Official Report
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Education and Gaelic Committee

Comataidh an Fhoghlaim agus na Gàidhlig

Tuesday 10 November 2026

Session 7

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Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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EDUCATION AND GAELIC COMMITTEE
8th 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)
*Senga Beresford (South Scotland) (Reform)
*Duncan Dunlop (South Scotland) (LD)
*Patricia Gibson (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
*Laura Moodie (South Scotland) (Green)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Billy Anderson (Children in Scotland)
Dr Janet Brown (Royal Society of Edinburgh)
Helyn Gould (University of Strathclyde)
Alyn Smith (Minister for Innovation, Technology and Tertiary Education)
Lisa Weylandt (Includem)
James Withers (JR Withers Advisory)
Gavin Yates (Connect)

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Education and Gaelic Committee

Tuesday 10 November 2026

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:00]

Interests

The Convener (Karen Adam): Good morning, and welcome to the eighth meeting in 2026 of the Education and Gaelic Committee. Under our first agenda item, I invite Senga Beresford to declare any relevant interests.

Senga Beresford (South Scotland) (Reform): I note an interest in having been an employer for 25 years and having taken on apprentices.

The Convener: Thank you, Senga. Welcome to the committee.

Subordinate Legislation

Qualifications Scotland and His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education in Scotland (Miscellaneous Listings) Regulations 2026 [Draft]

09:00

The Convener: Our next agenda item is consideration of subordinate legislation that is subject to the affirmative procedure. The committee will take evidence on draft regulations from the Minister for Innovation, Technology and Tertiary Education and his officials. The minister will then move the motion to recommend approval of the instrument. I welcome Alyn Smith and his officials Sarah Hart and Judith Brown. Minister, I invite you to speak to the draft instrument.

The Minister for Innovation, Technology and Tertiary Education (Alyn Smith): Good morning, convener. It is my first time before the committee—the first of many, I hope. I regard everyone on the committee as an ally in what we are looking to achieve by pushing through changes in how we do education and skills in Scotland. I am very pleased to be here.

I have some prepared remarks on the Scottish statutory instrument. I am accompanied by Sarah Hart and Judith Brown—you will be glad to know that there are some experts in the room, who can answer your difficult questions. Do you want to hear the prepared remarks, or would you like to go straight to questions?

The Convener: We would like the prepared remarks, please.

Alyn Smith: I am happy to provide them, as it is useful to set the scene.

I would hope that the instrument is not controversial. It follows the establishment of Qualifications Scotland and the office of His Majesty's chief inspector of education in Scotland and the dissolution of the Scottish Qualifications Authority by the Education (Scotland) Act 2025. If the Parliament approves it, the instrument will update the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024, the Equality Act 2010 (Specific Duties) (Scotland) (Regulations) 2012 and the Consumer Scotland Act 2020 (Relevant Public Authorities) Regulations 2024. The instrument will ensure that the relevant statutory duties apply to the new bodies. In essence, it will swap in the new ones for the old ones.

Section 18(1) of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024 sets out the listed authorities

that are subject to the reporting duty. Listed authorities must report on what they have done and will do to comply with the public authority duty under section 6(1) of the act and to secure better or further effect of children's rights. If approved, the instrument will amend the 2024 act to replace the SQA with Qualifications Scotland and to add the chief inspector as a listed authority. That will ensure that the reporting arrangements established under the act apply to Qualifications Scotland and the chief inspector.

The Equality Act 2010 (Specific Duties) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2012 set out the Scotland-specific equalities duties that are designed to support listed authorities in meeting the public sector equality duty under the Equality Act 2010, which applies to both the chief inspector and Qualifications Scotland. The instrument will add the chief inspector as a listed authority, which will ensure that the chief inspector is subject to the same equality reporting framework as any other relevant public authority.

