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Education and Gaelic Committee

Comataidh an Fhoghlaim agus na Gàidhlig

Tuesday 6 October 2026

Session 7

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EDUCATION AND GAELIC COMMITTEE
6th 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:

Siobhian Brown (Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise)
Gavin Henderson (Scottish Government)
Màiri McAllan (Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic)
Orlando Mason (Scottish Government)
Gordon Paterson (Scottish Government)

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Education and Gaelic Committee

Tuesday 6 October 2026

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:05]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

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

Our first item today is a decision on taking business in private. Does the committee agree to take the draft report on our pre-budget scrutiny 2027-28, and any other draft reports, in private at future meetings?

Members *indicated agreement*.

Pre-budget Scrutiny 2027-28

09:06

The Convener: This morning, we will have the final evidence-taking session for our pre-budget scrutiny in advance of the budget documents being published on 3 December. This year, we have been focusing our scrutiny on progress towards reform of the children's care system and class contact time in school education.

I welcome to the meeting Màiri McAllan, the Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic; Siobhian Brown, the Minister for Children, Young People and the Promise; and their officials: Orlando Mason, Gavin Henderson and Gordon Paterson.

Cabinet secretary, do you want to make some opening remarks?

The Cabinet Secretary for Education, Culture and Gaelic (Màiri McAllan): Yes, convener, and good morning, everybody. As I have previously stated to the committee, it is my ambition as education secretary that every child and young person in Scotland, regardless of their background, should be able to have the chance to succeed and fulfil their potential. The two matters on which the committee has been taking evidence, and which will be raised this morning, contribute to that ambition, and the minister and I welcome the opportunity to speak to you as you carry out your pre-budget scrutiny.

First, on the reduction in class contact time, the Government has a strong interest in action that will drive improvement in learning and teaching, and the tripartite agreement on reduced class contact time that has been achieved between the Educational Institute of Scotland, the Scottish Government and Convention of Scottish Local Authorities leaders represents a significant investment in Scotland's teachers and in the quality of education for our children and young people.

By providing more protected professional time, we are responding to the principal ask on reducing workload pressures and supporting a more sustainable profession. It will mean more planning time for lessons, and opportunities to provide timely and meaningful feedback to students. It will, for example, mean time to prepare tailored content for lessons for children with additional support needs.

We have agreed a phased approach to RCCT, which will be implemented in primary and special schools from August 2027 and in secondary schools from August 2029, and we are committed to funding the implementation cost. Initial funds have been released to councils to support local

implementation, with £1 million made available to support recruitment in island and rural Scotland.

I will now move swiftly to the Promise, convener. The Promise, and keeping it, are absolutely fundamental to our ambition for Scotland's children and young people. It is about ensuring that children grow up loved, safe and respected and that families receive the right support at the right time to prevent crisis and to keep them together, where possible. The Scottish ministers provide national leadership on the Promise, and the minister and I are committed to creating the conditions that are needed for change, to driving that change and to working across Government and across society on that effort.

With 2030 very much approaching, and with a lot achieved to date—although with very much still to do—we are firmly focused on delivery. That means progressive implementation of the Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Act 2026, containing as it does substantial work on aftercare, continuing care, reform of the children's hearings system, the strengthening of family group decision making and more.

Alongside work on the 2026 act, we will continue to transform whole family support with preventative and relational early intervention support for families. We will also take forward work on foster and kinship carers; we will strengthen the social work workforce; and we will continue to roll out the bairns' hoose model, among other interventions.

Our officials, the minister and I are working on a clear and decisive implementation plan that covers these matters and more. These are ambitious aims, and delivering them will require sustained investment, clear leadership and strong partnership right across national and local government as well as civic services, with the voice of lived-experience individuals always at its heart. Siobhian Brown and I care deeply about this issue, and we look forward to taking your questions.

The Convener: Thank you, cabinet secretary. We will now move to questions, and I will start off.

The Scottish Fiscal Commission recommended in August that, to support parliamentary committees in carrying out their pre-budget scrutiny, the Scottish Government should set out progress on planned efficiencies, developments in public sector pay and workforce, and how the spending pressures that it faces have changed since the spending review in January 2026. Are you able to provide the committee with an update on that progress? In particular, are you able to advise how planned efficiencies and spending pressures will impact on the delivery of the Promise and the reduction in class contact time?

Màiri McAllan: Yes, that is absolutely something that we can comment on, although doing so early on will require me to give you a very significant answer, with lots of detail. Although RCCT is a quite self-contained part of education spending, the Promise covers almost every service that comes into contact with children. I would be very glad to support the committee in understanding the differences in that respect, but it is probably better if I answer that question in writing rather than orally this morning.

The Convener: We would appreciate that.

What consultation did the Scottish Government carry out on the reduction in class contact time policy, and what is the primary rationale for its introduction, from the viewpoint of young people?

Màiri McAllan: I mentioned in my opening remarks that RCCT was the principal and foremost ask in respect of reducing teachers' workload. The Scottish Government has been committed to the policy for some time, because we recognise that a teaching profession that has more professional time, more scope for preparation, more scope for feedback and more scope for tailoring curriculum content and lessons is a profession that is working best for young people.

The discussions that we are now having about implementing RCCT are being had between us, COSLA and the teaching unions, and that is a very important forum for gathering the voice of the teaching profession as well as that of the local authorities and the Scottish Government.

I know that reduced class contact time is principally about the teaching profession, but there are many ways in which it supports young people, too. In considering its implementation, we have looked at how it will create opportunities for young people to get more specialised time with a specialised teacher, whether that be in music, art, physical education or whatever, and it will hopefully create better content in the classroom, as teachers will have more time to think and prepare lessons.

One of the things that appeals to me is the idea that teachers will have more scope to give meaningful feedback to young people to identify their needs and the ways in which we can support them to make progress. In that way, it really meets the goal of reaching a young person's potential. Therefore, the policy both relates to teachers' workload and can have a very positive impact on young people, although I should point out that we will have to monitor it to ensure that it is having those intended impacts.

The Convener: Thank you. I call Patricia Gibson.

Patricia Gibson (Cunninghame South) (SNP): Cabinet secretary, I was interested in what you said about the reduction in class contact time allowing more time for specialised lessons in art, music or whatever. Some of the evidence we have heard on this issue has highlighted shortages—shortages that were around when I was going to school, which was not yesterday—in certain subjects, particularly physics and other science, technology, engineering and mathematics subjects.

There are worries that the unintended consequence of reducing class contact time might be a shrinking curriculum, because there are simply not enough specialised teachers. I know that the Government can do—and has been doing—things to fill those gaps such as encouraging physics and maths graduates, for example, to come into teaching. We also know that golden handshakes have been offered, although they do not seem to be making the kinds of inroads into the problem that we would like. How do you square that with providing more specialism?

09:15

Màiri McAllan: As I said to the convener, I see two major upsides of RCCT, firstly for teacher workload and the profession and, secondly, for young people. I appreciate that the committee has taken a lot of evidence on it but, for me, the implementation of RCCT ought to be neutral, as long as it is done right, which is why local planning and the collation of data that we are encouraging local authorities to do are important.

We made £7.5 million available to allow local authorities to review their workforce, consider gaps, and think carefully about how they were going to implement the policy to ensure that it does not lead to an erosion of curriculum content, because we cannot let that happen. I do not want to underplay the fact that implementation is critical, but there is no reason that reducing class contact time in that way should not have a positive effect on what young people are taught, especially when it creates opportunities for learners to have more specialised time with specialised teachers.

Patricia Gibson: Does the Scottish Government have any plans for how it will tackle the persistent shortage of STEM subject teachers, which will be critical to the success of the reduction in class contact time?

Màiri McAllan: You mentioned that you are aware of a few things that we are trying to do, such as the bursary that focuses on subjects with teacher shortages, which Orlando Mason may be able to find figures for while I am speaking.

We have also been running recruitment campaigns that are focused on subject areas with teacher shortages, including STEM, home economics and other subjects. I have spoken about the £1 million teacher recruitment assistance fund, which is linked to RCCT, with the understanding that rural areas are most at risk of teacher shortages and are the most likely to face difficulties with implementation. The fund will provide practical support, such as help with housing and other things, to encourage teachers to apply in those areas.

