consequences of teachers having insufficient time to spend on that endeavour.

The EIS has undertaken various pieces of research, including independent research that was commissioned from the University of the West of Scotland, Birmingham City University and Cardiff Metropolitan University, which was published in 2024. That research showed that, on average, teachers work the equivalent of a day and a half per week over and above their 35 contracted hours. The bulk of that 11.5 hours per week is spent undertaking activities related to the preparation of learning, teaching and assessment, because there simply is not enough time in the working week for teachers to do all that.

That was why the teachers' side of the SNCT strongly advocated for the full 90 minutes that would be freed up from the reduction in class contact to be allocated to that component of a teacher's working week. The deficit in available time has been so large and so chronic that it has caused significant issues for teachers in relation to workload, stress and poor wellbeing. There is also OECD research that clearly shows the correlation between teacher workload, teacher wellbeing and student outcomes.

We have been very clear throughout the negotiations—and throughout the campaigning that led us to the point where we got into them—that the link between teacher working conditions and student learning conditions is very strong. We have to be mindful of both of those things whenever we are making policy decisions or reaching agreements at SNCT level that impact on both.

We very much see this as an investment in teachers. However, the ultimate beneficiaries of that investment are the children and young people that teachers are teaching within the parameters of curriculum for excellence.

The Convener: Are you saying that teachers using their discretion will benefit the young people?

Andrea Bradley: Absolutely. Everything that teachers do is, ultimately, for the benefit of children and young people, including everything that they do in relation to planning lessons that are engaging and take account of all the aims and aspirations of curriculum for excellence, particularly in regard to deep learning, interactive learning and interdisciplinary learning—all the aims that are

captured within the curriculum. That is what teachers are planning and preparing for. That sets the learning is in flow, and the young people engage in it.

Given the strong emphasis on formative assessment within curriculum for excellence, a really important part of the job of teachers is to look at learner progress and make critical judgments about what learners have undertaken strongly and are showing confidence in, and where they might have particular development needs. The next job for the teacher is to plan in order to ensure that the individual development needs of each child in their class are provided for.

I will add another point in relation to the context in which we are now operating, which is that 43 per cent of children in our mainstream classes have a recognised additional support need. Every teacher in Scotland's schools has responsibility for responding to that range and complexity of additional support needs. A lot more is demanded of teachers in terms of individualised planning than perhaps would have been the case at the inception of the agreement following "A Teaching Profession for the 21st Century", which began to be enacted in the early 2000s. The landscape now is very different than it was when that agreement was first struck.

The other point to make is that Scotland lags quite significantly behind OECD counterparts in terms of the allocation of teaching time. In the majority of OECD countries, teachers teach for less than half of their contracted working hours; the average is 43 per cent. The 22.5 hours allocation of teaching time that teachers currently have amounts to 65 per cent of their overall working hours. When we move to a maximum of 21 hours, it will be 60 per cent, and so we will still be an outlier in relation to OECD counterparts.

However, this is a good step in the right direction. We believe that it will have benefit for teachers, which, in turn and simultaneously, will have benefits for children and young people—who, of course, are the ultimate beneficiaries of everything that is offered within our education service.

The Convener: Tara, would you like to come in on that?

Tara Lillis (NASUWT): Andrea Bradley gave a comprehensive response. The importance of the variety of needs in the classroom cannot be undersold—it is a significant reason why the time is necessary.

I will also add a point about the importance of trust and empowerment within the system. We should trust and empower our teaching staff to provide the best education for the learners who are in front of them. They are best placed to understand what preparation they need to undertake in relation to planning and curricular needs, in order to meet the needs of the children and young people in front of them.

I do not have anything further to add.

The Convener: David, would you like to come in?

David Barnett (School Leaders Scotland): It is clear that the workload of teachers is too high. The OECD evidence shows that Scottish teachers have among the highest number of contact hours in Europe. The reduction in contact time will provide teachers with extra time to do work that will be to the benefit of young people.

Alongside that—as Andrea Bradley alluded to—we have a clear link between teacher wellbeing and educational outcomes for young people. If young people have teachers who are stressed, have too much of a workload or who are ill, or have teachers who are absent through work-related stress, that is not to the benefit of young people.

We see a reduction in class contact time as very desirable and as something for which there is a clear need. It is not the panacea for every issue, but it is a start, and it will be welcomed by our teachers.

The Convener: The OECD's view is that reducing class contact time in any school system makes sense only when the teaching workforce is already well qualified and has demonstrated capacity for innovation and collaboration, and when school leadership has the capacity to ensure that that scale of investment delivers improvement for learners. However, some of the submissions that we have received seem to suggest that reducing teachers' workload is the primary objective of the SNCT agreement. How does the approach meet the OECD's recommendation to lead, plan and support CFE at the school level, and how will it be evaluated?

Andrea Bradley: I go back to what I said in my opening answer, which is that there is very strong correlation between teachers' working conditions and the capacity that teachers have to plan, prepare and evaluate learning effectively. The OECD is very clear that those things matter to learner outcomes. We have also commissioned other independent research on that.

In 2025, we commissioned the Institute for Public Policy Research to do some work around costings of some of our key campaign asks. Those were long-standing campaign asks, but we wanted that work to be done in advance of the 2026 Scottish Parliament election. The colleagues who undertook that work did some desk-based research that involved international comparison

and they also uncovered evidence that clearly shows the positive impact that teachers having sufficient time for the planning of learning, teaching and assessment has on learning and learners.

The flipside is that, when teachers have insufficient time to plan, prepare and evaluate learning appropriately, it has a negative impact on the choices that are made about the curriculum that is offered and the types of learning that are undertaken. There is a narrowing and there can be a propensity towards learning and assessment that encourage rote learning and memorisation, rather than the kind of deep learning, critical thinking and strongly evaluative work that curriculum for excellence tries to encourage in learners. We try to move away from the former style of learning, because it is very limited in what it offers to learners and in how it prepares them for life, work and citizenship beyond school. Curriculum for excellence tries to equip young people much more deeply and broadly with the kind of skills, attributes, knowledge and qualities that they need in order to be able to function well within a democratic society.

There is evidence to show the relationship between those two things. Is there an agreed evaluation mechanism at the moment? No, there is not. However, there are certainly lots of markers that the EIS, and the Scottish Government, Education Scotland and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, as the representative body of employers, have used over a long period.

If we think back to around 2010 and the early part of the noughties, there was a strong collective emphasis on teacher workload across different spheres of the education community, because it was well documented that it was a problem. That is why the working group on tackling bureaucracy produced two reports and why the current First Minister, who was then Deputy First Minister and the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, attended an EIS national conference. He acknowledged that teachers' workload was excessive and said to our members that, in the event that they found themselves being asked to do bureaucratic administrative tasks that they did not believe were contributing positively to the quality of learners' experiences and outcomes, they should not do them. That is the strength of the understanding that there has been for the best part of 20 years that there has to be decisive action on teacher workload.

08:45

Trying to handle the issue by limiting and tackling bureaucracy has not worked. A plethora of evidence shows that teacher workload has worsened over the period, rather than improved. That is why the teacher side of the SNCT pursued contractual change as a new way of trying to do something about teacher workload. That is in the interests of teachers and their recruitment and retention, but I go back to the point that the ultimate beneficiaries are children and young people, as well as families in our school communities.

The Convener: The key point is whether we can evaluate that.

Tara Lillis: It is important to stress how well qualified and experienced members of the teaching profession are: they are required to be registered with the General Teaching Council for Scotland; they have to go through a highly competitive process to qualify as a teacher; and there is a requirement for ongoing professional review and development. One of the OECD's recommendations is that we should have a well-qualified workforce. We have an exceptionally well-qualified workforce that we should be proud of. I am sure that David Barnett will have things to say about school leadership capacity, but I suggest that some of the bureaucracy in the system hampers that capacity.

Evaluation mechanisms have already been mentioned. Scottish education has a glut of information. In many instances, we overgather information for fear that we do not have enough of it or that the evaluation mechanisms are not in place. In all tiers of education, from school improvement and local authority improvement planning processes to the national improvement framework, evaluation frameworks have been discussed and agreed nationally to assess the quality and impact of education. I do not think that there is any desire for more data collection, nor is there a necessity for it. Certainly, we would worry that that would contribute to further bureaucracy, which would be negative.

Lastly on evaluation mechanisms, education is a positive good. Across many metrics, it improves the wellbeing and life chances of young people, in respect of not only the economic or educational output, but their health and chances of becoming a successful individual later in life. Fundamentally, education is about upstream prevention. The challenge is that, if you prevent someone from falling in the river, you will not have evidence to show that, unlike if you drag them back out of it after they have fallen in. We need to be careful about the extent to which we rely on metrics to assess the positive impact of education.

David Barnett: There is a great deal of evidence to show that our teachers are well qualified; it is an all-graduate profession They undertake professional learning every year, there

is a professional review and development process, and there is a professional update process.

The working time agreement in every school already provides time for collegiate school improvement work. As an association, originally, we would have argued for some of the 90 minutes to be used for collegiate and collaborative work at school level. However, the negotiations led to our agreeing with the proposal that all 90 minutes would be for teachers to direct their own professional time. At some future point, if there were to be a further reduction in class contact time, we would argue for some of that time to be used for collegiate and improvement work led at school level.

On the issue of school leadership capacity, there are real issues. Our workload report last year indicated that, on average, school leaders are working 53.3 hours per week on a 35-hour-per-week contract. Some are reporting workloads of 70 to 80 hours, and in many cases—this is perhaps even more pronounced in primary schools; our members are secondary school teachers—school leaders are using an awful lot of their time to cover for absent colleagues because they cannot get the supply staff to cover. That is using up a huge amount of time that could otherwise be used more profitably on planning school improvement.

The Convener: Thank you. I will now move on to questions from members.

Angela Ross (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Reform): We have previously been told by the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland that there is no causal link between the problem identified by the OECD and the proposed solution.

I will start with Andrea Bradley. Have teachers been involved enough in shaping the solution? Given that they are already working 11 hours of overtime a week, will those 90 minutes help? Is that what teachers are asking for? Have they been involved enough?

Andrea Bradley: The EIS, like the other teacher trade unions that are represented on the SNCT, is a strongly democratic organisation. All the decisions that we take are based on the outcomes of decision-making processes in which members are wholly involved. It is not the officers and officials of the EIS who take decisions; it is the members themselves. That democracy works from the school level all the way through to our annual national conference.

All of our policy is set from the decisions that come from the various committees, local associations et cetera and from all the voting that takes place in each of those scenarios. We are very confident that our members were involved in the decision making that led to the EIS campaigning for that measure. Our members tell us repeatedly that that is what they want.

To go back to the question of evaluation, one of the ways in which we can evaluate the success of the reduction in class contact time is to ask teachers, because they are the ones who have been telling us for the past 15 to 20 years that workload is a significant problem for them. It is a significant inhibitor of their ability to do the professional job that they want to do for the children, young people and families in their school communities. We have quite a wealth of longitudinal data that comes from national member surveys of about 50,000 teacher members, who have been telling us over a number of years that workload is an issue.

Your question is pertinent, because teachers are telling us not only that workload derived from class contact time is a problem, but that—again, there is a wealth of longitudinal data to support this—they are struggling with the underresourcing of additional support needs provision in schools. They are telling us that they are struggling because Scotland has among the largest class sizes in the OECD countries, with class sizes ranking around the third largest. More recently, they have also been struggling because of the trends that we have seen in dysregulated, challenging, violent and aggressive behaviour among children and young people for a whole host of reasons, not least of which is the fact that more than 25 per cent of our school population is living in poverty. That has significant detrimental impacts on mental health, the ability to regulate behaviour and so on.

You are absolutely right to highlight that this is not the only challenge that Scottish education faces at the moment, nor is it the only challenge that our teachers face. We believe that, as my colleague David Barnett has said, reducing class contact to a maximum of 21 hours will not be a panacea. There are many more things that we think need to be considered. Our campaign, and the work that we did in the lead-up to the last Scottish Parliament election, articulate all of that.

We will keep on at those things, because we think that Scottish education requires significantly more funding than it currently receives. We also think that managing that is affordable for Scotland. Actually, we think that the UK as a whole can afford to think differently about how it funds education, and we are very much making those arguments in the wider UK context, too.

This is what teachers have been telling us for the best part of 20 years, but they have also been telling us that there are other significant areas that they wish us to campaign on, not least ASN provision and the issues of pupil behaviour and

class size reduction. Those are really significant campaigning priorities for us, too.