The instrument will also remove the SQA from the list of authorities in the 2012 regulations, following the SQA's dissolution. It is intended that the Scotland-specific duties will apply to Qualifications Scotland, but adding Qualifications Scotland as a listed authority is outwith the scope of the instrument. That is because of restrictions on listed authority functions that are exercisable in or as regards places outwith Scotland. Qualifications Scotland has some such functions. Potential legislative solutions are being explored to address this issue. As an interim solution, the framework agreement between Qualifications Scotland and the Scottish ministers provides that Qualifications Scotland will comply with the duties under the 2012 regulations and any direction given by the Scottish ministers in relation to those duties.

The Consumer Scotland Act 2020 (Relevant Public Authorities) Regulations 2024 list the relevant public authorities that are subject to the consumer duty under the Consumer Scotland Act 2020. The instrument will remove the SQA from the list of relevant public authorities and replace it with Qualifications Scotland. That will ensure that Qualifications Scotland is subject to the same requirement that the SQA was formerly subject to, which is to have regard to the impact on consumers and the desirability of reducing harm to consumers when making strategic decisions about the exercise of its functions.

I hope that the regulations are not overly controversial. It is nuts and bolts and consequential stuff instead of anything that is overly strategic. However, we are here to answer your questions and to listen to your comments.

The Convener: As members have no questions, we move to agenda item 3. I invite the minister to move motion S7M-01925.

Motion moved,

That the Education and Gaelic Committee recommends that the Qualifications Scotland and His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education in Scotland (Miscellaneous Listings) Regulations 2026 [draft] be approved.—[*Alyn Smith*]

The Convener: Does the minister have anything to add?

Alyn Smith: Well, we have got this boxed and bagged, and I am glad to have done so. I am very happy to have a conversation about anything that committee members would like to discuss. There is plenty going on in the education and Gaelic space that we could be chewing the fat over. However, I am conscious more of the committee's time than ours. I am happy to see this bit of business done, and I thank you for your support.

The Convener: As members have no comments, do we agree to the motion?

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, minister. I suspend the meeting for a changeover of witnesses.

09:06

Meeting suspended.

09:10

On resuming—

Apprenticeships

The Convener: Welcome back. This morning, we will have the first evidence session of our short inquiry into apprenticeships. I welcome to the meeting James Withers, director of JR Withers Advisory Ltd; Dr Janet Brown, vice president for education at the Royal Society of Edinburgh; and Helyn Gould, deputy associate principal for education systems and enhancement at the University of Strathclyde. I thank you all for your written submissions.

Before I open up the discussion to other members, I will start with a question. The Scottish Government's post-school education reform agenda aims towards a system that is fair and that gives opportunities to all school pupils, yet I hear of many cases in which kids cannot get access to foundation apprenticeships and of cases in which there are no modern or graduate apprenticeships or opportunities in their desired field. Why is that? Are there not enough apprenticeships, or are they perhaps offered in the wrong areas?

James Withers (JR Withers Advisory): Good morning. Thank you for arranging the evidence session and inviting us.

It is almost three and a half years since I finished my review of the skills system on behalf of ministers. A key part of that, for me, was observing the cultural issue that we had in the education and skills system, whereby vocational education, as it is called—apprenticeships have been the most obvious vehicle for that—is still treated as secondary and second best to traditional academic forms of learning. In the year that I spent inside the system, I observed that it was very fragmented.

My longer answer to your question about why not everyone can access apprenticeships is that, for a long time, the entire apprenticeship system has been carved off and separated from the rest of the education system. The funding and development of frameworks were carved off into separate agencies, away from the mainstream of education. Vocational education has been deemed a separate potential add-on, often for young people who are considered not to be progressing through academic routes as well as schools and the system would like.

There are not enough apprenticeship places. The Scottish Government has committed to 150,000 places over this parliamentary session, which is a good increase, and a 10 per cent increase in contribution rates, which is certainly overdue. However, until we have culturally embedded parity of esteem into our system—in other words, if you are doing a foundation apprenticeship in software development, that is level 6 learning in exactly the same way as higher maths is level 6 learning and those things are treated the same by parents, teachers, ministers and the whole system—apprenticeships will remain the area of the system that is more poorly served in terms of funding and availability.