My officials engage regularly on workforce planning, which is connected to but broader than RCCT. We are working with local authorities to get clear data about vacancies. We have 32 local authorities, which are all separate corporate employers and hold their own data. We are asking them to bring their data to the Scottish Government so that we can look at it together and feed it into an up-to-date approach to recruitment, teacher training and all the other matters that will help to get the right people to the right place. We have enough teachers but, often, their location creates difficulties.

Orlando Mason has just let me know that, so far, 850 teachers have been supported to teach secondary subjects through the bursary.

Laura Moodie (South Scotland) (Green): I want to examine some of the issues from a rural perspective. What assessment has been made of the availability of further and higher education routes into teaching, particularly for the subjects that are hard to recruit teachers for across Scotland? I am thinking about more rural areas, where people may want to change their career paths to teach those subjects, but a route may not be provided for them locally.

Màiri McAllan: The question is about the provision of teacher training for hard-to-fill subjects in rural areas, which feeds into our workforce planning. My impression is that there is a good spread of provision and that there are opportunities for learning across the country. The challenge that rural areas face is more about people wanting to settle and make their lives in those areas, as opposed to the central belt.

I am open-minded, but I would diagnose the issue as being more about where people want to have their careers and that they want to live in areas with population centres, as opposed to there being a lack of available training and learning opportunities for the teaching profession.

Just last week, I visited the centre for teaching excellence at the University of Glasgow, which we fund. Although it is based in Glasgow, it is very much a national offer of teaching support. For example, I was in Skye two weeks before that visit,

where I met the women who lead the Gaelic hub of the centre for teaching excellence. The centre has a hub-and-spoke model that provides support right across the country.

Duncan Dunlop (South Scotland) (LD): Good morning, cabinet secretary. Last week, we had representatives at the committee from two teaching unions and the head of School Leaders Scotland. David Barnett, the general secretary of School Leaders Scotland, noted that existing staff shortages will be exacerbated by implementing the reduction in class contact time policy. He was mainly talking about secondary schools in particular rural areas, and he said that 18 schools have only one part-time physics teacher. If we give those teachers less class contact time, there will be nobody else who can teach physics. How will we fill those gaps in provision?

Màiri McAllan: The ongoing exercise that we are funding with £7.5 million is doing exactly that work on a local scale in order to get a clear picture of where the vacancies are and to give us time to address those as we move towards a phased implementation of the policy.

I stress how important phased implementation will be for RCCT; it cannot be done in one go, and I recognise the points that need to be worked through. It is absolutely right for there to be local planning. I will not sit in front of you all today and say that the policy is not without challenge. However, our assessment is that the benefits will outweigh the challenges that we will need to work through.

We know from His Majesty's Inspectorate of Education in Scotland data that the feeling that workload is unmanageable is exacerbating and driving staff shortages—or, certainly, staff absences—which can cause problems for learning and teaching. Creating that space can help the profession by helping us to avoid absences that are related to overworking, and it will have a positive benefit for young people.

Duncan Dunlop: As Patricia Gibson said, getting teachers in physics and STEM subjects in rural areas has been a problem for a long time. What different incentives are you looking at for local authorities to be able to use to attract teachers to those different areas?

Màiri McAllan: I will give a few examples, and maybe Orlando Mason can come in if I miss any. I have spoken about the teaching bursary and the 850-odd people who have already used it. To date, that bursary has been linked to hard-to-fill subjects, but we are considering whether we could layer place on to that, so that it would cover subject and place at the same time.

I also mentioned the £1 million fund for rural recruitment, which is another practical thing to help people to take up jobs in rural areas and sustain those jobs. I appreciate that that is only £1 million, but I hope that it can help us as we implement the reduction in class contact time policy over the next couple of years. As I said, we have also attempted things such as recruitment campaigns, and we will keep doing that.

Duncan Dunlop: As I said, we had representatives from three unions at the committee last week, and we heard from a teachers association the week before that. We did not hear from pupil support assistants, but we have heard that, with the high degree of additional support needs that are now in classrooms, teachers require people to be in the classroom when they are teaching to help the students who are struggling so that they can focus on their tasks, which allows for a more productive learning environment for teachers and pupils.

Those support staff do not seem to be unionised under a trade-specific union—it is apparently Unison that covers most of them—so we did not hear their voices on what they would require. They are at risk of being marginalised during the reform process to release more of the budget, but we need to have more of them in the classroom; that should be the priority, rather than removing teachers from the classroom. What consideration have you given to that issue?

Màiri McAllan: I am giving close consideration to the issue of additional support for learning and the exceptional workforce that supports it. I understand why, when we consider spend that is dedicated to RCCT, people are asking, “What else might you have spent that on within education?” However, we need to invest across the board.

In this year’s budget, for example, an additional £29 million was dedicated to additional support for learning: £28 million went to councils, and £1 million was used by Education Scotland to create training tools to support the workforce who are involved in that work. I do not see it as a trade-off. We have to try to do both things, albeit with limited funds.

I will give you one example of how the two issues come together. I talked earlier about how having more professional time will allow the class teacher a more tailored approach to the additional support needs that they face in the class. They report to us that, sometimes, they feel that they cannot do the best for those young people because they do not have the time to prepare to teach them well.

There is another wee example that might be of interest to the committee. We are not just pursuing RCCT but developing digital tools for support. I

draw your attention to one that is being developed, which is called Trellis. It relates to support for children with additional support needs. Often, teachers have to convene meetings with learners and their families to create a child plan. Teachers have reported that the work to take the notes of such a meeting and turn them into information that can feed into a plan can take two or three hours, and that they often have to do that outwith allocated time. The tool will help them to gather all the information that was discussed and put it into a format that is more workable—taking away that two or three hours and creating something that is ready to go. That allows better communication with families, more quickly.

Duncan Dunlop: I am sorry to interrupt. I totally agree that there are benefits to using artificial intelligence for a range of issues, to help teachers to prepare for classes and tailor for different needs. However, to look at it from a budget scrutiny point of view, the implementation of the RCCT policy will cost up to £300 million, yet we are spending only about £30 million on additional support needs—on teachers in classrooms. We have heard continuously that that is really the priority in which we ought to be investing, yet we are spending a 10th of that budget on them.

Màiri McAllan: On the point about the total cost of RCCT, COSLA referred to the sum that you have just put to me in its evidence session. However, as far as I am concerned, that is not accurate and, frankly, not affordable. My estimation of the cost of RCCT, which we are currently requiring the local plans to absolutely finalise, is not in the region of that figure, which would not be affordable.

Duncan Dunlop: So what is it, roughly, in your mind?

Màiri McAllan: I am still doing the work to understand the conditions in each locality, in order to work out how much it will cost. For example, we might need to recruit more teachers, so I first need to know where the vacancies are. That work is under way. However, the COSLA figure was out of date on the pupil roll, and it did not consider phasing. I stress that phasing is important for RCCT.

Duncan Dunlop: I highlight the point that, regardless, we are spending significantly less on additional support needs in the classroom to guide pupils through, relative to what we are going to spend on implementing the RCCT policy. Is that not the case?

Màiri McAllan: The policy will support young people with ASN in the classroom. I do not accept for a moment that the investment is divorced from the needs of ASN children. It will support them very much, because their teacher, who stands in front of them and tries to get the very best for them, will have more time to prepare and think about how they do that.

That is not to say that we do not also have to invest in the ASN workforce. I have spoken before at committee about my intentions to create easier registration for other parts of the profession to move into ASN roles—including those who are facing underemployment in primary school and who would wish to move into such a role. It is not just a singular focus.

The Convener: Thank you. We now have questions from Patricia Gibson.

Patricia Gibson: Having listened to Mr Dunlop, I am prompted to return briefly to the question of STEM. I know that there are other topics to discuss, but let us stay with that issue for a moment.