Angela Ross: Tara, you mentioned a number of issues such as working conditions, wellbeing and the impact on children. Have any other ideas for addressing those issues been considered? I know that £310 million is being invested in this proposal, but has anything else been considered as part of a solution? In other countries, they have longer lunch times or additional breaks in the afternoon, which might allow teachers more time away from children in which to do all the significant things that we are talking about. If we are looking to reduce class contact time by 90 minutes, we could add 20 minutes to breaks throughout the day, which would make the day slightly longer but would allow consideration to be given to wellbeing and children to have additional breaks. Those models work in France and Finland. To your knowledge, has anything like that been considered as a different way of approaching the problem? What is your opinion of it?

Tara Lillis: The starting point of my response is that there is no single approach to the school day across Scotland. The start of the school day, the length of breaks and so on will vary not only between local authorities but within an authority. Some local authorities have looked to rationalise that—Edinburgh comes to mind—but there is no standardisation. Therefore, there is no level playing field to start with.

In any case, it would not matter how you cut up the day—the working hours would remain the same. Moreover, in the negotiation that took place in the SNCT, which is the appropriate forum for considering and agreeing teachers' terms and conditions, there was no discussion of the length of the school day. That matter is devolved to individual local authorities.

I would add, in support of earlier comments, that this is just one of a number of metrics. If we are looking at systems change, we have to understand that that is complex. Therefore, I would echo that there is no silver bullet here and that a number of metrics will need to be considered, including ASN, behaviour, workload and workforce permanence. In that respect, we have a number of asks, which I think NASUWT made quite clear in its own manifesto prior to the election process. There was not one manifesto ask on one identified issue, but, like my two colleagues, I would say that our view as a representative organisation is that our members feel that this will benefit them in the classroom, alongside a number of other things.

Angela Ross: Thank you.

I want to ask David Barnett about staffing. Do you think that reduced classroom contact time would accelerate a trend of the curriculum being shaped by staffing rather than by pupil need, given the significant pressures on the workforce and on getting teachers in, particularly in secondary education?

David Barnett: There is a very clear danger that that could happen, and the system urgently needs to look at how we recruit the right numbers of staff. There are particular issues in secondary schools and in particular subjects. We often talk about that with regard to rural and island areas, but there are subject shortages in some of the big cities, too.

Schools might need to make difficult decisions about the curriculum that they offer if they cannot get the right staff. The curriculum that is on offer to young people might be shaped by the staff who are available, because there will need to be more staff—but only decimal fractions of staff—to make the increase in non-contact time work. That is not a reason not to increase non-contact time; it just means that there is an urgent need for the system to work collaboratively. Different groups are looking at the issue, such as the strategic board for teacher education, which meets again this week. We need to consider how we can get the right number of people who teach the right subjects into the right areas.

09:00

The issue has existed for many years. There were similar issues 10 or 15 years ago, and they have not been resolved yet. It is hard to see how the problem could be resolved in the next two to three years—well, it will be less than three years, now, until the implementation of reduced contact time at secondary level. Again, that is not a reason for the reduction not to happen, but something needs to be done to ensure that we offer a wide and varied curriculum that benefits our young people and meets their different interests and needs, rather than a curriculum that is shaped by the fact that we cannot get enough home economics teachers, technical teachers or physics teachers. Those are some of the realities that could happen, and you urgently need to find ways to avoid those.

Angela Ross: Thank you.

Patricia Gibson (Cunninghame South) (SNP): I was going to ask how the figure of 90 minutes was arrived at—according to the written evidence, it comes from an average of 11 additional hours being worked. However, I am not going to do that, because I know what you will say.

Instead, I would like to ask about staffing. I enjoyed your comments about how qualified teachers are, because I was an English teacher for 25 years, so I was basking a wee bit there. I know that you will not want to be drawn into this, because it is the elephant in the room, but there is

a hierarchy of subjects in schools. We talk about that in every staff room, and pupils and parents talk about it as well, but trade unions—for reasons that I understand—do not talk about it. Everybody knows about it, but nobody talks about it outside staff rooms and homes. It is probably fair to say that, although all teachers work hard and want the best for their pupils, the workload is not evenly spread—that is an evident truth. I will not ask you to comment on that, because I know that you will not want to.

Last week, we explored the issue of chronic subject specialism shortages, which David Barnett alluded to—and that is before we get to the reduction in class contact time. Those shortages are in key areas such as physics, chemistry, English and maths, and I think that there is a problem with recruitment because of pay. I know that teaching is a vocation, but, at the end of the day, people have bills to pay and teaching cannot compete with industry for the opportunities that are available to graduates, particularly in maths and physics. Some graduates will come into teaching regardless, but that would explain some of the chronic shortages.

If we are serious about reducing class contact time, we need to fill those gaps, which already exist and will only be exacerbated by reducing class contact time. We are talking about a marketplace, and this is a case of supply and demand. Should we not at least consider the possibility of offering pay differentials? I am not talking about golden handshakes of £2,000 a year—that does not do anything—but offering differentials in pay for locations and subjects that are very hard to fill.

Andrea Bradley, you can go first.

Andrea Bradley: We are serious about reducing class contact time, which is underscored by the fact that we have a tripartite agreement on that across the Scottish Government, COSLA, on behalf of local authorities, and all the teacher trade unions that represent the teacher side. We collectively dedicated five years of our lives to getting that agreement.

The figure of 21 hours came from the Scottish National Party. In the early part of 2020, the EIS called for class sizes to be reduced to 20 and for class contact time to be reduced to a maximum of 20 hours. One of the reasons for the 21-hour manifesto commitment in 2021 was that we had made that call. The number 21 came from the SNP—we would have preferred 20, and we think that that would have allowed the SNP more scope. We accepted the 21 hours, but, as David Barnett said, we are certainly open to, in future years, looking to see whether we can get that number down and more closely in line with the figure in our OECD counterparts.

In terms of what you said about a proposal for pay differentials, it sounds like you are looking to apply raw market forces to a public sector endeavour. We are talking about publicly funded and publicly provided education, which is organised in such a way as to recognise that every teacher in Scotland, regardless of their age, the stage at which they teach and the subject that they teach, is equally qualified, and their contractual terms, as in the number of hours per week and the standard that they need to reach in order to be able to teach in Scotland, are universal. Introducing pay differentials would be problematic for those reasons. Depending on how it landed, we could end up with equal pay claims. We only have to look at the unfortunate, unfair and unjust situation in Glasgow at the moment to understand why we would not want to replicate such a scenario.

The other thing is that, over the years, there have been peaks and troughs with regard to the availability of teachers in the primary sector and the secondary sector across certain subjects, so the situation has not been fixed. We have not got workforce planning right in Scotland, and to a large extent we think that is because the teacher trade unions have not been involved enough in the workforce planning processes. There is a real opportunity in the agreement that we now have to put that right. David Barnett is right: as teacher trade unions, Government and employers, we need to work together to solve the challenges, particularly in respect of secondary education and given that we have shortages across so many different subject areas.

Patricia, you rightly talked about unfavourable salary arrangements for teachers who are qualified in certain subjects compared with what they might be able to earn in the private sector. We very much share that view but we do so with respect to all teachers, because there has been a 25 per cent real-terms reduction in the value of teacher salaries since 2008, and we are very committed to recovering some of that value over the relatively short term.

Teacher shortages are not a problem that is exclusive to Scotland. The United Nations is looking at that issue because it is concerned that, globally, we will have a shortage of 44 million teachers by 2030, which is just over three years away. The UN has made a number of recommendations—I think that there have been 57—to the Government in the past 18 months. One recommendation is to pay teachers salaries that are competitive in comparison to those of other graduate professions. Addressing workload is in the recommendations, as is the need for opportunities for professional development. There

is so much in there because, as Tara Lillis said, it is a complex issue.

If you are asking whether the EIS would support a proposition of the kind that you outlined, I would be very surprised if our 50,000-odd school-based members went for something like that. They would see quite quickly that there would be a whole raft of negative issues associated with it.

Patricia Gibson: One thing that clearly will happen in the short term, as we see a reduction in class contact time, is some school subjects disappearing altogether or not being available to first and second years. I am thinking immediately of science, because we cannot fill those posts. What is your solution to that? Obviously, you will not say, "We'll not bother doing the reduction in class time, then."

How would you see that panning out? Even if we solve the recruitment crisis in those very hard-to-fill locations and subjects, that will not happen in the short term. I am sceptical about that. Andrea Bradley talked about peaks and troughs, but we have always been short of science and English teachers, and we can evidence that through the difficulty in securing supply teachers in those subjects. If we reduce class contact time, what do we do about the physical lack of teachers in the locations and subjects where we need them without impacting pupils?

The Convener: To ensure that all members are able to come in before this session ends, I ask that answers be kept succinct, please.

Andrea Bradley: We would love to have the opportunity to discuss some of the solutions with the Scottish Government and COSLA, but, as yet, there has not been the opportunity to do that within the SNCT.

The agreement was signed in March and it will be next week, I think—in October—before we get to see the modelling work that the Scottish Government and COSLA have been engaged in over the past six months. We have been pressing to take part in the discussions much sooner.

One of the reasons that we are struggling to recruit teachers in certain areas is the workload. That has been a major issue in Scottish education for a long time, and we are only now in the foothills of doing something tangible to relieve the pressure on teachers. That, in and of itself, should make teaching those subjects a more attractive proposition.

We have not always had a shortage of science teachers; it is a relatively new scenario. Teaching is a highly rewarding, attractive career. People are drawn to it.

Patricia Gibson: We do not hear that, though, do we? The media constantly talk about how awful everything is.

Andrea Bradley: Absolutely. Over the past 10 years or so, education has become a political football. That is problematic for teachers, children, young people, families and whole school communities. Those of us who are, and have been, in the profession very much see it for the profession and the career choice that it is. However, for that to be sustainable for those who are already in it, and for it to be an attractive proposition for potential new entrants, we must get many of these things right. It comes down to workload, staffing, class sizes and pay. There is no single thing that will address all those challenges.

The report by the UN high-level panel on the teaching profession is really worth reading if you have not had a chance to look at it. It captures the complexity of the challenges that we face not only in Scotland but globally. In Scotland, we have an opportunity, because of the SNCT agreement, to move forward on some of this. However, the conundrums that we have been talking about, such as how to get the requisite number of properly qualified teachers in the right places, remain. We want to talk about dual qualification, with primary teachers perhaps teaching in the secondary sector. We want to talk about secondary-qualified teachers perhaps using another part of their degree to become dual qualified. Those are among the solutions that we could be considering, in addition to the longer-term investment that will be needed if we are to encourage more people into teaching in the first place.

Patricia Gibson: Should some of the solutions that you are talking about to fill the gaps not be implemented before we reduce class contact time? Otherwise, we will have hugely problematic gaps that schools cannot fill, which will impact pupils.

Andrea Bradley: That is one of the reasons why there is the time lag with implementation at the primary level, where we have a surplus of qualified teachers. We also know that precarity has been a significant issue for teachers in Scotland, the majority of whom are primary qualified. There is still a job of work to do to ensure that the qualified primary teachers that we have are distributed across Scotland in time for implementation in August 2027, but, when we were making decisions about how to frame the agreement, we were very cognisant, certainly within the EIS, of the number of gaps in subject specialisms across Scotland. There are geographical challenges, but there are also challenges across a large number of subject areas. Three years should be sufficient time,

certainly if we are all working together, to begin to address some of those challenges.

The Convener: We will now have questions from Duncan Dunlop. I remind the witnesses to keep their answers as succinct as possible, please.

09:15

Duncan Dunlop: Good morning, and thank you for coming. I do not want to be too provocative, but I am struck by the fact that we have three trade unions here and we had a professional association in last week, but there is not a trade union for schoolchildren—I do not mean to be too facetious—and there is no specialised union for teaching assistants or support staff, although I know that they are part of a more general union.

From the child's perspective—in their absence—if a union existed for them, would children really say that less time with a teacher was their priority in improving learning? Last week, ADES warned us that additional changes of teacher could disrupt pupils' learning. The proposals will probably cost about £300 million a year. Would it not be better to invest that in support staff and administration? That would reduce the workload and make the workplace less stressful. It would make coming to work a more productive and enjoyable experience and therefore reduce the workload for teachers in other ways.

I am interested in briefly hearing the perspectives of all three witnesses on that.

Tara Lillis: It is important that we consider the importance of teaching support assistants. As a representative of a teachers trade union that does not represent teaching support assistants and learning support assistants, I put it on record that they are a vital part of the school community. Without those staff, our members—teachers—could not undertake their job. It is absolutely fundamental to the running of a school system that we have an adequate number of those staff, particularly given the increase in additional support needs in the system that was outlined earlier.