The demand is there, and business is certainly looking for greater support for apprenticeships—we know that the workplace needs that pipeline. There has been good structural progress on system reform, but delivery progress has been relatively slow. It would be unfair to say that cultural progress has been non-existent, but we are a long way off where we need to be.

Dr Janet Brown (Royal Society of Edinburgh): I cannot disagree with what James Withers has said—I agree with everything he said. The challenge for culture is key to this issue. Countries such as the Netherlands have taken action to have the Government lead the way in how we talk about this sort of education and the way in which we measure education.

It has historically been the case that you get what you measure and you get what you value. August is a time when everybody values how many highers everybody has got and how many people go to universities, but we do not recognise what has happened during the course of the year in terms of apprenticeships and the foundations that lead to apprenticeships. We have a system that values one pathway over another, and we need to do something about that.

One of the other challenges, for me, is the fact that we measure the school system according to how many highers pupils get. That is a challenge in persuading parents to encourage their children to go into foundation apprenticeships.

The provision of modern apprenticeships poses a different challenge. If you read some of the reports that have come out from several industries, such as the heating and plumbing industry, you will see that they are concerned about whether employers will continue to want to hire people as modern apprentices, because of the costs associated with that and the challenge of taking somebody on for four years but not necessarily being funded for that or for providing secure employment for longer than one year. That is particularly the case with Government contracts, which are, in general, 12-month contracts. We must challenge that.

It is a complex arena, but we have to fix it, because, if we do not, Scotland's economy and Scotland's people will not be successful in the future.

09:15

Helyn Gould (University of Strathclyde): Good morning. I am here to speak about graduate apprenticeships, which are in a slightly different situation. To an extent, they have become victims of their own success. The process for achieving a place is extremely competitive, and apprentices are recruited by the employers, not through the universities. Research has shown that the entry requirements are on a par with those for entry to prestigious universities. One of the challenges is that the widening access agenda in Scotland has led to universities giving adjusted entry to students from widening access backgrounds without there being any requirement for employers to do the same, so the application process for apprenticeships is extremely competitive.

The different skills involved have been matched to Scottish Government priorities, particularly in science, technology, engineering and mathematics, so most of the available graduate apprenticeship frameworks are in the STEM area. Their availability in Scotland is limited compared with their availability elsewhere in the United Kingdom, and the application process is very competitive, which disadvantages students from a widening access background.

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

Senga Beresford: Good morning. I have been an employer for 25 years and have taken on apprentices, although I have never been approached and asked to do so. I have also spoken to many other businesses in the south of Scotland that have never been approached or encouraged to do so, which is a big failing. Taking on an apprentice is not cost effective for small and medium-sized enterprises that have to rely on their trained staff taking time out to teach somebody. They really cannot afford to do that, because costs have gone up in every area of business. We need to look at what we can do to incentivise and encourage businesses to take on apprentices, through a tax break or something like that. Something has to be done in that area, because it is getting harder to run businesses.

On the point about kids not attending school and looking to go to college, colleges and tutors have told me that kids are reaching them who can barely read or write, which is quite concerning. I am talking about plumbers and electricians—you need skills to learn to do those jobs. Why do we not have apprenticeships start in schools, perhaps even in third year, to engage kids' minds and help them to find their passions before they go on to further education?

Dr Brown: First and foremost, you have made some really good points. Incentivising employers is a real challenge. We all know the fiscal situation that the Government and others are in, but we really need to take away some of the pressure on employers when they take on apprentices. As you said, you get little out of them in the first year.

Senga Beresford: It is more like the first four years.

Dr Brown: One suggestion that has come through in the work that we have done is that apprenticeships should start in school, but it is important that what young people learn in school actually builds towards an apprenticeship. The Scottish credit and qualifications framework should allow that. Young people should be able to build on things learned in school—and things perhaps learned in one year of college, such as health and safety—and carry that learning forward before they enter employment. That is one of the challenges that we face.