For decades—long before devolution—there has been a shortage of teachers in STEM subjects. My assessment is that there are two barriers to recruitment. One is competition from industry. I will not say that it is solely about pay, because Scottish teachers are the best paid in Europe, and possibly the world, but education is nevertheless has to compete with industries that can offer much more lucrative salaries and career structures.

09:30

The other is the constant media narrative about education: how awful everything is and how terrible children are, and how difficult teaching is. That has certainly been more vociferous in recent years. Of course teaching is a difficult job—it always has been—but the use of education as a political football is certainly a barrier to recruitment, especially when the sector is competing with industry.

I do not know whether you want to comment on that; I just wanted to say it out loud and put it on the record. I feel able to do so—I worked in education for 25 years, so I am not speaking as an outsider.

Màiri McAllan: Thank you—I agree with your assessment; the competition with industry is absolutely real, and we should think about how to draw on industry to support the workforce.

On the political point, I would reflect that many teachers whom I meet at the round-table events that I regularly hold tell me that it is demoralising to see the way in which their profession is often described in the media. We know that that is not unique to education—bad news sells, and we are experiencing quite a lot of that just now. Nevertheless, as you will know from your

experience, and as I know from the time that I have spent with stakeholders in this area, teachers are passionate and positive. They are certainly under pressure and are looking to their Government and their local authority to support them with that, but they are deeply passionate about doing the best for young people.

We have a responsibility to create the right conditions. You mentioned pay; that is something the Scottish Government has been keen to support. Not only is it right to recognise the professionalism of our teaching workforce, but it helps to bring people into the profession. RCCT is one example of that, and there are others. Teaching is a wonderful profession—the people who commit themselves to it are doing an excellent thing, and I want to see them supported.

Angela Ross (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Reform): Good morning. I want to look at non-contact time, or RCCT. The Association of Directors of Education in Scotland commented in evidence that there was not a causal link between the problem that was identified in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's 2015 report on workload pressure and bureaucracy and the proposed solution of 90 minutes of non-contact time.

I accept the logic in giving teachers time back—having been a teacher, I agree with that. However, does the Government accept that there might not be a causal link, and that the parameters of what we are trying to achieve may grow as we adapt and gather numbers and metrics on the problem that we are actually trying to solve?

Màiri McAllan: Thank you for the question—I will take both parts separately, starting with the last part on metrics and the potential for things to grow. I have been clear that we need to monitor the implementation of RCCT, and assure ourselves that it is having a positive impact on learning and teaching. We will discuss that through the SNCT, which stands for—

Orlando Mason (Scottish Government): The Scottish Negotiating Committee for Teachers.

Màiri McAllan: That is it. That is where we sit together and work these things through between Government, local government and the unions. That will be done; it will help us to monitor the impact, and remits ought not to grow.

You mentioned the OECD study. We also have a study, which was carried out by the University of the West of Scotland, Birmingham City University and Cardiff Metropolitan University, which shows that

"The three activities that consume … the largest time commitment outside contracted hours are planning and preparing lessons, preparing resources, and marking and feedback for pupils."

It stands to reason, as I discussed with Mr Dunlop, that the more opportunity a teacher has—as you will know—to have a quiet moment to prepare feedback, or consider a young person's work, the far better prepared they will be to push that young person to reach their potential, which I talked about in my opening remarks. In my view, a better-supported teaching profession is good for teachers themselves, and it is good for young people.

Angela Ross: It has been made clear in evidence that it is up to teachers how they use the 90 minutes of protected professional time. All that sounds fair and good if teachers have the autonomy to use it for preparation, planning, assessment and the other issues that we have talked about. However, is there any risk of inconsistency here? Should that time be ring fenced to ensure that it is not taken up with, say, meetings that the council has asked for or with undertaking collegiate tasks?

Màiri McAllan: I will bring in Orlando Mason to respond, because he and I were discussing the differences between collegiate and professional time the other day.

Orlando Mason: Teachers' non-class contact time is divided between collegiate time, which is directed and largely applies to school activities, and what used to be called prep and correction but will now be called professional time, which is self-directed time. The activities that you have described, such as improving cross-school working, might fall under collegiate time rather than professional time. I think that you have had evidence from other witnesses on what that will cover in future, but a range of professional activities falls within that.

Of course, the two things support each other. Professional time is not directed, but if we are talking about work on preparing resources or reflecting on feedback to learners or on progression, we might expect that kind of thing to bleed into discussions that a school might have during collegiate time, too.

Angela Ross: Has any assessment been made of safeguarding issues that might arise from handovers? I have not seen a lot of evidence about, or reporting on, the handover between a teacher and, say, a supply teacher who might be facilitating cover. Given that 43 per cent of pupils now require ASN support, is there any risk at all arising from handovers? Does a handover occur during the 90 minutes, or does it happen outwith that time?

Màiri McAllan: On your last question, that will very much be decided on a school-to-school and

local authority-to-local authority basis in the same way that schools currently manage non-contact time. Many schools might be able simply to boost the approach that they already take to managing non-contact time.

I do not think that we should assume that RCCT will necessarily mean having significantly more teachers in front of a class. After all, it is just a short period of time that we are talking about and, as I have said, it could simply be an extension of how non-contact time is already dealt with, or it could mean more specialised opportunities.

The issue of the handover, and ensuring that it works well for children, particularly those with additional requirements, is very much the subject of a live discussion. It is very dependent on and bound up with the work that we are doing just now with COSLA on producing plans that reflect local circumstances, and we can, through the SNCT, ensure that the proper procedures are in place.

Angela Ross: I have a question on implementation and delivery that applies to both the Promise and RCCT. Coming from a private sector background, I am very keen on agile project plans, risk registers and so on. Is that sort of accountability and oversight of delivery occurring? If so, at what level does that occur? Is it at local level, or is it something more overarching? Are any risks clearly documented and updated on an agile basis?

Màiri McAllan: There are a couple of points to highlight in that respect. I might ask one of my colleagues to say a word about corporate parenting and the teaching workforce, but I would just say that, because I have oversight of both of those areas in my portfolio, I can take a view across the board on what we are asking of services and how that can be timetabled to best effect to optimise chances of success. For example, I am very mindful of RCCT being introduced alongside the curriculum improvement cycle, because that will mean significant change over the coming period. That said, I think that RCCT can support the implementation of the new curriculum, because it will give teachers more time to think about it.

Equally, though, our very fulsome approach to additional support needs in our schools, which captures our care-experienced young people, too, means that we have a very good understanding of the needs of the young people in our classes, which our teachers, whether supply, permanent or otherwise, have a strong grasp of and an expectation of responding to.

Gavin, is there anything that you want to say about education and the Promise?

Gavin Henderson (Scottish Government): In broad terms, the committee may be aware of the corporate parenting duties that apply to local authorities. Teachers are included in that, along with a range of professionals who are expected to work together as a team around a child, under our getting it right for every child policy.

On the core question of accountability, the children's services planning partnership in each local authority area is responsible for reporting annually on delivery against a range of measures and outcomes. Each children's services planning partnership also publishes a three-year plan setting out how it will approach that over the period.

Angela Ross: On the accountability point, it came up several times during evidence sessions that, although we are six years into the Promise, accountability and oversight are still unclear, which is a real risk to delivery. We have three and a bit years left. Will the Scottish Government step in where that gap appears to have emerged? I was also considering social work as a front-line-led approach. What are your thoughts on that, minister?

The Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise (Siobhian Brown): Convener, I do not know whether you want us to move on to the Promise now or to stay on the education side of things. I have quite a few points that I could speak to on our implementation strategy and on establishing a delivery coalition, which might touch on Ms Ross's point.

The Convener: That is fine. We can do both as part of the overall pre-budget scrutiny.

Siobhian Brown: Okay. One point in relation to the Promise is that we have been listening. Obviously, a lot of work has been happening over the past five years. We recognise and welcome the oversight board's report last week. There is work to be done.

A high-level implementation strategy will be published setting out how we will implement the Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Act 2026—the bill was passed at stage 3 in March, and was dealt with by my predecessor. That should be done by the beginning of next year.