It is important to recognise that we have a significant amount of Barnett consequentials coming to Scotland as a result of decisions being taken in Westminster regarding special educational needs and disabilities, or SEND. Although that is not particularly what we are here to talk about today, there are discussions about how that should be ring fenced and used in Scotland to provide support for pupils with ASN, which undoubtedly should include the provision of support for learning assistants, as well as additional teaching staff.

In addition, I highlight some of the difficulties and challenges relating to national decision making and how that then lands on the ground. In the briefing papers that were given to members in advance of the committee's previous meeting, very brief mention was made of the challenges between local government and the Scottish Government around the promise of an additional 3,500 teachers and additional support for learning or teaching assistants. That challenge with a lack of ring fencing for education funding will remain a perennial problem.

It is noteworthy that, although NASUWT still needs an opportunity to take stock of the full contents of the report by John Wilson that was issued yesterday, one of the points that is made in it is on the importance not only of funding education appropriately, recognising that it has a significant long-term impact on children and young people, but of ensuring that the funding is ring fenced. Doing so would go some way towards providing support for children and young people.

Duncan Dunlop: John Wilson also says in his report that we are spending £1,700 more per pupil a year in Scotland and we are getting worse outcomes.

Tara Lillis: It is difficult to compare apples and oranges. There is a geographical spread in Scotland, which is different and distinct, and there are rural challenges. In fact, our priority motion at our Scotland conference this year was on looking at the particular challenges in rural schools and for our rural teachers. I am not here to tell you that what has been agreed through the SNCT is a fix for everything. I do not think that any of us has come here saying that. It is one mechanism—

Duncan Dunlop: I am sorry to interrupt, but I am conscious of the time. We are going to hit a budget black hole of potentially up to £5 billion by the end of this parliamentary session—within five years—and we are spending around £300 million on this initiative. I understand that there has been a lot of progress on artificial intelligence and other things that can help teachers to plan and develop resources. However, would it not be better to prioritise the spend on additional support needs and classroom assistants to alleviate some of the pressures on teaching staff, so that there is continuity of the core teacher in the classroom, with support around them?

Tara Lillis: My quite succinct answer is that this is not the appropriate forum for decision making on teachers' terms and conditions. I just want to put it on the record that it is the SNCT—the tripartite negotiating forum for teachers—that is the appropriate forum in that respect, and that decision has been reached and agreed within it. I do not think that it is consistent with the Scottish

Government commitment to fair work to seek to undermine collective bargaining, where you have recognised trade unions negotiating on behalf of their members, sitting across from Scottish Government representatives who have been put there to represent the Government, and COSLA, which is also a local authority representative group. That is the appropriate forum for determining the appropriate terms and conditions for teachers.

Duncan Dunlop: That might be the case, but we are in quite a fluid situation with our budgetary envelope. There have already been changes to the way that we work. The Government is trying to get things across the line and pass the budget, and we want to do the best for our pupils, too. Do you not think that negotiations on this issue should be reopened?

Tara Lillis: No.

Duncan Dunlop: Okay.

David Barnett: On your question whether it is a good thing for young people to have less time with their teacher as a result of this, I would say that, in a secondary school context, that would not necessarily be the case. In fact, it normally would not be the case, because you would still be constructing a timetable in which a child in secondary 4 with, say, four periods of physics a week would still get those four periods. It would not necessarily lead to less time with a teacher. There would be more teachers in the school to teach the curriculum, which is something that is on offer, but what you have asked about should not be the case with regard to young people's individual experiences. There will be, say, shared classes where there are part-time staff or people job sharing, but that is already the case, and nothing is going to change in that regard.

You mentioned support staff. We would absolutely support the need for more support staff in schools, particularly to cope with the massive increase in additional support needs, and the need for those staff, who do a vital job in schools, to be paid more than they currently are.

Duncan Dunlop: On the point that you began with, David, do you not warn in your submission that this move could narrow subject choice? Last week, there were 18 secondary schools that had only a part-time physics teacher. If teachers have to have less contact time with pupils, who is going to teach physics in that environment?

David Barnett: That will be caused not by the proposal to reduce class contact time, but by the inadequate supply of appropriate staff. Again, we as a system urgently need to look at improving that situation.

Someone asked earlier whether certain subject staff should be paid more, and the answer to that question is no. Teaching is a very collegiate profession; a sense of togetherness among staff, and the morale of staff itself, can make a massive difference to a school's success, and that would be affected if different teachers were being paid at different rates. It could be very divisive.

When we look at what we need to do to attract more teachers into the profession, we should be asking whether a physics graduate, for example, actually wants to come and teach in a school and work with young people. That is a big thing. You might have a physics degree, but do you really have that vocation to work with young people? You might not, but we do need to think about graduates who are sizing up different opportunities and consider what flexibility they might have when it comes to working in education. If you work in a school, you might not be able to have the flexible working patterns, the ability to work from home and so on that you will get in other professions. We need to have a really good look at those conditions and at what can be done about a flexible working model, as that might attract more people into the profession.

Duncan Dunlop: I still do not see how that will help, say, Plockton high school. If there is already a lack of physics teachers somewhere that isolated, how will they be able to get extra specialist support in physics?

David Barnett: These problems exist already, and they are going to be exacerbated.

Duncan Dunlop: Yes, they are going to be exacerbated.

I see that Andrea Bradley wants to come in, but I want to move on to a different, perhaps more collegiate, area.

One of the issues that we have in education, on which you might not be prepared to answer, is that, last year, only 23 per cent of probationary teachers secured a full-time, permanent contract in the year after graduation, which compares with more than 56 per cent in 2016-17. What has driven that deterioration, and what should the Government be doing to address that?

Andrea Bradley: In essence, it comes down to the strain that there has been on local authority budgets. The Scottish Government has made additional funds available to local authorities. At first, that money was meant to increase teacher numbers, then the language around that changed over a couple of years and it became about preserving teacher numbers because, as some local authorities were considering their budgetary positions, they were very much articulating a need to trim the size of the teacher workforce. One

example is Glasgow City Council, which two years ago proposed to cut 450 jobs. That led to quite high-profile industrial activity by the EIS and some sister trade unions in order to push back against that decision. Thankfully, that cut did not come about, but that was a very high-profile example of the tensions between national Government and local government in respect of the funding of education.

That tension and the insufficiency of funds being allocated to education are why we have such high levels of either underemployment or no employment among qualified teachers. That is another reason why we see benefit in the move towards a maximum class contact time of 21 hours, because that should also help to address long-standing issues in regard to precarity and the waste of talent, effort and Government funding that we have seen. All the people who qualify as teachers have been in receipt of Government funding, so it seems highly wasteful not to follow through on the intention behind all that and bring those qualified teachers into the service, given the workload situation, the ASN situation and the relational approaches that are required to address the behaviour piece. All those things are crying out for additional teachers.

Duncan Dunlop: I am conscious of the time, so I will leave it there.

Katherine Sangster (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab): My first question follows on from what Duncan Dunlop was asking you about. You mentioned that, in 2020, you wanted a commitment to class sizes of 20, and in 2021 the SNP made a pledge to recruit 3,500 teachers. That approach has been ongoing but, as you said, we have moved to a focus on retaining teacher numbers as opposed to increasing the numbers.

This whole discussion has come down to teacher numbers—to there not being enough teachers in the system—and to funding. I want to be clear about where you think the barriers are to achieving the teacher numbers that we have been talking about for many years and to getting that funding. Is it that the funding is not being made available by central Government? Is the funding going to local authorities, but something is happening when it gets there? Where do you think the key things are going wrong in the system?

Andrea Bradley: You are absolutely right to reference teacher numbers. At the last count—we are about to have a new set of school census data—we had 1,688 fewer teachers than we had in 2007. The 2021 SNP manifesto contained a pledge to recruit 3,500 new teachers, but the Scottish Government is more than 4,000 teachers short of its target for the overall number of teachers. We have too few teachers in the system, and that is one of the drivers of the workload that our members are experiencing. It is an obvious conclusion to draw that, if you have fewer people to share the load and do the work, that will have an impact on those in the service.

09:30

On what the answer to the problem might be, I come back to the findings of the UN high-level panel. The recommendation that it makes to Governments is that 6 per cent of gross domestic product or 20 per cent of overall spending should be channelled towards education. It is difficult to get figures for Scotland in that regard, but, at the last count, the GDP allocation at UK level was 4.2 per cent. Given that, as Duncan Dunlop said, there is a slightly higher allocation of spending in Scotland, we are probably somewhere around 4.5 per cent of GDP, but that would still be 1.5 per cent too short, and we are far off spending 20 per cent of the overall budget that is allocated to the Scottish Government on education.

We believe that the issues that we face could be addressed with just a little bit more than there is at the moment, although it is not an insignificant sum. The IPPR work that I referred to earlier concluded that, for a sum in the region of £850 million a year extra, we could have class sizes capped at 20 at all ages and stages in all subjects; teachers' class contact time capped at 20 hours across the board; universal free school meal provision for young people from age three to age 18, with special holiday provision for those who need it; and the number of qualified teachers in early years services being restored to 2012 numbers, which is important because we know how foundational early education is to young people's progress and outcomes. All of that would have a significant impact on ASN provision and all the other areas that we have been talking about with regard to school education.

That extra £850 million a year is not an insignificant sum of money, but we believe that finding it is doable, and that it would function as preventative spend, as Tara Lillis has already mentioned. The UK Government is talking about that approach, too. We think that we have to start looking strategically at how we fund our education service, because the harms that come from not funding it sufficiently are significant, and the costs to the public purse down the line in relation to health, employability, criminal justice and many other areas are phenomenal. We could head off some of that spend at the pass if we were to invest much more now. That would benefit the children, young people and communities who are impacted by the system right now, and, to be honest, it would also benefit our long-term collective health, prosperity, wealth and social cohesion.

Katherine Sangster: Tara Lillis, do you want to add anything?

Tara Lillis: I fully agree with that, and I also agree that it is all about the teacher workforce and funding. The bit that I would add, as a data geek, is that we are not getting data right at all. We do not have a shared understanding of what an absence is or of what the workforce picture is across the whole of Scotland. To address that, there must be desk-based work to standardise the situation across Scotland, and that work should be undertaken with urgency.

You will see from the submission from NASUWT that this is a drum that we have been banging for a significant amount of time. Some 10 years ago, we were before the Education and Skills Committee saying pretty much the same thing, which is that we need to get a national strategic approach to workforce planning. Part of that is about a shared understanding and accuracy of that workforce data.

As Andrea Bradley said, we hope that the discussion about the reduction in class contact time will take place through the working group that has been set up within the SNCT, but that is one part of a bigger picture of workforce planning that still needs to be discussed.

Katherine Sangster: Andrea Bradley, you spoke about the fact that, back when he was Deputy First Minister, John Swinney said that, if there is admin that is overwhelming, you should not be doing it, but then you said that it had got worse.

I will come to David Barnett first, because he did not answer the last question. Can you bring to life for the committee what the pressure of that paperwork and admin actually looks like, so that we can start having conversations about how we can solve that for you?

David Barnett: That is a difficult question. There is a lot in the way of paperwork and admin that is needed that teachers would certainly argue is not necessary, although school leaders might take a slightly different view on that.

We complete a lot of paperwork that is about ensuring accountability. As a headteacher, you are accountable to so many different people and bodies that you are looking to generate evidence all the time. In the background, there is the prospect of school inspection, which drives a lot of that as well. You are looking at the accountability piece, whereby you are required to produce data. Data is good and necessary, but we might ask whether there is too much of it, given that we produce data and reports for various audiences, particularly at local government level.

Katherine Sangster: Okay, thank you.

Andrea Bradley: I echo what David Barnett has said. On the one hand, we talk about the importance of professional autonomy for teachers and the importance of trust in teachers' professional judgment. However, there is a collision between the different drivers and levers in the system around all that. We have that on the one hand, but, on the other, we have the accountability and performativity agenda that drives so much of the behaviour at school level.

There is a huge amount of paperwork, admin and bureaucracy—that is not only around His Majesty's Inspectorate of Education processes, because, to its credit, HMIE has streamlined some of those over the past 15 years. However, local authorities are almost building a cottage industry of mini-inspections. They want to be prepared for the inspection itself, so they carry out a lot of activity that very much mimics the HMIE process. That is a driver of admin and bureaucracy for school leaders and for class teachers.

There is also a huge focus on standardised assessments. We have the Scottish national standardised assessments, but a raft of local authorities also do their own assessments on top of the SNSAs. A minority of them do them instead of the SNSAs, but a lot of bureaucracy and admin come with that. To be honest, teachers do not find such assessments, especially the SNSAs, to be particularly helpful at all.