You also brought up the issue of people leaving school unable to adequately support themselves with maths and English. Scotland's latest programme for international student assessment results are quite interesting from that perspective. It is important that, when kids leave school, they are able to enter the workforce and also have successful lives. Every individual in Scotland needs a good comprehension of maths, English and—

Senga Beresford: The basics.

Dr Brown: The basic studies—I totally agree with what you are saying. For me, that means thinking about how, within one system, there are different places where people can learn things that are valuable for employment but also for their personal benefit and development.

James Withers: I agree entirely with Janet Brown on that, but I will add a couple of things.

The SME point is important, not least because our business community in this country is dominated by SMEs. There is no doubt that SMEs find it very difficult, because of time and resource issues, to engage in public sector funding networks and the public sector more generally. Also, it can be easier for public agencies to deal with bigger businesses. If Skills Development Scotland is trying to hit an annual apprenticeships target, it will be easier to deal with Rolls-Royce, where hundreds of people can be put through. If you want to make the most efficient use of resources, working with a small number of large companies is much easier than working with a large number of small companies. Therefore, there needs to be ministerial direction on engaging with SMEs.

Also, contribution rates have lagged far behind. My sense is that, for SMEs, contribution rates are

important and should, at the very least, keep pace with inflation. Actually, it is about committing the time, because, as you say, a company is taking someone off a job to work with an apprentice.

On the point about education and starting apprenticeships earlier, I could not agree more. It is absolutely essential to bring more work-based learning into our school curriculum. The curriculum is going through its annual cycle of review, and my hope is that that will come out with something that is much more positive and with an understanding of the importance of embedding work-based or work-related learning into the curriculum. When I was doing my review, Louise Hayward was doing her review on the future of qualifications, and it is a huge disappointment to me that some of her key recommendations have been shelved and have not been progressed at all.

That has happened partly because there has been a lack of bravery and courage to grasp real reform in our education system, which is partly because there are short-term fires to be put out around violence in classrooms, attendance and PISA scores. My assessment is that part of the reason for those issues and why so many young people are disengaged from the curriculum is that they do not see any relevance in it. Collecting highers and A grades is not relevant for more than half of our pupil population, so we have to build a curriculum that is much more relevant to them, and apprenticeships and work-based learning are key to that.

Foundation apprenticeships fail the parity of esteem test partly because they have a terrible name. They are not an apprenticeship and they are not a foundation level of learning. We should give them the same name as other academic routes, because they involve the same level of learning. Until we tackle that, people will always deem them to be a second-best option.

Senga Beresford: I totally agree with that.

The Convener: Would you like to come in on that, Helyn?

Helyn Gould: I have two short points to make. The point about the challenge for SMEs is true for graduate apprenticeships as well. Research has identified that the work-based mentor is a key resource, but it is challenging for SMEs to provide that in order to have a graduate apprentice. Another issue is that there is no associated funding for potential innovation or collaboration, and modern apprenticeships do not necessarily feed directly into graduate apprenticeships, which makes advanced entry more challenging.

Patricia Gibson (Cunninghame South) (SNP): I have a small point. I left school more than 41 years ago, which is hard to believe. When I left school, there was a debate about parity of esteem between skills and academia, and we keep on having that debate.

I was interested in something that Mr Withers said. I am paraphrasing, so please correct me if I have got the meaning wrong, but you said that skills and apprenticeships are poorly served in terms of funding and that, until we get culture change, that will not change. Maybe the reason why the funding situation is poorer, as you see it, is because there has been no culture change. In talking about culture, I am talking about schools, parents, society, universities and employers—everybody. Until we get culture change in all those parties, there will be no parity of esteem, and that has been the block.

I am sure that employers who are looking for apprenticeships believe that what they are offering is as valuable as anything that people might get from a university course, but nobody else has bought into that. Even the children—sorry, the young people—have not bought into that because, as you have said, It feels like second best. That is the message that is all around them.

What do you think we can do? I spoke about what the situation was like 41 years ago, but we have probably been talking about the issue for even longer. How can we change the culture? Is it just a case of funding?