Alongside that, a delivery coalition will be established, which I will be part of and which the cabinet secretary will chair. We are still making preparations for that and will see how it develops. However, we want to focus on implementation through to 2030. We want to establish a timetable and identify who is responsible for what. A risk register will also be included as part of that work. I hope that that answers the question.

Angela Ross: That is good to hear. Thank you.

The Convener: We will go to questions from Katherine Sangster.

Katherine Sangster (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab): Good morning. I will return to the topic of reduced class contact time. Thank you for your remarks so far, cabinet secretary. You have been very clear that you consider that the measures will have a positive impact on young people in education.

I want to return briefly to the issue of metrics. If we return to these issues in a year's time, or beyond that, what would success look like? Do you have any thoughts about what the metrics could be?

Màiri McAllan: I place a great deal of importance in our doing exactly what Katherine Sangster has set out when we look back. That is why I have been stressing today that monitoring will have to go alongside this work. As I said to Ms Ross, exactly how that monitoring will work will be developed with the SNCT.

However, we already use a number of metrics to indicate success in our education system, including final attainment. I also think that progress is important, as Ms Moodie and I discussed before. The metrics will differ between the primary and secondary sectors. At secondary level, we can also consider positive destinations and other aspects.

Whoever is education secretary at any given time has a very keen sense, informed by COSLA, ADES and the teaching unions—I also get this from the headteacher panel—regarding what is hindering and what is supporting success in schools. I will ensure that monitoring arrangements are developed for RCCT that help us to maintain that keen sense of things.

Katherine Sangster: Do you think that some local authorities are ready for this while others are not? How does public service reform intersect with getting them ready for it?

09:45

Màiri McAllan: It is a really good point. I will resist naming authorities, because it is probably not fair to do so, but the process is more straightforward for some authorities than for others. There are differences between primary and secondary. In addition, schools might experience absences, perhaps by dint of their location. The profile of the young people and the demographics will also have an influence. Some authorities are at different stages in getting that clear picture. The Government is supporting local authorities to build the local picture, but we need that work to continue at pace, particularly in view of that primary deadline of August 2027. We must have that data in full, and soon, in order to do what is necessary for planning.

Katherine Sangster: You said that the COSLA figure was too expensive. We have also been told that an additional 3,700 teachers would be needed. Are you closer to working out how many teachers you will need?

Màiri McAllan: We are working on that, but it is entirely dependent on our getting a view of local circumstances. That work is under way, and it is what we are funding local authorities to do.

Orlando wants to come in on the teaching point.

Orlando Mason: Several exercises are under way. One is a review with local authorities on the number of vacancies that they have—especially in secondary, which has the August 2029 implementation date—so that we can get a firm evidence base to understand where and in what subjects we might have shortages.

The £7.5 million in funding that the cabinet secretary spoke about earlier is to support planning at local authority level. One of the conditions for that funding is that local authorities produce an implementation plan that looks ahead to the primary implementation date of August next year. We are expecting those plans in the autumn, and that should give us much more detail on what is required.

On the modelling itself, as the cabinet secretary mentioned earlier, the COSLA figure was developed more than a year ago now and was based largely on instantaneous implementation across all sectors, which will not be the case. That is why we are looking at phasing in primaries and special schools, then in secondary. In addition, the COSLA figure did not take account of demographic changes that might lead to the pupil roll changing.

On the modelling itself, as the cabinet secretary mentioned earlier, the COSLA figure was developed more than a year ago and was based largely on instantaneous implementation across all sectors, which will not be the case. That is why we are looking at phasing implementation, beginning with primary and special schools and then moving on to secondary schools. In addition, the COSLA figure did not take account of demographics and the pupil roll might change.

The work that is under way with COSLA is about considering how we might come to an agreed, shared position with local government on what will be required—with the caveat that national modelling can only go so far, because one of the success criteria is that schools and local authorities examine their own data.

It is about looking not only at some basic factors, such as where we baseline funding, how many teachers we have, demographic forecasts, and how we will calculate pay and non-pay costs, but at the detail, which will need to be supplemented by information on what is happening in local authorities. That includes the extent to which small schools might be affected differently from larger schools; how the process might affect centrally employed teachers compared with teachers who are employed in schools; how leadership time might be affected; and the impact on teacher supply. We are trying to get into a lot of detail in order to reach a shared position about what those costs and challenges might be.

Katherine Sangster: Thank you. Sorry, but I have a final question on reduced class contact time. The implementation date of August 2027 is not far away at all—I am sure that you know that. How much will be implemented by August 2027? You mentioned that you are taking a phased approach.

Màiri McAllan: Would you like to answer, Orlando?

Orlando Mason: Thank you, cabinet secretary. That will be set out in the SNCT handbook, which means that it will form part of teachers' terms and conditions. It will be incumbent on employers to ensure that teachers have access to that non-class contact time.

Katherine Sangster: There is an expectation that it will be fully implemented by August 2027.

Orlando Mason: Yes—across primary and special schools.

Katherine Sangster: Brilliant, thank you.

I move to the Promise. In your opening remarks, you mentioned the right support at the right time for families in crisis and children who need a bit more support. I absolutely agree. We heard evidence about the importance to that of whole family support. I want to ask about the commitment in the 2021 programme for government that 5 per cent of health and social care spending would go towards whole family support by 2030. Can you give an update on progress on that and say whether there are any barriers to achieving that?

Màiri McAllan: I am happy to start, and then colleagues can come in.

Officials can keep me right, but I think that the aim of 5 per cent is absolutely still there. However, attributing 5 per cent of spending across such a large area has proved difficult. We are still committed to significant proportions of whole family support being funded, but our approach now is slightly different, because, instead of saying that it is 5 per cent of a certain pot, we are much more in a place now of integrating funding streams. We will probably come on to talk about that, but we can see that excellent work has been funded by the whole family wellbeing fund. However, we recognise that, instead of targets such as percentages, we need to integrate funding, make it available earlier and ensure that it is relational and supports families pre-crisis.

It would be fair to say that our planning and strategy in that regard has moved on quite a bit recently. I hope that we now have a commitment to the new whole family support programme, which has done exactly that: it has brought funding streams together and is working to have them support families earlier. It is an example of the track that we see as necessary for funding.

Katherine Sangster: We received evidence from Social Work Scotland and The Promise Scotland exactly to that effect—that one of the barriers to spending the funds was that there were multiple funding streams and it was difficult to track effectiveness in local authorities. One suggestion was a cash-first approach, which had been successful during Covid. Would you consider doing more of that?

Màiri McAllan: For the most part, if not completely, the whole family wellbeing fund goes to the children's services planning partnerships at local authority level, which have discretion on how best to use it. Some of that goes directly to families, when that is considered the right thing, and some of that is a cash-first approach. Ultimately, it is for local partners, who will know the family, to make the best judgment about that.

Katherine Sangster: I come to my final question on the Promise. In the summer, chief social worker officers said that there was a crisis in support for looked-after children and that they were having to take children home themselves. We are more than halfway to delivering the Promise. What further resource needs to be put in to deliver the Promise by 2030?

Màiri McAllan: That is something that we could probably each say a word on. The minister has spoken to our intention to produce an implementation plan. We are taking a lot of influence from what we are being directed to do, for example by the Oversight Board, to achieve clarity and precision and, as the minister said, to track responsibilities. We also need to set out the programme for implementing the Children, Care, Care Experience and Service Planning (Scotland) Act 2026. It is a substantial act, with significant change to be made in aftercare, continuing care, housing and the children's hearings system. We will need to programme all of that work, too.

Supporting the social work workforce is another major priority. The National Social Work Agency,

which we set up, is now up and running. It is already proving to be a fantastic resource, which is helping us to understand really well what the social work workforce needs. In our programme for government, you will have seen across children's services, justice and others that we have committed to support the social work workforce in the times ahead.

We also realise that the sufficiency of care placements is a big priority. I know that Ms Brown has been doing a lot of visits with kinship carers and foster carers to get a sense of what they need. She also held a round-table meeting, and some recommendations were taken forward from that.