There is a huge amount of emphasis on tracking and monitoring children's and young people's progress. Teachers have their own ways of gathering assessment evidence on how children and young people are doing things, but they often have to convert that into other systems to make it more shareable across the school, to local authorities or to national Government. We have the achievement of curriculum for excellence levels data collection piece. In the secondary sector, there is a huge amount of bureaucracy and admin for teachers who teach national qualifications. That arises from Qualifications Scotland, as it did previously from the Scottish Qualifications Authority. A lot of that is considered not to be particularly helpful to the real business of learning and teaching. All that is a huge drain on teachers' time.

Tara Lillis: To add to that, we should reflect on the reports of the tackling bureaucracy working group, which came out about a decade ago but are still highly applicable. A conversation needs to be had about why the recommendations in those reports were not implemented at local level.

Katherine Sangster: Thank you very much.

Laura Moodie (South Scotland) (Green): The other week, I actually asked a question in the

chamber about the tackling bureaucracy working group reports, so thank you for flagging that.

I would like to ask a few questions about tackling educational inequality and how we can potentially use contact time to drive that work. I will start with David Barnett, because I am conscious that he has perhaps not spoken as much as the others so far.

I want to pick up the point that you made earlier about the potential for teacher shortages to exacerbate the inequality between rural or island areas and urban areas. How can we ensure that that does not happen? How can we ensure that it does not expand inequality in access to subject choice?

David Barnett: It goes back to the inadequate supply of appropriately trained teachers in the right subjects. The fact remains that that is an issue currently, before we have introduced reduced class contact time, and it is an issue that will be exacerbated. There will be a need for more teaching staff, so we really must do something urgently about the recruitment of teaching staff in rural and island areas. We need to make it an attractive proposition for people to go to those places.

This is going back quite a number of years, but I once worked in a rural authority and I remember a local house builder offering new houses rent free at one point. Perhaps that is the kind of measure that we need to consider in order to attract people to move to different areas. I do not think we should be looking at a differential in pay. I do not think that that is necessarily an incentive for people to move. It is often found in rural areas that, after people have moved there because they felt they should take a particular job, they realise that those are quite nice places in which to live and that there are other benefits. It is about getting that message out. Perhaps there should be a campaign highlighting the attractiveness of working in a rural area or on an island.

Clearly, there are remote island allowances and whatnot in some of those areas already. However, if we can make the proposition more attractive, we may be able to attract more people to those hard-to-recruit areas.

Laura Moodie: Does Tara Lillis or Andrea Bradley have anything to add?

Tara Lillis: This data is a couple of years old, but, in 2023, NASUWT carried out a UK-wide survey of around 11,000 members aged 30 and under in which it asked them about the impact of housing on their ability to access work, and 40 per cent said that the inaccessibility of housing was having a substantial impact on their ability to access work. We can put that into context when we drill down further into the data: one in five respondents were still living at home with their parent or caregiver.

When we are looking at the cost of living and recently qualified teachers' ability to move to a rural area or around the country, or to access work where there are gaps, one of the barriers is undoubtedly the unavailability of housing. In our most recent Scotland conference motions, we called for incentives and support to increase GTCS registration among those in the private sector who might be considering teaching, support for those in rural areas and additional support for students. That segues into national discussions about a graduate teacher programme, which would provide a longer-term approach to employment post-qualification.

Andrea Bradley: I echo what my colleagues have said. In the offer that was made to COSLA on behalf of local authority employers, the Scottish Government included £1 million of additional funding to support some of that endeavour to incentivise moves to rural and remote areas. Local authorities were also reminded of the availability of the £25 million rural affordable homes for key workers fund, which supports recruitment to those areas. Teachers are presumably included in that, which is encouraging.

In addition to what my colleagues said, work has been done in Scotland previously to encourage career change. We have many people who are graduate qualified, who might be working in other sectors of the economy and who have acquired a significant amount of life and employment experience. Those people could consider teaching as an option. Further support and encouragement for that type of career-change activity could be helpful.

Along with colleagues from sister trade unions, I would be keen to have the opportunity to discuss those measures with COSLA and the Scottish Government in the SNCT.

We are very keen to be as solution focused and innovative as we can be, while recognising teachers' terms and conditions and the fact that, as others have alluded to, the profession in Scotland is highly regulated. There is a high bar for qualification to teach in Scotland, which is a good thing. Internationally, we are lauded for that. Visitors from other parts of Europe and the wider world frequently come to talk to the GTCS about our system in Scotland, because we believe that young people, wherever they are and wherever they are being taught, deserve to be taught by fully qualified teachers who have met the required standards and are therefore fit to teach them.

09:45

Laura Moodie: You have talked a great deal about the evidence that shows that reducing teacher workload improves outcomes for pupils in general. Has there been any specific research on, or can you discuss, how the approach might impact young people who are experiencing poverty or who are disadvantaged in other ways? I ask Andrea Bradley to start.

Andrea Bradley: The way that the contract will be rebalanced means that teachers will now have nine hours of preparation time for 21 hours of learning and teaching. I have alluded to the fact that 43 per cent of children and young people have a recognised additional support need, and there is a very high correlation between additional support needs and poverty. Scotland's teachers are very aware of the socioeconomic barriers that many young people face to learning in schools. In fact, the EIS provides a whole programme of learning on that topic for our members. Teachers are already struggling and striving to plan and prepare on as individualised a basis as possible in order to meet the needs of all the learners in their classes. Many of those learners will be living in poverty, and many will have additional support needs that may arise from the fact that they began their learner journey having already been impacted negatively by poverty.

We believe that teachers having more time to devote to the planning of individualised learning and teaching, and to evaluating assessment, should have a positive impact on the experiences of those learners. There is no evidence for that yet, because teachers in Scotland have not yet had that additional time, but it is quite likely to be one of the things that teachers report down the line, as the approach begins to take effect. At the moment, teachers are reporting an insufficiency of time to do that within the working week. They are reporting doing it in their own time—in the evenings and at weekends, and sometimes in their holidays. That is having a detrimental impact on their health and wellbeing and on their family and personal lives. That impact on teachers' wellbeing is not good for any child or young person, regardless of their socioeconomic background.

Laura Moodie: Tara Lillis, do you have anything to add?

Tara Lillis: I would quickly add that some of the planning and processes around supporting children and young people involve liaison with others who are external to the school. Tackling inequality, whether that is due to poverty or any protected characteristic, can never sit solely in the education environment but requires a system-wide approach. Teachers are well versed in engaging externally, whether that is through the local authority, social work or external third party links. However, the feedback that we get from members in our surveys on additional support needs is that they have insufficient time to make those connections and links. The additional time will certainly support some of that communication work.

Laura Moodie: I take it that you mean during the working day, because not everybody is working office hours. Presumably, you would envisage some of the non-contact time being used to liaise with external professionals.

Tara Lillis: Yes.

Laura Moodie: That is helpful.

David Barnett: I echo what my colleagues have said. Schools and teachers are already working very hard to minimise the impact of poverty on young people. The 90 minutes will provide more time to meet the needs of young people who are affected by poverty. It will not be used solely to support those needs, but it will provide teachers with time to think, "I need to do something different to support this pupil." Having more time will create that opportunity.

Going back to the idea that the reduction in class contact time is not a panacea, I think that we need to look at other things alongside it. For example, there might be an opportunity to look again at the pupil equity fund and how that extra funding is distributed and used in schools. In many ways, it has very much become core funding in many schools when it should be seen as additional money, so I think that we need to look at it again. I have not had time to properly read it yet, but I think that there are recommendations on that in John Wilson's report, which was published yesterday.

Laura Moodie: Thank you. My last question picks up on some of the earlier discussion on assessments and the challenges of the assessment systems. There is the bureaucracy element, but I am also concerned that our assessment systems in Scotland do not seem to really measure pupil progress. Instead, they measure attainment, and often in many different ways. How would this proposal enable teachers to better monitor the progress of each individual pupil?

Andrea Bradley: Curriculum for excellence was designed to ensure that, certainly within the broad general education, there is a strong reliance on formative assessment in class, in person and in real time, as well as teachers looking after the fact at, say, written work, a piece of art that a child has created, or a piece of music that a child has created or played and recorded. It is supposed to be formative assessment, which is time consuming. That is partly why the teachers side of the SNCT argued for the full 90 minutes to go on

the planning and evaluation of learning, teaching and assessment. As things stand, there is just not enough time in the working week for all of the activity that should take place on assessment, which should be largely formative. That was our endeavour when curriculum for excellence was introduced.

I have mentioned the collision of different forces and drivers within the system. That has been captured in the philosophy behind, and the intent of, curriculum for excellence, but, unfortunately, there is still a very strong tie to high-stakes, exam-based assessment. That is very much the case in the senior phase, and it takes out big chunks of teaching and learning time throughout the year. Young people have to do lots and lots of preparation for that, sometimes in the form of class assessments and sometimes in the form of preliminary exams, but it is all part of the performativity culture and drive that I talked about earlier. That sort of approach has a workload cost not just for children and young people, but for teachers, too.

You seem to be suggesting that we have not got the culture quite right around assessment, and I would absolutely concur. It has workload—and, indeed, wellbeing—implications both for young people and for teachers.

The Convener: George Adam has some questions.

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): Good morning, everyone. Andrea, you mentioned that you would love to talk to COSLA and the Scottish Government about the delivery of the proposal that we are discussing today. I hope that you can talk to us about it, too. I think that Tara Lillis also suggested that we ring-fence some education funding. We tried that in the past, and the employers and COSLA were not too keen on the idea.

The backdrop to my question is public service reform, which is going on in the background while all of this is being decided. The reduction in class contact time has been agreed and banked—it is there—but delivery will depend on 32 local authorities that are facing different workforce, subject shortage and geographical pressures. How do we protect professional time for teachers if local government is going to be restructured in the future? Should Scotland examine whether it would be better to organise functions such as teacher workforce planning, recruitment or deployment at a national level, at a regional level or through shared services?

Tara Lillis: That is an excellent and well-made point. At this year's Scotland conference, which is our main decision-making forum and through which our members bring issues to us, we were asked to engage critically with the operation of the 32 local authorities. I am not suggesting that there is a predetermined outcome, but there are frustrations in the workforce. For example, over the past couple of years, an increasing number of motions on data have come to the conference. That is pretty surprising for a teachers union, because, ordinarily, you would expect motions on policy, terms and conditions or pay. However, increasingly, our members are frustrated about the inability to action national commitments.

Historically, some of the international assessments of the operation of Scottish education have pointed to what I would call a soggy middle: the high-level aims are laudable, and on-the-ground delivery by teachers is excellent, but some of the bit in the middle is not quite right. Increasingly, our members are pointing to that and saying that we cannot keep doing the same thing. I have no predetermined idea of what that will look like, but we are open to that conversation.

George Adam: Exactly—it is an ongoing conversation, and the Government is also looking for ideas. To go back to Andrea Bradley's point, that gives you the opportunity to say, "We think we can deliver by doing it this way."

Andrea Bradley: The EIS does not have a set policy on how many local authorities there should be. Some of our activists will remember that we have 32 local authorities because of decisions that were taken by a Tory Government at Westminster. Many of them still remember how we got to where we are. No matter how we organise local government, our policy position is that there needs to be strong local democracy, and that should be the case all the way through to schools.

John Wilson's report is reviving pretty strongly the conversations on empowered schools, teacher empowerment and so on. That is welcome, because things have gone a bit quiet on that since the big work was done on it, just before the pandemic. It is understandable that the crisis of the pandemic displaced some of that work, but we have been talking to our members about the issue consistently over the period. It is about building our local democracy so that democratic decision making takes place in the right places, as close as possible to local communities, but it is also about how children and young people in school communities experience their education. That should be based on strongly democratic decision making that involves teachers alongside school leaders, parents and young people.

The Scottish Government, in making proposals for public sector reform, has given itself a bit of a conundrum. It wants to have those conversations but, meanwhile, it has committed to certain other

things. The Government will have to square that circle, and we are more than happy to assist in the squaring of that circle. As I said, we do not have a firm policy position on how many local authorities there should be, but we have people who remember very much how we got here and what that was all about.

George Adam: The argument would be about whether we have a national or a regional approach. The Government's idea or discussion paper is, in effect, about regional bodies with small local authorities. I have heard discussions about splitting education between the two but having a strategic approach from the regional body, whatever that is. However, there could be an argument for having shared services, which is the panacea that we have talked about for the past 30 years but has not really happened. Without changing structure, groups of councils could strategically work together on education.

There are many options. Are there any that you, as professional bodies in the teaching profession, believe would be better? It is all about outcomes. What would give us better outcomes?