James Withers: No, it is not just funding: it requires real leadership. One of my observations was that Scotland's skills system had lacked Government leadership for years, and that echoed a report from Audit Scotland that came out before I began my work.

We must stop talking about university as though it is a golden pathway and the ultimate achievement for any young person, because it is not relevant to at least half our young people. In some cases, it is also a way of warehousing young people in another four years of education when the job opportunities out there do not discriminate as much as they used to between someone who has a degree and someone who does not.

The optimism I can offer is that the culture outside the education system is already changing. If you speak to businesses now, you will hear that the list of grades that a job candidate got for their highers is much less important than it used to be and that it is much more important for a candidate to demonstrate that they can be creative and solve problems and that they are empathetic, kind and good team workers. Those are the skills that employers are looking for now, so our education system needs to catch up with the cultural reform that is already happening in the outside world.

The recommendations in my review were informed by people from across the system, none of whom had a total understanding of how the whole system worked because it was so fragmented and complex. One of my main recommendations was that, if we want to have a joined-up system, we have to join it up. If we carve apprenticeships out into a separate agency with separate—and uncertain—annual funding, it is no wonder that those are treated as second best to the more consistent rhythm of academic qualifications.

We need to stitch the system together, and that structuring is beginning to happen. The Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) (Scotland) Act 2026 is a good step forward, and having a single agency looking after both university and college funding as well as apprenticeship and training funding is another good step. However, we must change the qualifications culture. We need to stop newspapers from printing exam league tables to determine the best and poorest-performing schools because that is absolute insanity.

Until we get there, it will be very challenging. I am hopeful that the culture will change because the world is already demanding a much broader set of requirements from the workforce pipeline than just an exam certificate, but the education system has not quite caught up with that and its hierarchy of qualifications does not value what the business world is looking for.

Finally, the Scottish credit and qualifications framework is an asset, but it is a gift that we are bemusingly and bewilderingly underutilising.

Patricia Gibson: I think Dr Brown wants to come in, but I have one more question before that. You said that Audit Scotland mentioned a lack of leadership. Is anywhere else in the UK doing better, and can we learn from that?

James Withers: A similar review was done in Wales. Some parts of the UK have done well, with Manchester being one example. When I was doing my review, Manchester was delivering more of what they call “degree” apprenticeships—which is what we call “graduate” apprenticeships—than every part of Scotland combined. That shows that some areas have been doing better.

The recent rhetorical leadership from the UK Government about the importance of technical, vocational and apprenticeship-based qualifications is a big step forward. Until recently, there was a stark contrast with the rhetoric we would see up here. We have had First Ministers for whom the percentage of children going on to university has been the absolute driving key performance indicator. Scotland’s universities are brilliant and are absolutely the right path for a lot of people, but they are not the right path for everyone.

Political leadership is really important, but we have had an extraordinary turnover of skills ministers even since I did my review. The minister who commissioned me to do the review was gone by the time I had finished it nine months later; the minister who introduced the tertiary education bill was gone by the time it reached stage 2; and the minister who saw it through stage 3 was gone before the changes were implemented in April.

Therefore, one of my hopes—in what is probably a naive way, politically—is that we could have a skills minister who lasts longer than the average football manager over a season. I think that Alyn Smith absolutely gets the cultural bit, so let us keep him in place for a while to drive some change with the kind of political leadership that is needed and which I hope he can bring.

09:30

Dr Brown: It is not just a UK issue; it is a worldwide issue. We recently completed some work looking at how four different places—Switzerland, Sweden, Ontario and the Netherlands—are approaching vocational technical training. Fundamentally, they all have the same challenge, which is the perception that movement into university is the way that everybody should be going. That is the case for lots of people and for lots of jobs, but not all jobs.

In the future, it is likely that we will need far more people not to go to university than is currently the case. It is a real challenge that we need to analyse. It was interesting to see that all four of those places had recognised that there is a cultural challenge. The only place that seems to have made an absolute commitment is the Netherlands, which said that there was leadership from Government that started to change the language used to describe things.