Siobhian Brown: We made that announcement in June. I had an urgent meeting with kinship and foster carers and then convened a round table in August with all stakeholders regarding the urgency of childcare placements. It is a shared challenge for all stakeholders, and one of the things that we are looking at is what we can do in the short to medium term. I will indicate just a few of the actions that we are actively considering: the three-child placement limit; foster care support and incentives; streamlined assessments; the development of the whole family integrated programme; service registration; and options to strengthen the recruitment and retention of foster carers, including potential incentives and support measures.

There is a capacity issue at the moment, and we are working actively with local authorities, COSLA and all stakeholders to consider how we can address that.

Katherine Sangster: I want to come back on one thing. Are kinship carers getting enough support? Can anything be done to strengthen support?

Siobhian Brown: Yes. I conducted several visits in the summer and have had some really emotional meetings with kinship carers. I value all the work that kinship and foster carers do.

One point that has come across to me is that all local authorities do things very differently, and there is a feeling that there is a lack of support. One thing that we are looking to do at pace is consider how we can put support in place for when someone becomes a kinship carer, so that they get guidance on the legalities and what they are entitled to and are signposted to support. We are actively working to put that in place between the beginning and the middle of next year.

Katherine Sangster: Thank you.

Màiri McAllan: The only thing that I will add to that point is that we recognise that, as we shift the balance of care to families, kinship has always been important and is ever more important in all the areas that Ms Brown spoke about. We introduced the Scottish recommended allowance, which will rise with inflation, as ensured by the Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Act 2026. That is another piece of practical support.

Duncan Dunlop: I will go back a bit in order to ask a question on education. Has there been any dialogue with pupil support assistants about what they see as a priority for improving education?

Màiri McAllan: Yes, absolutely. I have undertaken a suite of engagement with individuals directly. I have visited schools, spoken to all the people who make up the classroom and had discussions with all the unions. I hold round tables with representatives of the sector, too, so I am always absorbing as much as I can from—

Duncan Dunlop: I asked only because we are good at listening to voices and sometimes assume that we have heard the pupil's voice in the story, but pupil support assistants are concerned about getting the representation that they need as a profession so that they can further professionalise, because they are low paid in relative terms, have part-time contracts and often only work in the school term, yet they play crucial roles in developing individuals. We must ensure that we hear their voices, because we sometimes hear very strong points from teaching unions, which I do not criticise, but we need to ensure that oxygen is sometimes given to the pupil support assistant sector too. I was just querying whether that engagement had happened.

Màiri McAllan: Yes, it is a very fair point. When you have such large organisations, there is a tendency to listen only to the teachers, but I assure the committee that my team and I work hard to ensure that everyone is heard and understood.

Duncan Dunlop: Okay, thank you.

Moving on to the Promise, you said in your opening remarks, and I was glad to hear it, that the purpose of the endeavour that we are pursuing with our care system is to create loving, safe and respected relationships for these children. However, I was concerned about the Oversight Board report and about what we heard at last Tuesday evening's event with care assistants, which was that a lot of the language seems to be increasingly focused on building trusted relationships, scaffolding and support but not the key issue of forming a lifelong loving relationship.

In fact, we heard that in some of the earlier evidence sessions, which involved getting people to recognise immediately that delivering that for children is the main route for change. Is there a watering down of the ambition to ensure that all

children in care receive lifelong loving relationships?

10:00

Màiri McAllan: The answer is no, there is no watering down. It was very deliberate that, in my opening remarks, I spoke about children growing up loved, safe and respected.

Duncan Dunlop: When the Government or agencies deliver care—this can also happen with whole family support—a range of adults and professionals are introduced into a young person's life. That includes mentors, befrienders, whole family support workers, pastoral support, youth workers, social workers, family drug workers, respite carers and mental health workers, yet none of them has the expectation that they will go on to form a lifelong loving relationship with the child. I have seen it happen often that somebody—whether it was a pupil support assistant or whoever else—had a bond and a connection with a child but, in the system, we overlooked the potential for that relationship, because they did not go through the foster care or kinship care assessment. What efforts is the Government making to ensure that every relationship that a child has is supported to give it the best chance of being that one crucial lifelong loving relationship?

Màiri McAllan: There are a number of dynamics involved in your question. I will have a go at answering it, but please come back to any aspects that I do not address. You talked about the importance of a lifelong stable loving relationship, and that is why, over the summer, the minister was so keen to spend her time on placements. We understand that, although we keep children at home where we can, where a placement is necessary, having it happen well, as early as possible and on a permanent basis is probably one of the best ways that we can pursue lifelong loving stability.

On the other services and individuals who you are right to mention—from youth work to police to general practitioners and teachers—we ensure that they all understand their responsibilities through, for example, corporate parenting work, ensuring that the getting it right for every child approach is embedded across everybody who works with children, and by trying to create the circumstances where they can fulfil that. For example, earlier, we talked about what happens in the classroom and our approach to additional support needs in Scotland being broad—I get challenged on that a lot—and capturing children with care experience. That means that the teacher in front of the class knows and understands their responsibilities towards the individual and supports them as they need it. However, we are talking about different degrees of relationship—someone who you might come into contact with on a transient basis versus the place that you call home for your life. We recognise the difference, and we want to support both.

Siobhian Brown: At the moment, the independent strategic adviser is going round all 32 local authorities to see what they are doing well in relation to the Promise and where some might not be doing so well. Through conversation, I understand that Moray Council has introduced an approach of ongoing connection, which is what I think you were talking about, Mr Dunlop. In other words, if there is a mentor or someone who a care-experienced person has a connection with, that connection will be ongoing. I think that we could learn from Moray Council when we are discussing the issue with all local authorities.

Duncan Dunlop: I am encouraged to hear that and happy to work with you on that, because it is one of the biggest barriers. We have overprofessionalised something that is about connection. We need to maximise the connections and create the system around that, but the system still seems to be very inflexible in how it deals with relationships and with regard to how it recognises where people have those relationships with children.

The report by the Oversight Board for the Promise noted that the Government has already produced two implementation plans but that neither have provided the clarity needed on delivery, responsibility, resources or impact. Why will the plan that you will deliver early next year be any different? I also note that the Accounts Commission asked for a plan at the beginning of this year, so we seem to be a year behind. What confidence can you give us that this plan will be different?

Màiri McAllan: First, we have come into post with a clear and heavy duty, knowing that, all being well, we will still be in post come 2030, so we know that we will be the ministers who will be explaining to Parliament and Scotland what happens in 2030. As I said in my opening remarks, we care deeply about this. Together with our teams, we are clear that a lot of preparatory work has been done.

We talk about the Promise in a singular way, just to be able to have a conversation about it, but it is everything, everywhere, in the life of a child who needs support. In some ways, the preparatory work that has had to go on until now has been very full, and there have been lots of plans and lots of strategies because there are so many aspects that need to change, and it is a whole-system change, but we now absolutely have to pivot to delivery.

That does not mean that we have not been delivering to date. There are lots of things that we are proud of having done, such as stopping young

people going to Polmont, the bursary support that we have talked about, the establishment of the bairns' hooses, the establishment of the National Social Work Agency, changes across the board and many more. However, we are clear that we want to produce the plan now, we want it to capture the substantial piece of legislation that has been passed, and we want it to be concise and clear as to what will happen and, as Siobhian Brown said, be monitored.

Siobhian Brown: On the point that I raised with Angela Ross, the cab sec and I, coming into our roles, feel the responsibility that we will have up to 2030. My feeling is, not another implementation strategy, because everybody gets sick of all those strategies. We are determined to be involved through chairing the delivery coalition. As I said, it is a work in progress at the moment, and we are hoping to meet by the end of the year, to have oversight of who is responsible for what and what timescales will be implemented. Over the next four years, we will be working very closely so that we have oversight on what is happening on top of the implementation strategy.

Duncan Dunlop: So I assume that by early next year we mean that, in January, we will have what we recognise as a plan of what will happen and by when, who is responsible and what change there will be.

Siobhian Brown: The implementation strategy will definitely be in place by February next year—hopefully, earlier.

Duncan Dunlop: Okay, good.