Andrea Bradley: From our point of view, in addition to what I have said about the importance of well-constructed democracy and good relationships between national and local government—whatever that looks like—we are absolutely clear on the need for national terms and conditions. We have national collective bargaining, which is another strong instrument of democracy, and we have national terms and conditions. We are open to looking at different possibilities, but, ultimately, it would be for our membership, through our democratic structures, to land on one proposal or another rather than for me to sit here today and say what would be an idea for the way forward without having a discussion about that in the EIS.

10:00

I have outlined the two principles that we would wish to be safeguarded, which are the strength of democracy and the fact that we have national collective bargaining and nationally agreed terms and conditions. Even with restructuring of local government, there is absolutely no reason why any of that should be undermined. In fact, we absolutely would not want any of it to be undermined. If anything, we should look to strengthen those two principles rather than have any erosion of them.

David Barnett: As an association, we have argued for a long time that because there are 32 local authorities, there are 32 different ways of doing things. We would support any look at doing things differently. We do not have a formal position on that yet, either, but I will give one example of the inequities under the 32 local authorities set-up. In many authorities, we have school business managers in secondary schools and in primary schools in many cases. They make a huge difference to the ability of the headteacher and the senior leadership team to lead their school and to look at school improvement, learning and teaching and school ethos. However, in other authorities of a similar size there is no such provision at all, which makes for a very uneven playing field. In any reorganisation of local governance of education, we would look for a level playing field, so that people have an opportunity to benefit from the same types of provision right across the country and it is not a matter of being lucky enough to be in an authority where that happens already. We need that right across the board.

George Adam: That is the kind of thing that drives me nuts. Why can we not just do it everywhere? I hope that we do not just draw the boundaries with a big Sharpie, as the 1990s Tory Government did in the Scottish Office, but instead have an ongoing conversation. Every one of you has answered by saying that it is important that we focus on service delivery. We are talking about public service reform, and it has to have outcomes at the end of the day.

The Convener: Thank you all very much. That brings our first evidence session to a close. I will now suspend the meeting for five minutes before our next session.

10:02

Meeting suspended.

10:09

On resuming—

The Convener: Welcome back. This is our second panel this morning, and we have people who will chat to us about progress towards reform of the children's care sector. We have Claire Burns, director, CELCIS; Alison Gordon, member, children's services planning strategic leads network; Simon Cameron, chief officer, children and young people team, COSLA; Joanna Macdonald, chief executive, National Social Work Agency; and David Anderson, chair, Oversight Board for the Promise. Thank you all very much for joining us.

I will head straight into questions. This panel is larger than our earlier one, so I ask that you keep your answers as succinct as possible. Thank you.

The evidence that we have heard so far tells us that there is still a lot to do if we are to achieve the Promise, with only four years to go. Workforce capacity and longer-term funding seem to be some of the biggest challenges in delivering the Promise.

In relation to workforce capacity, there have been calls from the Oversight Board for a joint workforce improvement plan. I note in your submission, Joanna Macdonald, that you say that you will

"develop a strategic plan to set out our shared commitment to strengthen the social work profession."

Will this be a joint workforce improvement plan, and how will it address the challenges faced by the sector?

Joanna Macdonald (National Social Work Agency): Good morning, everyone, and thank you for having me here. The National Social Work Agency was set up to provide leadership and support improvements across the workforce. That reflected the variation and the issues that exist within the workforce.

We are very new, having been established in March. We have a collective ambition to support improvements for our workforce. Our workforce is absolutely key to delivering improved outcomes for children and families across Scotland.

A key part of the National Social Work Agency's work is collaboration. As well as the agency being established, a memorandum of understanding has been in place since June between COSLA, Social Work Scotland and the agency, with a collective focus on the workforce.

Whatever the agency is doing, including bringing together national policies and supporting the Government in that work, we are also working locally with partners and across the system to ensure that any workforce plan is meaningful across all partners, including those who are sitting around the table today.

The Convener: I will move around the panel from your left, Joanna. What are your views on preventative spend and its role in helping to deliver the Promise?

Claire Burns (CELCIS): It is important to acknowledge that the Scottish Government has made money available, including through the whole family wellbeing fund. Money has been allocated to every local authority to consider how they can support early help and family support. That funding is likely to be insufficient. We are not talking about tinkering with the system; we are talking about overhauling it.

Some aspects of the way in which the funding is managed are challenging locally. Often, there are unrealistic expectations about what can be achieved and the timescales for deciding what to do with the funding. As a result, local areas often feel that they have to do what they can rather than invest in early help and prevention. We hear from many local leaders that funding can be very siloed. Money comes from the whole family wellbeing funding programme, the fairer futures partnership programme and the child poverty strategy funding. The burden of reporting on those funding streams has reduced the capacity that local areas need to make improvements. We need to ensure that preventative spending does not increase the burden on local areas but instead supports them.

In addition, we must have realistic expectations when we talk about preventative spend and the savings that we will get from that. Although it will reduce demand on one part of the system, meaning that we might see fewer children going into residential or secure care, it will increase demand in other areas, such as early help, family support and wraparound family support, for which local areas do not have the money at the moment. We have to view it in terms of the better outcomes and efficiencies that it has delivered for the experiences of children and families, and for the system overall.

Yes, funding has been made available for preventative spending, but it remains a challenging context for local areas.

Simon Cameron (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities): I echo what Claire Burns said. We talk about long-term investment all the time. We talk about long-term, generational challenges and how we want society to progress, but we never give ourselves the time to deal with them. I appreciate that, in relation to an awful lot of what is happening on the ground in children and families' lives, we often do not have time. However, since Covid, we have entered a period in which the pace at which we try to make change creates the implementation gap that we have in Scotland.

10:15

There is continued pressure to say what we have done with money and whether it has made a difference and we are on to the next thing before we have even had a chance to report meaningfully on that. Pilots are happening across the country all the time, which gives staff a negative impression and makes them wonder whether they are being trusted to work in a manner that understands local and individual needs. We talk all the time about working in a person-centred way, but are we actually allowing people to be person centred if we try something and quickly move on to the next thing when that does not work?

If we are going to create the change that we want, we must move away from short-term, statistics-based information to qualitative information that shows the trajectory that we are on. David Anderson's report from the Oversight Board shows that really good work is happening in the system, but there must be time for that work to continue and for change to take hold.

Alison Gordon (Children's Services Planning Strategic Leads Network): I agree with Claire Burns and Simon Cameron.

We have seen significant progress at local partnership level, particularly on early family support, but that progress is quite fragile because of the uncertainty about future funding. I welcome the plan to bring the fairer futures and whole family wellbeing funds and programmes together, but we are still not feeling that at local level, where we still have separate reporting and separate outcome frameworks and learning partners. We try to bring that together with other elements of funding such as the health and wellbeing element of the care-experienced children and young people fund, community mental health and wellbeing funding and some aspects of alcohol and drug partnership funding, because all those funds are trying to support change in the same space.

We can do some things at local level to create some coherence in planning for prevention, but that is fragile and has not worked its way through the system as yet. There is still uncertainty about future funding and that has an impact on the local partnerships that we are building with the community and voluntary sector partners who are supporting that work and on our own local staff.

The public sector reform team has been doing some work with a number of local authorities as early adopter areas to look at whether we could achieve more by having more flexible budgets or by using single outcome and evaluation frameworks. That is quite promising, although it has not gone as far or made as much difference as it might have done, because of the ring fencing of some health and education spending. As we move on to look at the structural elements of public sector reform, it is important that we do not lose the elements that are really about how people work together at local level to make a difference for families and young people.

David Anderson (Oversight Board for the Promise): I preface everything that I am going to say today with an acknowledgement of what Simon Cameron said about all the good work that is going on and about the workforce who do their best every day to ensure that children who are looked after receive true care.

We need a massive shift towards preventative spending, which, as Claire Burns said, should go hand in hand with the continuation of funding for services and needs across Scotland—there cannot be a shift of money from one area to another. We are calling for a massive shift to preventative spending and that call has been echoed by the independent strategic adviser.

Investment must be streamlined and must reduce bureaucracy. The public sector reform agenda has evidenced the same conclusions as we have come to in our report, which is that the way in which Government tries to move things forward sometimes does not work for the people it should be working for.

We have to bear in mind that it will take time to see evidence of the change that we are looking for. As time goes on, we should see evidence in the sometimes blunt statistics that we see, but we must also ask how people are experiencing that change.

The Convener: Thank you. We move to questions from Angela Ross.

Angela Ross: I want to start with David Anderson. David, thank you for sharing the report of the Oversight Board with us, but it clearly shows that a lot of the Promise remains on paper instead of having been put into practice, and we are now in 2026.

I want to ask about the issue of a single owner and what seems to me to be fragmented accountability. Who is accountable for delivering the Promise, and would the project benefit from having a single owner or leader?

David Anderson: No, I think that that would be impossible. The Promise is being kept by multiple organisations and bodies across Scotland, each of which has its own responsibility.

I can give the workforce plan as an example. That plan was announced by the Government and supposedly agreed by COSLA. In our last report, which was published 20 months ago, we called for it to be delivered; it has not been, and we now have the National Social Work Agency saying that the plan will be coming soon. We support the NSWA, because we think that it will bring social work to the heart of Government where it belongs, but it is already starting to fight fires that were lit long ago, and it needs the support and resources to be able to carry out the progressive forward-looking work that it is trying to do.

As for accountability, I heard that issue being raised at the previous committee meeting. People are responsible for delivering certain things in the Promise, but if you look at the whole family wellbeing fund, for example, you will see that there was an underspend in that. I find that strange. How can it be so difficult to spend money that the Government has earmarked for supporting people? Fifty million pound per year has been earmarked for that, and the people involved have not been able to spend it. There are people in the Government who are responsible for ensuring that that money gets to where it is needed, and that did not happen.

As we have heard, a lot of that money went towards short-term funding. That is just not

acceptable; indeed, in our last report, we called for trust-based, long-term funding for essential services that have been going long before the Promise was made and will continue into the future beyond the 2030 deadline.

The Government has to take this on board. We heard of a good example in Glasgow, where a service received a seven-year contract to deliver weekend support for children and families who need it. These are the people we have to keep at the centre of our thinking, and that service allowed social workers to go home on a Friday without the pressure of thinking, "Is that family going to receive support?"

That sort of thing should be widespread. We have said this before, but third sector organisations should not have to be thinking about whether they have to reapply for funding. Of course, that comes back to the bureaucracy issue that Simon Cameron highlighted and the need to show how the work that you do is evidence of progress. A lot of that is just unnecessary.

Angela Ross: Simon, you obviously have a good understanding of the funding landscape. Do you feel that there are too many layers and organisations coming between the Scottish Government funding and the families who need it? Can you say a little bit about some of the blockers in that respect and how we can overcome them?

Simon Cameron: I think that there are too many layers and organisations, although I do not know whether they are coming between Scottish Government funding and families. It is more that there are too many disparate parts of government trying to control too many small pots of money, thinking that it will make an impact. To be honest, I would say that, in any sector and any large organisation, you will get a siloed approach; after all, you have a task to do, and you think that delivering this particular strategy, policy or pot of money will be the thing that makes the difference.

Going back to your question to David Anderson, I think that, if we have one person responsible for the Promise, we will surely be on a path to failure, because there will be a single point of failure in the system. The Promise is a collective one that we made as a country; it is not just the promise of all elected members in this Parliament. You collectively have the same commitment to deliver the Promise that councillors across chambers in Scotland have, that the whole workforce has and indeed that our communities have. How can we work collectively together, if we can all turn to one person and say, "That is where the system failed"?

There is a huge issue of trust here. Our public service reform has been held back. Actually, Andrea Bradley made the point well in the previous session when she talked about the need to understand and value the democracy that we have.

When the Scottish Parliament was founded, the relationship between national Government and local government was meant to be based on parity of esteem, mutual respect and trust, but we do not see that in the system. That goes all the way down to our workforce, who are told day in, day out by the media and others that they are failing in the jobs that they are doing, but they are not. They all turn up every day to do the job to the best of their ability, but they often have their hands tied.

That is where the point about funding comes in. Whether you work in local government, the third sector or any other part of the system, you cannot do your job well if there are multiple strands of funding and you have to spend money on something from one pot, money on something else from another pot and so on.

As Alison Gordon and others have mentioned, we need to provide whole family support. That requires flexibility and the trust that local people and local systems will work well together. They need to be trusted to spend the public money that is available to them in the right way, in the right places and on the right things.

Angela Ross: Joanna Macdonald, in relation to front-line social workers, there are so many elements to the whole family wellbeing fund, which is about addressing not only poverty but mental health, addiction and the drivers that bring children and young people into the care system, such as domestic abuse and housing instability. I know that the whole family wellbeing fund is not addressing all those drivers, so where are we in relation to using that fund appropriately to address those drivers and put in place preventative measures?