I think that it was the submission from James Withers that said that we should stop using the word “highers” and call them level 6 qualifications. That would represent a huge step forward. We talk about degrees, which are an SCQF level 10 qualification. There are Scottish vocational qualifications at that level too, and it is really important that people across the country recognise that the depth of learning, which has just happened in a different space, is of equal value and equally as challenging as a degree. We need to change the culture, but culture is incredibly difficult to change.

A couple of years ago, the RSE published a paper called “Education and skills 2050: Future proofing Scotland”, in which we tried to encourage people to think about a radical review of the

curriculum. That does not mean a subject-by-subject review of what is in a history or geography qualification; it is a process of thinking about what children should be learning for when they come out of school in 2050—and that is not what we are teaching them today. What we are teaching them today is good for, probably, 1995, but not necessarily for the future.

There is a whole load of culture that needs to change. We need to take some risks, because it is always very hard for teachers, who are absolutely focused on getting the best for their students, to do something radical, but we might be in the position at the moment where we need to think about that and scope that work. That is also cultural change, and it is a fundamental barrier to any significant movement on the issue.

Helyn Gould: The experience of the graduate apprenticeship is relevant here. It was introduced in 2017, and one of the first challenges that we had was explaining to employers that it was not degree-lite or a different version of it. In particular, the attachment of the words "graduate" and "apprenticeship" seemed to be quite challenging for some employers.

One thing that has come out of that experience is that the retention level for graduates from a graduate apprenticeship, as opposed to a university graduate recruitment, is much, much higher, and companies are seeing a return on their investment. There is an issue with graduates leaving university, joining a company, doing two years on the graduate scheme and then moving company. The retention rate for graduate apprenticeship students is significantly higher.

We have seen sectors move to introduce graduate apprenticeships to their talent pipeline and to have both graduate apprenticeship and university graduate recruitment.

Duncan Dunlop (South Scotland) (LD): I am listening to what you are saying, and I am trying to work out how it settles with me, maybe because I am culturally attuned to the fact that we are meant to go to university. I am trying to establish whether you are saying that university is not the route or that we should not have that ambition for people—although "ambition" might be the wrong word—and I am worried about what we would lose.

You are right that the economy and the jobs market are very quickly driving the way that things are happening. Even if we and the Government are not leading that process legislatively, we see that universities that are not what I suppose we would call the ancient universities are offering places at below course requirements just to fill the spaces.

I guess my question is about whether such changes are happening in the jobs market anyway. As far as I can see, that is mainly due to artificial intelligence moving the whole jobs market—let us be honest about that. Will losses happen anyway as a consequence of that? We will need to respond in some form—otherwise, there will be significant unemployment.

Dr Brown: It should not be seen as a case of, "We can't go to university because of this or that." It should be seen as, "This apprenticeship is actually a good direction of travel for me and my future family." It is not just about the economy; we want to encourage multiple different ways in which people can develop throughout their lives for their own benefit as well as for the benefit of the economy. If we focus only on what the workplace requires, we will not properly serve our people.

It is about saying to people, "You can have a great career and a good family, and you can support your family by going down these pathways as well as by going to university." We need to aim as much for that aspiration as for having a degree that people might not be able to find a job with afterwards. It is not about just waiting for that to happen because of people not being able to get jobs after their degrees; it is about creating a positive environment that says to people, "This pathway is really beneficial for you as a human being and a member of Scottish society as well as for the Scottish economy."

That thinking is also a way to address the other issue that Scotland needs to address, which is social inclusion. It is important that such pathways are not seen as things that only people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds go into, because they are for everybody.

Helyn Gould: I back what Dr Brown has said. University is also not just for when people leave school. If we are committed to lifelong learning, we need to support flexible and innovative pathways through universities—that is key for upskilling, reskilling, microcredentials and all those different elements. Just because a person does not go to university after they leave school, it does not mean that they will never attend university or engage with higher education.