Lastly on this issue, I have talked to you a few times about the difficult issue of the premature death rate of care-experienced people. The chair of the Oversight Board for the Promise also noted in an open letter the value of our knowing that, and you wrote a letter to him and to our party on that after a question to the First Minister last week. From your letter, I understand that the people we track are children in care and those in receipt of aftercare services. However, a huge number are not in receipt of aftercare services when, unfortunately, they die prematurely. I now know that we have the technical mechanisms by which we could do it, so will you commit to tracking and publishing the premature death rate of all care-experienced people as soon as practically possible, and is it in your budget plan?

Siobhian Brown: It is important to get on the record what the Scottish Government is currently doing. We recognise the importance of continuing to improve our understanding of the outcomes of people with care experience and of ensuring that the evidence that is available to us supports learning and action. The Scottish Government collects data on the number of statutory notifications received for those who are looked after at the time of their death or are in receipt of continuing care or aftercare at the time of death. Ministers are made aware of all those tragic incidents. That is why we have taken steps to strengthen reporting, through the Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Act 2026, which introduces a statutory reporting requirement that requires the Scottish ministers to lay before the Scottish Parliament and publish an annual report detailing the number of deaths of children and young people who were looked after by the local authority or were in receipt of continuing care at the time of their death. The first report will be published in May next year.

I am not in a position today to commit specifically to tracking the deaths of all care-experienced people, but I am happy to have the on-going conversation with Duncan Dunlop.

Duncan Dunlop: In principle, are you interested in pursuing and finding out that information?

Siobhian Brown: We can definitely look into it.

Màiri McAllan: Since the three of us first had the conversation in the summer at which you mentioned the issue, we have been thinking a lot about it, and I have been asking people about it as well. There are, undoubtedly, those who agree that it would be the right thing to do. However, there are some, as I think I mentioned to you at the time, who would be uneasy or reticent about carrying that label, if I can put it that way, for their whole lives. Some people are very proud—some consider it part of who they are and their community, but others do not want to go through their whole life knowing that, when they pass away, that will be noted. It is a delicate balance. As Ms Brown said, we are keen to keep working through it, but I do not think that there is a definitive answer just now.

Duncan Dunlop: But the chair of your Oversight Board, who is care experienced, has, along with the board, supported this proposal. I get that, with such a large population, there will always be a diversity of opinion on this issue. It makes me really uncomfortable, too—I know many who have passed away early—but this is a public health priority. Indeed, it is not just that; care-experienced people are overrepresented in a number of really awful, negative social wellbeing indicators If we do not know this information, we lack the driver and the incentive to ensure that we are scrutinising how we can do better in our care system, way beyond the time that we are all in these posts, and to ensure that we keep knowing how we, as a nation, are doing. We have a responsibility here, however difficult it might be, and it will help us know how well we are doing and what the outcome

is of this huge expenditure and intervention in children's lives.

Siobhian Brown: I totally appreciate where Mr Dunlop is coming from. As the cabinet secretary has said, this is a very sensitive issue, and I appreciate that the Oversight Board wants to see this work put in place. I think that it is something that we can continue to discuss. However, if we were going to move forward with it, we would have to consult those in the general public with care experience to see whether they would like it to happen, and that could take time. It is not something that can be done quickly, but I am happy to keep the conversations going.

Duncan Dunlop: I would just point out that you are already tracking those who are in care and receive aftercare services, and I am not sure that I see any difference between that and what I am asking for. This sort of thing happens in a huge number of other areas that are not palatable—I am thinking of street homelessness, for example, or the prison population—but we need to get real about this. If we do, we might improve people's lives in a tangible way and engage more of the public on this matter.

The tragedy behind the Social Work Scotland joint statement in the summer is that there are not enough people to care for, and have loving relationships with, these children. People are not coming forward, and we need to understand why that is and engage the public in that conversation.

The Convener: I call Patricia Gibson for a supplementary, to be followed by Laura Moodie.

Patricia Gibson: In your previous answer, cabinet secretary, you talked about the Promise and about looking after children as being everything, everywhere. Something that has come up in previous evidence sessions—and, indeed, has come up today—is that the landscape around the Promise is quite cluttered. Perhaps that is inevitable, given the number of agencies that have to be involved at various stages in a child's life, depending on what they need. What has come up a lot, though, is that a lot of organisations are involved in the Promise, and they all collect their own data. However, they do not necessarily share that data, perhaps for perfectly legitimate reasons.

I wonder whether you and the minister will consider this, but a question that I have been asking, and wondering about, is whether we could collate that data. Bearing in mind the data protection issues, and the fact that only a very limited number of people would have access to it, I wonder whether the data around a child—what they need, what they have experienced and what their challenges are—could be collated and then follow them until an appropriate time. One issue that was highlighted was that, if a child moves between local authorities or from one part of Scotland to another, their data does not necessarily follow, and they have to explain themselves over and over again to access the services that they need. Has any work been done, or consideration been given, to collating the critical data around these children to ensure that, as they advance, they get the support that they need, regardless of where they go?

Màiri McAllan: Yes, absolutely. You have directed the question at me—and understandably so, because I made the point—but I might ask the team to say a little bit about the data that we already have and how we are trying to develop that. There have been calls for a longitudinal study through a young person's life, as you have described it, and we are considering that.

Coming back to the everything, everywhere point, I think that we have to take ownership of a balance in that respect—that is, between focusing our energy and our efforts on turning the tank around on how all of this is done in society just now or carrying out longer-term pieces of work like the longitudinal data collection and study. Both are important approaches, but we do have to make decisions about what we want to prioritise now with regard to change.

I just want to make a point about data sharing. Whether it is the First Minister's ambition to eradicate child poverty, my ambition to improve school attainment or our ambition to keep the Promise, the fact is that data sharing across Scotland is a problem. It is a problem between organisations—and not for want of their trying, in many circumstances. However, there is a nervousness about it, or a lack of clarity about how to navigate the general data protection regulation and other things, and we are working really hard to try to break that down. In that respect, I would highlight the excellent example of the new agreements that have been created between Glasgow City Council and the Department for Work and Pensions. You would think it just common sense to share that data to inform what the council is doing, but we have had to overcome what is quite a substantial issue in that respect, and it exists across the board.

We are trying to break down that sort of thing, and public service reform presents us with a really good opportunity to do so, because it allows us to look, in this moment, at the way in which services are delivered—in this case, around children who require support and their families—and ask how we would optimise that, if we were starting again, and who we would require to co-locate or share information or to take decisions together. We are working on all of that just now.

10:15

Siobhian Brown: We recognise that we need stronger evidence on children's experiences and their outcomes over time, instead of relying solely on snapshots of individual services. Strengthening children's services planning will improve the consistency of information across the whole of Scotland, and our wider work on measuring progress towards the Promise needs to bring together data and evidence of children's experiences, relationships and outcomes to provide a richer picture of whether the change is making a difference.

I might bring in Gordon Paterson or Gavin Henderson here, but I know that a few studies are being carried out, and there is also the Promise story of progress. Gordon, would you like to touch on that work?

Gordon Paterson (Scottish Government): Good morning, everybody. A large amount of work is under way on this matter, but you are absolutely right to highlight the challenge of actually connecting and linking the data. Indeed, the Oversight Board has identified that issue, too.

The Promise story of progress gives us the structure to look at, and bring together, the statistics, what is happening organisationally across Scotland and the experiential data. If we can collect and connect those three things in a way that allows us to draw a shared narrative of what is happening and what is being felt, that would be a big step forward, and that work is actively being taken forward, headed by the chief social policy officer for Scotland. A lot of work is being done to develop and progress that.

The key bit that you mentioned is the organisational data—that is, who is doing what, where, and how we understand that engagement across Scotland. Last year, The Promise Scotland produced the report "Keeping the promise: A local perspective", which looked at work that was being carried out across all 32 local authorities and provided a huge amount of information on the organisational work that is under way. Understanding that, and how it connects with the children and young people who are being supported, is part of the work that the independent strategic adviser is undertaking at the moment, and she is engaging with all 32 local authorities as well as with partnerships. We are bringing that organisational work together to show that picture as part of the Promise story of progress.