Joanna Macdonald: We have heard concerns about the funding from colleagues, but we have also heard about the strengths and where we are doing things well, as David Anderson alluded to.

The creation of the National Social Work Agency enables us to focus on providing a sustainable social work workforce across the whole country. You have outlined a number of key areas that social work is involved in, usually behind the scenes. As Simon Cameron said, people usually do really good jobs—they come into work to do their best—but we do not have a sustainable workforce plan for the whole system.

When planning for today's committee meeting, I was very much thinking about the foundations for our ambition to get it right for every child in Scotland, the areas in which we have done well and how we can achieve our ambitions collectively. I have mentioned the Scottish social work partnership. Honest discussions are taking

place between COSLA, the agency and Social Work Scotland, but, just as important, honest discussions are taking place with individuals across the system.

On the responsibility for the Promise, it is incumbent on all of us individually, as leaders, to ensure that everything that we do is leading towards the delivery of the Promise, which is, ultimately, about improving outcomes for our most vulnerable children in Scotland.

Angela Ross: I want to ask about the complexity of the risks. We are trying to ensure that, when possible, children are kept with their families, but does that create more risks for social workers and more stress? Is that being adequately considered?

Joanna Macdonald: There has definitely been an increase in the complexity of the work that our social workers are undertaking. That is down to a number of factors, including post-Covid issues, the cost of living and other impacted areas.

More importantly, our social workers are showing a real commitment to do the best for the individuals they meet, and they want to feel valued for that role. I have heard positive feedback that the creation of the agency has enabled us to have a national voice in the Government and across the system to ensure that the work of social workers is valued. We often hear examples of things not having gone well for individuals and of outcomes that none of us wants, but we do not hear as often about the fantastic work that social workers do, the majority of the time, privately in individuals' homes and with their families.

As you said, there is complexity as a result of, for example, the increasing number of assessments for children. It is fantastic that we have greater understanding of their mental health, but that means that social workers have a complex role. That is why we are working collectively on investment in the workforce and on understanding the workforce plan that we need. Although the agency has a lead role in that, the plan will be influenced by the knowledge and expertise across the system.

10:30

Angela Ross: I have one more question. I found all the information that we have been provided with very interesting. My father was in care from birth through to his foster parent passing when he was 15. After that, the complexities of his life were significant, although he achieved a lot. I wondered about the fact that he was fostered but was never adopted. There is not much in the reports and the paperwork on adoption. David, could you talk to us about why adoption is a good route, or is that a separate issue? The focus seems to be more on foster care provision.

David Anderson: It is definitely connected. It would be impossible to write a report about the entire Promise—it would bore the life out of most people after the first 20 pages. We have to concentrate on certain issues. We spoke about adoption the last time. All those aspects are interconnected. We chose to focus on children who are looked after at home because, for us, that seems to be the most pressing issue in the landscape at the moment. We also speak about voice.

The same resources need to be provided for adoption as need to be provided for foster carers and children who are looked after at home. As things stand, we do not think that that is the case. We said that in our report 20 months ago, and we stand by that in our latest report. Great support is being provided but, at this point in time, it is not at a level for us to be confident that the Promise will be kept.

Duncan Dunlop: Good morning. It is good to see many of you again. The report from the Oversight Board is the fourth such report, and, last year, we had the Audit Scotland report. My conclusion from reading the Oversight Board's report is that, given the struggle that we are having and the time that it is taking to change the culture, there seems to be a lack of leadership. When we do not have clear plans, it is not possible to understand who is responsible and accountable for different aspects, what action will be taken, how much it will cost and what impact it will make. We hear that, while the picture is good in some areas, in other areas it is not and, in some areas, the Promise has almost been forgotten. There is a lack of coherence in how it is being delivered and a lack of impetus.

Who should be responsible for delivering care? I realise that there are many layers to that, so you might need to say who should be responsible for that at national, regional and local levels. Who should be responsible for ensuring that each and every child has a lifelong stable and loving relationship? That last bit seems to get forgotten and to get left out of the narrative of the core purpose of the Promise, but it is one of the main things that children need, along with a lot of other support and specialist services.

I put this question to all of you, with your different hats on, and I ask you to be brief. Who should be responsible for delivering care? As far as I can see, that has got lost. We want the process to work, but it is not working for enough children.

David Anderson: There are multiple people with responsibility. In local authorities, if there is an overspend on adult care and that puts a freeze on

spending on children and family social workers, the people who make that decision are responsible for that. We know that, if those nine social workers are not in place, the children and families who need that support will not get it, which will put pressure on other social workers. The responsibility for that lies with the people who make those decisions.

We have seen delay and drift in the Government—that has been the case with, for example, the whole family wellbeing fund and the creation of a kinship vision. The Promise was the vision for kinship, and that was six years ago, yet the Government is still talking about making a pack for kinship families. The people who are responsible for that are the people in the Government team—

Duncan Dunlop: Yes, but should we look at the issue differently? In other words, should different people be responsible? Should we have a different structure of responsibility for delivering care?

David Anderson: I will give the example that I gave yesterday. The Oversight Board pushed strongly for family group decision making. We worked alongside the national charity to have that included. It made a proposal to that effect, but, after six months, it had not even received an acknowledgement email from the Government. At that point, we intervened to say that that was unacceptable. It resubmitted the proposal, and it took another several weeks to get a response. We said, "Look—this doesn't work." Eventually, FGDM was in the bill. The Government said that it could not do what we suggested because it was being considered for the bill, but the proposal was just about expanding services, not about whether it should be put in legislation, to which people were saying yes, no, and maybe. We understood that, but the proposal was to expand on work that the Government had already funded.

Duncan Dunlop: Family group decision making will not even be offered everywhere, will it?

David Anderson: It took months and months of time and effort to get the Government to do what it did. My sister-in-law started a new job and, when she was 20 minutes late after having worked hard for three months, she had to justify that 20 minutes. Who is justifying the delay in the Government teams that led to a national charity not receiving even an acknowledgement email in six months? That needs to be addressed. The Government sometimes does not work at the pace that is necessary for change to arrive in the lives of the children we are all here to help and whom we want to have love, security and respect. There is a big issue with the pace at which the Government teams work.

Duncan Dunlop: It seems to me, from reading your report, that some areas are not implementing family group decision making and that there is no impetus to make that happen, which means that there is a patchwork of services. How do we ensure that it works better for children everywhere?

Joanna Macdonald, you are nodding.

Joanna Macdonald: At the heart of what you are asking is the question of how we get it right for every child. How do we ensure that every child has the opportunity for that? We know that we achieve it through local support—that is, the child's multidisciplinary team working around them, co-ordinated by social work services working closely with education.

I mentioned that we are not hearing enough about where and why family group decision making is working well. That includes what social workers are doing about bureaucracy. A number of local authorities have reduced bureaucracy, to free up social workers to have time with the children. However, it is absolutely incumbent on us to ensure that we are not discussing these issues in another six or 12 months but are clear about what we will progress and do it together. For me, it is as simple and as complicated as ensuring that GIRFEC is delivered locally and that we empower our front-line staff to support the voice of the child in the context of their family whenever they are being supported.

Duncan Dunlop: We have gaps in the delivery of family group decision making. I agree with what everyone has said about the hard work of individuals who make it happen, and I stress that your agency has a key role in promoting social work in that regard, but we still have gaps. When we have gaps, it means that, somehow, FGDM is not cascading up or down to the people who should deliver it and ensure that the services are there. What do we need to put in place to ensure that that happens?

Joanna Macdonald: We are aware that there are gaps. We do not have the same level of communication across the whole system, but what we are doing has many strengths.

From an agency perspective, one of the issues that you articulate relates to workforce, and David Anderson mentioned that there are gaps in the workforce throughout Scotland. It is important that we develop the workforce plan and determine collaboratively what workforce we need, where and why we need it and what we need for the future. Work is going on in relation to the gaps that we have in the workforce. Although the responsibilities are multifaceted, fundamentally they are about how we support local services within the context of the individual's home and

community, to enable them to achieve the best outcomes.

Duncan Dunlop: Claire Burns, I will come to you on that. In Scotland, there could be a case for specialist services such as secure care being provided nationally, foster care being addressed regionally and then the kinship care network being identified at the community level. However, we do not seem to have a mechanism to enable that to happen. Would that be a good way forward?

Claire Burns: Yes, it would. The question about who is responsible for delivery is a good one. It is necessarily complex, because some people have responsibility for the delivery of services and you have responsibility for setting the enabling context for that change. The question is how we get into a mutually reinforcing relationship on that.

However, Mr Dunlop, the big issue is that—I heard Ben Farrugia say this—we cannot consider who is responsible without also considering what the evidence tells us it will take to make the change. I will highlight two points in relation to that. We need to provide more capacity and support to strategic leaders locally, because, if there is no extra money, they will have to make decisions about what they disinvest from and invest in.

Let us take the family group decision making that David Anderson talked about. If no more money has been put in to support the legislation, there is a significant task to be done. How will we invest in that? Who is the workforce that will do that work and what skill set will they require? We sometimes have unrealistic expectations that when something is in legislation, it will be implemented automatically. It will not be; it takes work and time and a particular skill set.

Some good work done has been done. Element 2 of the whole-family wellbeing funding programme was to provide local areas with additional capacity and specialist implementation support. That is what it will take—it is what the evidence tells us it will take. It needs time and space, and you will often need external facilitation and implementation support, such as the children and young people improvement collaborative—CYPIC—and the Improvement Service provide to support the system.

The point you are making came through in our children's services reform research. Part of what the implementation support does is think about the alignment between what is happening nationally, regionally and locally. It is about investing in local leaders, giving them time and space and bringing in implementation support.

Duncan Dunlop: Yes, within the current structures.

Simon Cameron—it is over to you. We have had over six years of this, and, in around two weeks' time, it will be 10 years since Nicola Sturgeon said that she would, if necessary, rip up the system. More time is always the answer, but we have had a lot of time. Perhaps it has not been spent in the most efficient and effective way. This is about children's lives, so it impacts future generations.

Simon Cameron: Absolutely. There is no disagreement from me on that, and I said that earlier when I made the point about time. You ask about structures, and I have spoken about the trust in the system. One of the realities for us is that all the money is going to go on structures; it is not going to go to the front line. It is not going to go to working with children, young people and families, and to giving them support, because we are going to tie ourselves in knots trying to unravel systems and arrangements and so on. Indeed, we see that still. Councils are, to this day, since reorganisation back in 1995-96, trying to disentangle what went before us, such as on equal pay claims.

Structures are not necessarily the answer, but how does the system work together? We hear about the whole system all the time, but we do not understand the whole system. We talk about where the reports are and where the plans are, but we have them coming out of our ears. We have community planning partnership plans, children's services partnership plans—you name it, they are there for everybody to see.

Your question is, where can somebody go to understand how the delivery of the Promise is best articulated? We not only have the challenge of 600-odd pieces of legislation that govern how local government works in this country. When we hear about rewiring, the question is, how do we declutter? How do we get rid of legislation that is no longer fit for purpose and replace it with something that will be meaningful and enable us to deliver the change that we want to see happen? In relation to all the plans, ownership and responsibility, how do we get local public services to combine the totality of the public purse that they have with a single plan to deliver on their behalf?

We need to recognise that it is not only social workers who ensure that children will grow up loved, cared for and respected in this country; it is the totality of the public services workforce and beyond. That will be the role of teachers and so on. When we make decisions about things such as reduced class contact time, which is one of the biggest costs to our system, will that detract and take money away from the preventative approach to the endeavour?

Duncan Dunlop: Alison Gordon, I am afraid that you are the last one. I am hearing that things would all be okay if we had more money, but, for me, the

issue is about more than that. Far too many children and young people are being failed in the system. There are huge impacts on their life chances.

We look at the burgeoning prison population and the number of drug deaths we have had, and we know that there will be a correlation between those things and how we look after our care-experienced children when they are most vulnerable and when they are young. There has been massive impetus from the Scottish Government—for 10 years, the issue has been a priority—yet we are still struggling in this space. Is it not a leadership issue? What is one lever that we could concentrate on pulling in the three and a half years of the Promise that we have left?

10:45

Alison Gordon: As others have said, it is difficult to identify one lever. I agree that there is a leadership issue and that there needs to be whole-system leadership. As well as what happens in children's services, what happens in adult services is relevant in relation to supporting parents and making sure that, at the point of transition from care, life is not more complicated to navigate for our young people.

On the point about putting more money into the system, there is a challenge because of the lag between some of the positive efforts that have been made on prevention and their having an impact. In the meantime, need is not static in our communities and we are still responding to young people who have very complex needs. We are seeing new challenges with extra-familial harm and in relation to children with additional support needs, which are impacting education, health and families.

The issue is sometimes in the middle bit of the system. We do quite well on early support, and sometimes on very intensive support, but we sometimes do not get it right. There needs to be a reinforcing of the approach. At the national level, there needs to be better co-ordination and sequencing, and more attention needs to be given to the system's capacity to deliver in relation to the what-does-it-take question that Claire Burns talked about.

You need to give flexibility at a local level and set the expectation that people will come together to deliver. Social work is critical locally, but some of the changes that education and health partners have made in their approaches are absolutely critical to delivering. You cannot sit the responsibility in one place, but you can reinforce the expectation on the whole system, and that means not just the children's services system.

Patricia Gibson: When we talk about the Promise and children's services, it is inevitably quite a busy landscape, and there are a lot of reasons for that. As somebody mentioned, that creates a bit of silo working. We have heard that it is not about a single person and that there is a need to work together.

My question is on data. In the previous evidence session, we talked a little about the fact that, although a lot of good work is going on, many of the elements are not talking to one another. We also heard about challenges related to children sometimes moving around different parts of the country, never mind within authorities. We have gaps in data, which impacts what children can access. Would it be helpful to have a single data point through which we can trace and track children through the system so that, no matter where they are or which individual in whatever service is dealing with them, we can see the child's journey—if I can use that word—and what the child needs at the point when they present in whatever capacity?

I know that there would be General Data Protection Regulation—GDPR—considerations, but, with that kind of data, if every service was inputting it, obviously only accredited individuals and organisations would be able to access it, and that would be purely for the purpose of providing support at the point of need, which would sometimes be in critical or crisis moments and sometimes be about accessing practical services. Would that help?

David Anderson: I do not know about having a single data point. I can speak about our report and what the Oversight Board has found. As Simon Cameron said, we have plans coming out of ears, and we also have data coming out of our ears. It is about the way that it is used and linked—often, it is not linked very well. Duncan Dunlop has raised in Parliament the issue about people who have died. There is a lot of data on that, but it is not linked. It does not tell us what we need to know so that we can look at it before that point and support children and families.

I will give a stark example, which comes from speaking to someone in education. Data is collected on those who have one qualification or more at a certain level, which is used by Government. If the figure goes up, that is a mark of success. However, a person can have one qualification but feel really bad in their life, so that information tells us nothing about their wellbeing. Alternatively, they could have no qualifications but feel great—things could be going really well in their life.

This is not just about data; it is about people's experience, too. A lot of the data that we have are

quite blunt instruments, and we have talked in the past about issues such as data linkage. The Government has teams that work on that sort of thing, and we have asked, for example, for a longitudinal study of children who are looked after at home, because we do not know enough about them. We need a study that produces real-time data that can be used to inform policy over the next few years. Again, though, we see the Government dragging its feet in getting that up and running, and we would urge it to act.

I do not have enough expertise to respond to the question about having a single data point, but I do know that data linkage is an issue and that we have to use the data better. Maybe we just have to ask different questions.

Patricia Gibson: Perhaps service users could link into the system and input the kind of information that you are talking about.

David Anderson: Absolutely.

Patricia Gibson: That would better inform everything that is being done.

David Anderson: But some of that data already exists—that is what I am saying. Going back to the education stat that was highlighted, I know that there are consultations in which children are asked how they are feeling and so on, but that sort of thing is not linked into the rest of the data, so you do not get an overall picture.

Patricia Gibson: It needs to be linked in.

David Anderson: Yes, and the capacity to do that exists. It just needs some will and effort.

Patricia Gibson: Does anybody else want to come in on that?

Claire Burns: It is a really good point. Indeed, some of our research has shown that one of the challenges in the system is the lack of data linkage and organisations being unable to share information because they work with different systems. We absolutely need to address that.

However, we need to see data in a wider sense, too. We need not only data linkage but really good data that enables local partners to plan and make decisions about services. They need to know about their local community and its needs, which will be unique to each area. I would also say that a lot of data resources and data skills have been taken out of local authorities as a result of the reduction in their finances, and those are things that we need to invest in.

Finally, David Anderson is absolutely right in saying that we need a bit more of a focus on qualitative data. In the next few weeks, CELCIS has a report coming out on our bright spots programme, which specifically focuses on qualitative data on young people's feelings about their wellbeing and whether placements meet their needs. We need to focus on that kind of data, too.

Simon Cameron: I agree with David Anderson and Claire Burns—particularly David's point about having data coming out of our ears. We are data rich but information poor, and the question is how we can share the data. The Parliament and the Government can look at that at a national level and ask, "What's the enabler for change that will create the right spaces and systems, which will help us share the data?", but the other question—this goes back to the points that have been made about qualitative data—is how that data is then used at a local level. We need to understand that data is important at that level, too, because if we keep just aggregating things up, that will tell us only one part of what we think the story is. It will not tell us what difference will be made on the ground.

Yet again, this is all about approaching our use and understanding of data with some maturity. I go back to Claire Burns's well-made point about the lack of resource—and now, unfortunately, the lack of skill—at a local level. Indeed, that is one of the inherent challenges with the public service reform strategy. It is fine to say, "We'll cut back-office services, because that's the easiest place to save money and it will protect front-line services." However, we will actually be damaging front-line services, because it will mean that we are not giving people on the front line the information and support that they require to do their jobs really well. The back office plays a critical part in that.

Patricia Gibson: Do you want to come in on that question, too, Alison?

Alison Gordon: I agree with much of what has been said. I would say, from a children's services partnership perspective, that there is no core infrastructure for such partnerships. Therefore, when you look at data, manage it and pull it together from across partners, you sometimes struggle to get the right support to turn it into useful information that helps you to plan and respond appropriately to need. That is a big issue for us.

Going back to the earlier point about individual young people's journeys, I agree that there are some areas that we need to understand better. Indeed, David Anderson mentioned children who are looked after at home as being one such area. We also need to think about experience and what matters to people, and how that sort of information is held and shared. Young people are still asked to tell their stories too often, and we must also be careful how they are written about in our records and how that information is exchanged, so that they are not disempowered by that. That applies to the families that we are supporting, too.

Alongside paying attention to that, it is important to have an emphasis on trauma-informed practice and on the approach that someone starts with when they engage with a child, young person or family. Information must be used well and people must feel that they are being listened to and that you are not making assumptions about them, their life or what is important to them on the basis of a written record.

Patricia Gibson: That has to be carefully recorded and dealt with.

I am going to go back to a point that Simon Cameron made about public service reform. I do not know whether you will be able to answer this question, but I am interested in what you might say. There are challenges with the Promise: we have about three years left, time is racing by and we still see gaps and pressure in the system. Meanwhile, the conversation about public service reform is already taking place. If that reform process could give you one thing that would bring you closer to delivering the Promise by 2030, what would that be? I know that that is a really challenging question.

David Anderson: Is that question for everyone?

Patricia Gibson: Absolutely.

David Anderson: We need a massive shift to preventative services, with no cut in the money that goes to the services that are necessary alongside that. The 2030 deadline is just that—it is not an expiry date—and we will keep up the pressure. The Promise was made to all children in Scotland—past, present and those who will need support in the future. That point should be clear.

Patricia Gibson: When we look back in 2030, we will want to see how far we have come and to feel that we have made real progress. Progress has been made, but I do not know whether we are in that position at the moment.

Simon Cameron: As David Anderson articulated well, we see Scotland's public services as a whole, not as separate parts that have to be protected individually. If we try to protect individual parts, or if we say that one part is less valuable than another, we will deny the fact that it is the breadth of Scotland's public services that creates the type of society we want and puts support and opportunity into our communities. That is how we give people chances in life and change the direction of the lives that we all live. The Promise is fundamentally about how we feel and how we are supported in our communities to live lives free from fear of discrimination, victimisation, harassment, abuse and so on.

Patricia Gibson: I am segueing a bit here, but we are seeing real workforce challenges right across every part of the public sector today and that is going to impact everything that you try to do.

Alison Gordon: There are definitely workforce challenges as well as massive funding challenges, and you will not find me disagreeing with David Anderson about that need.

Systems can do well if they are given the flexibility to allow them to work differently together. For example, when young people are in conflict with the law, our youth work services take an approach that covers both policy and reporting on funding, and that allows people to look at local need to make the best possible use of the combined people and money resources that they have. That creates innovation that can deliver things differently, although it cannot entirely resolve the lack of capacity in funding.

Some of the best initiatives come from partnership working—for example, with housing colleagues, who are also critically important. If everybody is aligned in their approach and there is flexibility to do that, you can get more bang for your buck. It is about addressing some of the issues that Claire Burns talked about earlier in relation to various reporting frameworks and evaluation methods and the lack of policy integration. It does not resolve things entirely. However, with that, and working to the clear outcomes that have been set out in plan 24-30 in relation to the Promise, we can make more progress.

11:00

Claire Burns: The task that both Simon Cameron and Alison Gordon have set out is that we need the system to work in an interdependent and connected way to make the most of the totality of the money that comes in.

My plea is that we see that as work that needs to be done, because the structures, processes and relationships to allow it to happen do not necessarily exist at the moment. We seem to skip over the fact that that is the work that needs to be done. Leaders need the time and space to do it, and that is really difficult at a point when the current system's demands are so great.

Leaders tell us that their conversations are dominated by capacity issues, financial cuts and now various structural changes. I make no comment on that, but simply note that that is what will take up the oxygen. We really need to ask how we build in the time and capacity for leaders to have the space to have those conversations about how their system can work differently, and they will often need external support to be able to do that well.

Joanna Macdonald: I completely agree about this being a real opportunity to look at the whole

system, and all the parts of the system that are critically important and interdependent, to ensure that we are supporting our most vulnerable children. It is about giving them the opportunity to be supported locally and better, and it is about improving communication.

As Alison mentioned on the data question, it is also about recording and about how we describe our young people in important records, at times when they are at their most vulnerable. There is an opportunity for us to look at more standardised approaches, to take learning from different parts of the country, and to work in a much more collaborative way that is supported by structures, as opposed to having structures that, as we have heard, can be a barrier at times.

Laura Moodie: I would like to have a bit more discussion about preventative versus crisis spending, which we have touched on a few times today.

I take the points about needing more resource overall. However, I am interested in hearing how much progress has been made in moving resource from crisis intervention points to whole family support, particularly at an early stage, and about any evidence that that is reducing demand for intensive services today.

David Anderson: We have lots of evidence of the work that has been done. However—and this is not about bashing the Government, which is trying to do a lot of that work—it is simply not taking place at the pace that is necessary. Sometimes the processes, and the way that they work, get in the way.

I will give the committee a very direct example. One of the major needs of someone moving on from care is a stable home in which they can feel safe and secure. Before our previous report, we said that the Government had to reinstate the homelessness pathway. If people get the right support it can prevent some issues that can occur later on in their lives, which we know can come at great cost to our society.

However, it took us a year to get the Government to accept that it was going to do that—which, in itself, was ridiculous. Eventually, a couple of weeks before we released our report, the Government identified some resources. We were really pleased, because we thought that it would mean identifying every young person who was going to leave care in the next six months to a year and ensuring that we could put them into safe and secure homes. However, that was not the case—perhaps I was naïve to think that it could have been. The Government created a subgroup that had to meet first to determine its terms of reference and then again to determine its work plan. It took nine months for it to have its first proper meeting.

During those nine months, there were children who had to register as homeless. One of them, once they had eventually been offered a flat, opened the door there only to see mould on the wall. Would you accept that for your child? When we speak about prevention, we should think about preventing such processes from getting in the way of support arriving in children's lives.

Laura Moodie: Absolutely.

Alison Gordon: It is hard to say whether there has been a shift towards preventative spending. I do not think that we formally report on the measure, but, as the committee heard in the earlier evidence session, the target is that 5 per cent of community health and social care spend should be on prevention. I do not know whether that is actively tracked.

However, through local partnerships, more money is certainly being invested in prevention. That is largely where the money from the whole family wellbeing fund, the fairer futures partnership programme and some of the other change funds has gone. The challenge is in shifting core funding from crisis services to preventative ones, given the factors that other witnesses have described on needs not disappearing. Other issues have exacerbated elements of need since the Promise was launched.

However, we can see green shoots in some areas. I can speak most authoritatively about my local authority. Over the past two years, which covers the lifetime of the whole family wellbeing fund, for the first time there has been a reduction in the number of requests for assistance from social work services. That does not mean that there are social workers sitting twiddling their thumbs, because the demands and needs that they meet are complex. However, families that might previously have been referred to statutory partners are having their needs met through a strong community and voluntary sector offer that is supported by the wider system, so they are not left isolated.