This is also about implementing the 2026 act and doing the work that needs to be done in that respect. Some of that is about understanding unmet need—in other words, how do we know the true problem of who we are trying to target support at, and how are we doing that? In order to do that, we need organisations to come together and share their experiences and the work that they have done. Indeed, organisations have been actively involved in that. For instance, Who Cares? Scotland has provided a lot of information on the advocacy engagement that it does, and that can help to build a picture of what models across Scotland might look like. Children First, too, has been positively engaged on the family group decision-making model and how we progress it, and we need to continue to work with partners to build that understanding.

Finally, we spoke previously about governance and the programme that sits around the Promise. That is the high-level programme; below that are individual pieces of work that support all the bits of change that are happening. The redesign of the children's hearings system, for example, has a programme of change around about it, and that has been informed by what has been heard in that space. That sort of thing is making change at an individual programme change level to complement what is happening at the higher national level.

Patricia Gibson: Thank you.

Laura Moodie: Two really clear themes have emerged from our scrutiny sessions in relation to both the Promise and the reduction in class contact time: first, the gap between policy ambition and workforce capacity; and secondly, the risk of making significant spending without having really clear evidence of outcomes, metrics and delivery. I just want to pick up the workforce planning issue and look at some areas that we have not touched on yet.

First, on the Promise, how can ministers and the cabinet secretary reconcile the talk of significant public service workforce reductions with the repeated evidence that we have had that workforce shortages are already undermining the implementation of the Promise?

Màiri McAllan: I will come in first on that point. In relation to public sector reform, are your comments about looking forward or looking back?

Laura Moodie: Workforce capacity is a present issue, but there is a lot of rhetoric about reducing the public service head count. In that context, it is very clear that workforce capacity is an issue. How do we reconcile those two things?

Màiri McAllan: I will say a little bit about the state of play just now and then a bit about future planning. We are very mindful of the issue. To take one example, the National Social Work Agency has made it clear to ministers the pressures that the social work workforce is under, because the agency advises us daily about it. Our National Social Work Agency has been working with the workforce and employers to come up with a series

of things that we could do to bolster that workforce. Indeed, regardless of PSR and of the fact that we are not awash with public money, we understand the centrality of the social work workforce to that objective and we want to support it.

As I said earlier, you will see in the programme for government that it is clear that children's services, and social work as well as justice and others will have our support. Of course, all that will come through in the budget. Our work with the agency is one example where even though challenges exist across the public sector, we are clear where support needs to be given.

I want to give an absolute assurance that the objective of public service reform is not cuts or efficiencies; it is better delivery for people in Scotland. I said to the folks on the Oversight Board that I see the commitment to the Promise as a very early articulation of how and why PSR is needed. Yes, there will be workforce rearrangements, but we will deal with them carefully to ensure that front-line individuals, whose relationships with the people they work with are absolutely critical to positive outcomes, are bolstered and not undermined.

All that is wrapped up in that opportunity to say, "There are better ways of doing this", and efficiencies in our time and approaches can be made.

Siobhian Brown: I will come in briefly on that, convener. The sustainable workforce element will be fundamental to our delivering the Promise. I know that a lot of work is ongoing with the National Social Work Agency, which was established earlier this year. We see the Promise as public service reform in action because it has the aim of improving support for children and families through joined-up services, with a strong focus on prevention. As the cabinet secretary said, PSR is not about cuts or reducing the workforce; it is really about effectively reducing duplication and bureaucracy, and about how we streamline things to get better services.

Laura Moodie: Thank you. I want to talk a bit about ASN as well. There has been some discussion about moving the workforce around, which the General Teaching Council for Scotland has cautioned against. In particular, currently—

Màiri McAllan: Are we back on RCCT?

Laura Moodie: Yes, sorry.

Màiri McAllan: No, it is fine. I am just trying to get my head around the questions. Thank you.

Laura Moodie: I am hopping about—sorry. I have gone more thematic. Additional support needs specialists are older on average and already relatively scarce. What assessment has been made about retirement risks and the future ASN workforce? Is there a workforce projection for ASN workers in particular that is looking at demand vacancies, training places, retirement rates and the like?

Màiri McAllan: I have been reflecting that, out of eight or nine portfolio questions this week, six or seven were about ASN, either about a parent's needs that had been reported to their MSP, or exactly the point that you have put to me about the extent to which the workforce feels supported and the extent to which we need to grow that support, so, I am very conscious of the issue.

I want to do couple of things in that space to grow the workforce. You mentioned one of the things that is uppermost in my mind, because it feels a little easier than some of the others, and that is supporting additional registration. I hope that, by working with the General Teaching Council for Scotland, as well as with local authorities and schools, we can make it easier for people with education qualifications who want to help address the national need for ASN working to get their registration more quickly.

There are other things that we need to do more of that relate to what Mr Dunlop said about supporting the ASN workforce as a stand-alone group and acknowledging and understanding that they have distinct needs. I spoke about the overarching workforce planning that we are trying to do and how reliant that is on local authorities letting us know where their vacancies are. I think—I am checking with Orlando Mason—that we set a deadline in October for local authorities to get that information back to us, but only a third of them have sent it to us so far. I know that they are really busy—I get that—but we need the data in order to plan properly.

Uppermost in my mind is how I can support more people to get ASN registration and into provision.

Laura Moodie: Thank you. I will stay on the topic of class contact time. We talked about recruitment, but we have not really discussed retention. The General Teaching Council emphasised in its work that we are quite often losing teachers at the early career stage. Is the Government keeping an eye on that? Do we know how many teachers go into teaching but are no longer in teaching five years on? Do you have a target for increasing retention in the profession?

Màiri McAllan: I do not have a numerical target just now, but I have a target in principle, which is for teaching to be a sustainable profession that people, should they choose it, can enjoy throughout their careers. RCCT and teacher pay are important parts of that, as is the national staged intervention model as an approach to try to

simplify and clarify what is required of a teacher in order to move a young person through the support that they need. We are taking all those things together to try to make teaching an attractive profession that people can sustain.

We have talked a lot in this meeting about how RCCT is a significant investment. It will not cost as much as COSLA has projected, but it is significant. That is because the Government believes in supporting a well-functioning teaching profession in which people can be recruited where we need them and retained throughout their careers. That investment is a big vote of confidence by the Government in the profession.

Laura Moodie: Thank you.

The Convener: Before we move to questions from George Adam, I have a question for the cabinet secretary. Is the Scottish Government still planning to publish a plan on workforce and recruitment planning to help support delivery of the Promise?

Siobhian Brown: I can answer that question. The National Social Work Agency is working with COSLA and Social Work Scotland, I think through the Scottish social work partnership, to develop a strategic plan on the workforce, which is due in spring 2027.

The Convener: Thank you.

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): Good morning. When I ask anyone about public service reform, I always say that the public sector reform process that is happening out there and that we are going through will probably have an impact on everything that we are delivering. [*Interruption*.] Should I shout, convener, so that the microphone can pick me up? [*Laughter*.]

My question follows on from Laura Moodie's question. Additional support needs cover a broad grouping of young people, but we are living in a world in which the percentage of young people in schools who have ASNs is hitting 48 per cent. I know that the sector will probably melt down when I ask this question but, when we consider how we deliver and what the outcomes will be, is there any talk—it is maybe not being discussed—about making additional support needs part of teacher training, as opposed to having a separate additional support needs teacher?

10:30

Màiri McAllan: Every teacher is required to have had training in ASN in order to teach. That is done as standard. There will always be the case for support in the classroom to complement that, and to attend to a varied suite of needs. The classroom teacher can manage some of those themselves; others will frequently continue to require that additional support teacher. However, the point about PSR and the opportunity to do things differently is instructive, because, in my constituency surgeries, very frequently—well, maybe not very frequently, but from time to time—I have had teachers sitting in front of me in their different capacities, such as additional support for learning, or teaching in primary or secondary school, telling me that they struggle to grapple with the 32 different approaches to employment that currently operate in Scotland. It is just not efficient and it does not allow prospective teachers or additional support workers to move between areas, fill vacancies and respond to the need as it is.