We can see potential in prevention, but it is difficult to make progress at the pace that we want. Overall, the number of children in certain forms of care has reduced. Arguably, that is because of other challenges in the system.

Simon Cameron: On the relationship between national and local—members who have been in the Parliament for a while will know that, very shortly, they will get a briefing from COSLA on the annual settlement—more than 80 per cent of Scottish local government funding is directed, so we have little or no control over it. As Alison Gordon has rightly said, change is happening, but there is a challenge in making significant changes at various levels. At the local level, there is limited

ability through democratic means to make decisions on how to make the shift.

We will never say that we do not need more money—we do—but there is a lot of money in different parts of our system. How can we shift that into different places so as to make significant changes? In relation to community planning partnerships, children's services planning partnerships and so on, how can people come to the table and say how they will spend their resources locally, without the Government directing that they must be spent on a certain thing, at a certain time and in a certain way?

The challenge for political leaders, and those at officer level, is in coming up with new ways of working, and knowing the direction of travel that they want to go in, all while their hands are tied. Throughout the system, the decisions that they have to make involve taking with one hand and giving with another, so they cannot make significant continual changes towards prevention. It has long been agreed that that is the direction of travel that we want to go in as a country—the Christie commission set us off on that path—but we have simply not released into the system the trust to allow significant changes to take hold.

Laura Moodie: It is interesting that members of both panels have spoken about the importance of trust. Last weekend, I attended the National Theatre of Scotland's "One Hundred Voices" art installation, and I was really struck by the clinical and bureaucratic nature of much of what care-experienced people deal with. It was strongly reflected in their voices that that was the defining feature of their experience of the care system. An important part of the Promise is that young people should feel loved.

I do not see the importance of young people feeling loved being reflected in the report. I appreciate what you have said about the need for data gathering. Feeling loved comes under qualitative, rather than quantitative, evidence. How are we measuring the progress that is being made on how many care-experienced young people feel loved by the system, rather than feeling that they are just a cog in a wider administrative machine? I appreciate that that is a difficult question to answer, but I would be interested to hear your reflections on that and on how we might move towards a system that is able to measure and reflect that better.

Joanna, would you like to go first?

Joanna Macdonald: In relation to the previous question, which was about preventative support, we have heard examples of how the whole family wellbeing fund is delivering on some aspects of our ambition. There is also greater understanding of what we mean and of the art of the possible when it comes to our preventative supports.

That brings us on to love. We want all our children to grow up to feel loved and to have ambition and hope. As David Anderson said, the Promise gives us hope, because its ambition is for every child in Scotland to grow up loved. We are not there yet in relation to how we measure that. There are examples of where we are doing that well at local level and for individuals.

Thinking about how we evidence that brings us back to the question about data. We need to take a trauma-informed approach to recording information to ensure that we write our records in such a way that, when children read them, they feel loved. The experience that they feel is important, but how we record information across the system is just as important. As much as it might feel bureaucratic, what we record is essential to our ability to understand and support a child.

Alison Gordon: I would say that it is important that children should feel both loved and valued. That is hard for us to measure. We also need to think about how we strengthen relationships within families, and the work that we do with children who are looked after at home or who are in families but need support is important in that regard. To date, we have probably not been very good at collating the outcome measures for that work.

For children who experience care, the proxy measures for that relate to the stability of relationships, whether in a care placement or with the staff who support them most closely, and the work that is done to maintain brother and sister-type relationships. That involves looking at how many children are facilitated to remain in touch with those who are critically important to them. At the other end of the spectrum is the work that we do on lifelong links. We try to support children's understanding when they move on. Sadly, we sometimes have to help children to reconnect. That is important work.

Ultimately, in time, how people talk about their experience in the care system will be the most critical measure.

Laura Moodie: Is the Oversight Board looking into how to quantify that?

11:15

David Anderson: Absolutely. One of the deep dives that we make in our report is into the issue of voice, but we could not find enough information about how people actually felt. There is the Promise story of progress that is run by The Promise Scotland, but again that is a work in progress, and we are not seeing enough qualitative data at a scale that allows us to make

any judgment on how the care-experienced community feels.

If data linkage goes well, you will see in those statistics—if they are holistic—whether people are receiving true care, and you will also see it if you do the work on keeping families together. However, there are also links to housing, to local authorities ensuring that planning applications for bigger houses go through quickly and at pace, and to the money being there from Government to support that.

Much of this question can be answered simply by keeping the Promise and doing the things that are necessary, such as collecting the data and linking it in a way that shows us these aspects. We do not want to keep asking people the same questions; everyone should have the chance to be listened to, but, as our report states, they can feel listened to but not understood. You can be listened to and still not see the change that your being listened to should have provoked. I know people who have been pushing for this change for years and they have had to step away, because the pace of change has been so slow and the things that they have been talking about for years have not been progressed. They have been listened to, but what they have been saying has not been acted on at the necessary pace.

We talk about the work being done at all these different levels, but I will always bring it back to the human element and the impact on the young person. Those are really important. As I have said, the window of opportunity is closing, and that should act as a real impetus—I was going to say something else there—for people to act, not least the Government and the way that it works internally to progress things.

Simon Cameron: David Anderson made an important point when he talked about the wider services and the wider decisions that are made in planning and so forth. It comes back to the issue that we have been discussing about who should be responsible for the Promise and the fact that this is a collective issue that goes across the system. Indeed, that is one of the challenges that we continually face with the Promise—it involves everybody working to understand it. They might not be professional social workers, or they might not see it as part of their day-to-day job, but, as with human rights, as with children's rights, as with equality and diversity, the Promise is an underpinning feature not of what we do, but of how we do it. It is all about people starting to understand that.

It pervades what is done not only at officer level, but at elected member level. If you are taking a truly trauma-informed approach to decision making in a chamber, every decision that you make will be trauma informed. Therefore, you need to understand that, in some cases, it might have a very overt impact in the change that is made and, at others, it will not be the most obvious thing and might actually come furthest down the line. Nevertheless, it will still have an impact. If we are going to make the shift that we want to make, it is important that we start to understand that these are underpinning features, not just time-bound things that we are doing. They are ways of continually improving and enhancing the services that we deliver.

Moreover, on data, David Anderson spoke well about the fact that certain statistical information will tell us things, but we must also consider the lived experience and the feelings of the generations of people who have been through the system. I wonder whether we are too eager to bring that sort of thing up in reports at a national level. It will only ever be at a local level that we will truly understand whether people feel that the Promise is being kept for them, as individuals, and from day to day. Again, if we are truly supporting them, will they want that to be national news, or will they just be happy with getting the life, the opportunities and the chances that they were told they were entitled to?

Claire Burns: Going back to Alison Gordon's point, one of the important parts of the Promise is that children should stay with their families where possible, because that is the best place for them to experience love and good connections.

However, that means that we have to support the workforces and the carers who are involved with them and ensure that, for example, social workers get the time and the space to do this work. A couple of weeks ago, Ben Farrugia talked ago about the moral injury caused to workers who feel that they cannot give families the right time and space. The question is: how do we support them? Indeed, how do we support kinship and foster carers better and give them the financial or practical support that they need? How do we take that burden off them, so that they can focus on their relationship with the child or the young person? Ms Ross made a similar point about post-adoption support. How can we take the practical, financial burdens off people so that they can focus on the relationship?

Katherine Sangster: Good morning, and thank you for the incredibly detailed evidence that you have given. The Promise was published in 2020, and it is now 2026. Six years is a long time in a child's life or a family's life if they are struggling. What difference will children and families have noticed in the six years for which the Promise has been in place? I am happy for you to give examples of best practice locally.

David Anderson: If somebody receives the true care that they need when they are 10, the Promise will have been kept when they are 16. Unfortunately, the variation across Scotland means that someone who was 10 six years ago could now be looking at the mouldy room that I mentioned earlier, which would mean that the Promise has not been kept. Progress has been made in multiple areas and at multiple levels, but it is not equal across Scotland. I return to the point that that means that the Promise has not been kept for some children.

Alison Gordon: It is really difficult to home in on one thing but, from a partnership perspective, there has been a change in the wider understanding and the approach to families and to children and young people who face the biggest challenges. I know that that may be counter to the evidence that you have heard from Who Cares? Scotland about the education system, which is still the source of many issues relating to advocacy. However, we have seen significant changes in the ownership of understanding of the needs of children in the education system. For example, there have been significant reductions—we have not seen this eliminated yet, but we have seen significant reductions—in the numbers of children experiencing care who are excluded from our schools.

There has also been a radical shift in the fact that we try not to criminalise children in the care system. We are by no means there yet, but there has been a radical change in the approach to children who are in conflict with the law. We take a much more trauma-informed approach these days.

There are still some challenges in the system, but those are some areas where we have seen positive change.

Simon Cameron: I agree with the points that have just been made. To put it simply, change and improvement in the system have been happening for a long time, and that predates 2020 and the Promise. Joanna Macdonald has mentioned GIRFEC a number of times. The system has understood that we need to change the way in which we operate and the opportunities that we give our children and young people, and particularly those who are care experienced.

We have been on a long journey, and we are still on it. Getting it right is the critical part here, but let us not dismiss what was already in train, to which the Promise has added impetus, or the fact that we continue to add to it.

Claire Burns: As you have heard, we have seen some really good improvements. The biggest thing for me is that people in the system are committed to supporting families to keep children with them, and they wish that they had put more effort into that in the past. Sometimes we have to remove children because the situation is too risky, but, all the time, I hear leaders and workers saying, "You know, we removed that child. What would it have taken for us to have supported the family to stay together instead?"

I will give you a small example of that. Workers who have removed children have turned up at the foster carer's house and seen mattresses, beds and toys, and they have said, "Why didn't the system allow us to provide this while the child was in their home?" People are reorienting themselves to that perspective. That is not enough to deliver the Promise, but it is critical.

Joanna Macdonald: One of the biggest shifts that I have seen, which has been supported by having the drive from the Promise and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, has been for our children to be regarded and supported as children; for them to be seen as required; and for them to be supported as they demonstrate that, whether by their actions or their inaction. Although we are still on a journey with that and have a long way to go, it is a huge strength that the age of criminal responsibility is now 12 and that children and young people are no longer in adult prisons. As Alison Gordon said, those are significant changes in how we support children, as is the work of the children's reporter.

Prior to the introduction of the changes that I have just articulated, a lot of people were definitely asking how we would do this. As David Anderson has said, it comes back to the ambition for a 10-year-old today to have that love and hope for the future, so that they reflect that back to us when they are 16. Ms Moodie mentioned the "One Hundred Voices" installation. We have to hear those voices, and that must drive us.

I hope that the focus on the Promise and on care-experienced young people and their opportunity to stay in their care placements after they are 16 or 18—I know that, through doing that, which is the right thing, there has been an impact on childcare placements—is a national demonstration to children that we are doing what we can to support them and give them the lives and opportunities that our own children would have.

George Adam: Most people have discussed public service reform, and we have heard various answers. Simon Cameron, you can correct me if I picked this up the wrong way—there is a good chance that I did—but, when you answered Duncan Dunlop's question, you advocated almost no change to structures. You said that, if we are going to talk about structure, that will take money away from children and families. Is it more a case

of, “We need to get this right, so it is all about service delivery, and the structure must deliver that”, or did you mean that we should keep the status quo?

Simon Cameron: I did not mean the status quo. COSLA’s position is that we are very much—and long have been—up for the discussion about local governance reform and review, hence our being part of the local governance review for almost 10 years. There is honesty in the system, in that we are saying that we will need to do things differently, which you are already seeing in a number of different councils, in the single authority models and in the discussions that are happening in the Ayrshires and other places.

I was trying to suggest that, if we have a fixation on it being purely about structure, as we have discussed in recent times, we will lose sight of the fact that changing structures takes a significant amount of money. That is why I gave the example of what councils are still dealing with, to this day, from the previous reorganisation, because they have had to reset the system around what was inherited. It was more a case of, if that is the only answer that we come up with, it will not provide the answer that we need, because it will not achieve the right pace.

George Adam: As I said in the earlier evidence session, we are hoping that we do not have the equivalent of Ian Lang up in the Scottish Office with a big marker pen, deciding boundaries and things such as that—that was the case in the previous reorganisation. It is more about service delivery itself. I used to be a councillor—that was not yesterday—and, at that time, we talked about corporate parenting, which was about how we councillors, as corporate parents, delivered that. We need to get to the stage where it is more about the delivery of the services. You were, in effect, just giving us a warning that, if we do not get it right, we will end up taking up the big marker pen.

Simon Cameron: Indeed.

The Convener: That brings the evidence session to a close. Thank you all very much for joining us. We will now move into private session.

11:29

Meeting continued in private until 12:02.

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