Discussions are ongoing with COSLA, but, for example, if we were to move to that regional model of local authorities, with a regional approach to education authorities, I can see that that would have benefits for the teaching workforce, whether someone was a teacher or working in additional support, because they would have much greater clarity over a larger area of what is needed, and where, and we would be able to direct people to that much more easily. That is just one way in which I think it could be better.

George Adam: I understand that teachers get additional support needs training as well but, given that some 48 per cent of children are in the additional support needs bracket, that should surely be a major part of being a teacher in the 21st century. Surely that is one of the things that we should be looking at.

Màiri McAllan: Yes, absolutely. I mentioned in response to an earlier question that £28 million—or is it plus one, so £29 million—?

Orlando Mason: It is £28 million plus £1 million.

Màiri McAllan: This year's budget had an additional £28 million for local authorities for ASN. The £1 million that the Government held back is being used by Education Scotland to develop training that is relevant for the current broad spectrum of ASN that is presented in the classroom, which can then be provided to teachers. That is proving exceptionally popular. The Government now has to say, well, okay, how do we roll that out even more?

I will also mention the centre for teaching excellence, which I visited last week at the University of Glasgow and which is funded by the Government. Its representatives explained to me how, in the hub network that I described earlier, they can respond to needs for the additional continuing professional development that teachers want, in the areas in which they want it, and how additional support needs are one of the top areas on which they are developing content. There are

lots of ways in which we are bolstering support for a teacher to deal with ASN, but the additional individuals will always be needed, because they do great work.

George Adam: Still on public sector reform, I asked a question of COSLA—I do not even think that I asked; the representative just came out with it—about an anecdotal claim that, abroad, probationers and other placements were dealt with differently. We were talking about how, in rural schools, sometimes, it is difficult to recruit staff. Even in the central belt of Scotland, people come into my office saying that they cannot get a job in Paisley but there is one in Motherwell, which they think is the other end of the world. That problem came from a guy who used to work in Perth and lives in Paisley, by the way—not that I am bitter about it.

I feel that I have to ask the question, because COSLA went away and looked at it and found that the guy was talking a lot of nonsense. Basically, it found that we have a very good teacher offer in Scotland, because an eligible graduate gets paid in a supported post right away, as opposed to the situation in other countries, in which it is left to the market, effectively, to decide. There is a balance to be had, but the opportunity is there for certain schools to be left out because their posts are hard to fill. Why are we still having difficulty with such questions, when, on paper and given what I have from COSLA, part of the job is to pick five local authority areas or take the waiver and go anywhere. Why do we still seem to have those difficulties? Is that a public sector reform thing that we can sort through regional authorities, or is it just the 32 different councils doing different things? It just seems to me that, given the way that the system is—the way that COSLA has explained it—we should not be having those problems.

Màiri McAllan: I will have a look, or perhaps you could send me the proposition and the response that you received. There are inherent problems with having 32 different approaches to employing probationers, which we recognise at a national level. Rightly, it makes it difficult for me to be in front of a committee and to try to discharge my responsibilities for teaching employment when 32 local authorities employ teachers and decide themselves how to organise them. You are absolutely right to talk about when probationers can secure paid work but, equally, permanence is not where we want it to be for probationers who are finding their first job and have temporary contracts.

There is a tension between my desire to respect the fact that local authorities are employers and have to do it their way and my equal responsibility to probationers and teachers in Scotland; I would like it to be much better and PSR provides opportunities for that. We have not talked about it much, but I would like schools to be more empowered on employment. A couple of weeks ago, we published John Wilson's report, which we commissioned to look at reform in education. He remarked on the difficulties with employment and, equally, the need for schools to be empowered to take many of those decisions.

George Adam: Looking at the examples that COSLA has given us from Ireland, New Zealand, Ontario in Canada, the Netherlands, Japan and Switzerland, it seems that the majority of schools in those countries are a wee bit more in charge of the process themselves, and individual probationers have the power to decide where they are going. With the work on public sector reform, that could be a halfway ground, but it may leave us open to having gaps in certain areas where people will not apply to teach. There might be something to look at in those examples.

Màiri McAllan: Regardless of what else could go around it and how regional authorities would be required to co-operate with one another, I think that having a much larger area that follows one approach would be helpful for many people who are looking for permanent positions.

George Adam: As long as we are not talking about a Glasgow city region or Strathclyde, which is just another Glasgow city region—that is a pet view of mine.

Finally, the teacher workforce planning advisory group says that we have too many teachers and that there are shortages in some secondary subjects. Is that situation normal or is it just how it is currently? What does the Government plan to do to balance that out?

Màiri McAllan: It is a fair assessment of where we are at the moment. I have been candid with the committee that we are suffering underemployment with primary teachers, which is despite efforts to plan how many placements are required each year. The pupil roll in primary schools is declining, which will have an impact. As I reflected earlier, there are probably sufficient secondary teachers, but they are not spread across Scotland and there is a challenge with teachers in certain subjects. In response to Ms Gibson, I spoke about whether our bursary scheme could be targeted at both place and subject matter in order to try to address the situation.

The Convener: That brings our second agenda item to a close. I thank the cabinet secretary, the minister, and their officials for joining us.

I suspend the meeting for a comfort break for five minutes, before we move on to our third agenda item.

10:38

Meeting suspended.

10:36

On resuming—

Subordinate Legislation

Provision of Early Learning and Childcare (Specified Children) (Scotland) Amendment Order 2026 [Draft]

The Convener: Welcome back. The next item on our agenda is consideration of a statutory instrument that is subject to the affirmative procedure.

The committee will take evidence from Siobhian Brown, the Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise and her officials on the draft Provision of Early Learning and Childcare (Specified Children) (Scotland) Amendment Order 2026.

I welcome the minister and her officials, Joanna Mackenzie and Nico Juetten, and I invite the minister to speak to the draft order.

Siobhian Brown: Good morning. The Provision of Early Learning and Childcare (Specified Children) (Scotland) Order 2014 sets out eligibility criteria for funded early learning and childcare for two-year-olds whose parents are in receipt of certain qualifying benefits. As this is the first time that I am bringing a Scottish statutory instrument amending the 2014 order to the new committee, I thought that it would be helpful to set out some background and explain the timings of this year's amendment.

The main route for eligibility for funded ELC for two-year-olds is receipt of universal credit where the household has earned income that does not exceed a certain income level. The maximum income level is set out in the 2014 order at approximately the equivalent of a person working 16 hours a week at the national living wage.

When the United Kingdom Government raises the national living wage, we uprate that maximum income level through an amendment to the 2014 order. The amending order is usually laid around January every year, to come into force on 1 April. There was a delay in laying this year's amending order due to the later timing of the UK budget and the compressed parliamentary timescale due to the dissolution for the Scottish Parliament election.

In order to ensure that no families would be negatively impacted by the delay, the Scottish Government worked with COSLA to ask local authorities to use their existing discretionary powers to apply the new maximum income level from 1 April 2026 on a temporary basis until the 2014 order could be amended. COSLA and local authorities have been very supportive and co-operative, and we are not aware of any child not accessing a place due to that approach.

The 2014 order currently specifies that a two-year-old is eligible for funded ELC if their parent is in receipt of a universal credit award, with a monthly income that does not exceed £850 per month. This amending order ensures that the maximum income level of £885 per month, which local authorities have been applying since 1 April 2026, is reflected in statute.

We will continue to review the maximum income level in the 2014 order. For the committee's awareness, if there are any changes to the national living wage in the 2026 UK budget, which is to come into effect in April 2027, an additional SSI will be laid in early 2027.

I am happy to take any questions.

The Convener: As members do not have any comments or questions, I invite the minister to move motion S7M-01123.

Motion moved,

That the Education and Gaelic Committee recommends that the Provision of Early Learning and Childcare (Specified Children) (Scotland) Amendment Order 2026 [draft] be approved.—[*Siobhian Brown*].

Motion agreed to.

The Convener: The clerks will produce a short report setting out the committee's decision. Are members content for that to be published?

Members *indicated agreement*.

The Convener: Thank you for your time today. We move into private session.

10:50

Meeting continued in private until 11:27.

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