It should be part of the messaging that university is about people's careers and pathways. We know that graduates will change pathways multiple times throughout their careers in a way that they did not do 40 years ago. We need to look at the whole ecosystem and consider how the different elements of tertiary education support learners in post-secondary education.

James Withers: I will add a brief point. It is important to stress—as I think that we have done, but I will do so again so that there is no doubt in

anyone's mind—that people absolutely can have an ambition to go to university. We should be ambitious for our young people to go to university, but it should not be the ambition for them all to go to university.

Because the culture has become so embedded that university is a golden pathway, we are at the point of at least half our pupil population—and a much higher percentage in some areas of Scotland—leaving school believing that they are failures before their lives have even begun. I honestly cannot think of anything that would be more damaging to a country, particularly one that has a shrinking working-age population. Our universities are brilliant and the right option for many people, but they are not the right option for everyone. Where there are alternative routes for learning, those should be given parity of esteem.

Duncan Dunlop is right that the ways in which society is going and AI is developing will result in the system evolving. My concern is that there will be a time lag between when the system changes and when the world demands a much broader set of skills and a broader diversity of people in businesses, communities and volunteering roles—all the ways in which individuals can contribute to society.

In the past decade—probably since the beginning of devolution—the skills system has been allowed to evolve. Although evolution happens almost uniformly with good intent, when a system is complex different parts of it drift into different areas and the level of fragmentation will deepen.

Duncan Dunlop: We are probably in agreement. The question is what the motivating factors or drivers will be towards the apprenticeship schemes. I am interested in the degree to which various forces will push that. Even in Scotland, with our free university education, most people leave university with £18,000 to £20,000-worth of debt, which is pretty difficult if they do not then get a job off the back of their degree.

There is huge value in people having space to develop and mature. It is still predominantly people in their late teens and early 20s who go to university, and it does have a role to play. However, I totally get what you are saying about our need, which has been starved, and I totally agree with what you are saying about the status of what we do with apprenticeships.

I will move to the more practical elements. Oversight is moving to the Scottish Funding Council, and that is a structural change. We have also talked quite a lot about cultural change; what do we need to do to make sure that that happens? Instead of having the Scottish Apprenticeship Advisory Board looking at the area, the SFC is creating the apprenticeship committee, but how is that not just a mark 2 version of what there was? What will be different with the SFC? What does the SFC need to change?

Dr Brown: The first point is that, in my opinion, the SFC needs to see all three aspects of tertiary education as equally valuable. A really key thing is that we need to make sure that the apprenticeship area is still employer led. There has to be an engagement in the Funding Council—and the aspects of the apprenticeship management structure underneath that—that retains close engagement with employers. It would be a real shame if we lost that.

James Withers: In my review, I recommended that training and apprenticeship funding should come together with university and college funding into a single agency. That is important.

Skills Development Scotland did a remarkable and very good job in establishing our apprenticeship framework and the whole ecosystem that sits around it. However, the very thing that was needed to establish it is the very thing that is now holding it back—in other words, a dedicated agency that is focused only on apprenticeships and is separated from the rest of mainstream education.

The apprenticeship framework needed focus to establish it but, in order for it to grow up, leave home and become more embedded in our mainstream education system, it needed then to be stitched into the heart of the education system, which meant that the funding should be in the same place. It is also my view that the new qualifications body should have an overview of the entire qualifications ecosystem—school and post-school—and that is not quite happening.

There is absolutely a risk with the transfer to the SFC, because we are moving apprenticeships into an agency that has, if I am honest, muscle memory for universities, so there is a need to stay engaged with employers.

My vision was different to what is being executed now; my view was that we need much more devolution—down to the local level—of powers and responsibilities over skills and funding. In my ideal world, there would be a network of employer boards that worked locally in regions with their councils, colleges and universities and had responsibility over skills funding to establish the appropriate educational provisions in that particular area. That is why I felt that SAAB should be devolved down into employer boards around the country. That has not happened, so we have the creation of mark 2 SAAB through SFC, which I am not convinced will be as optimal as the more regional approach.

Some of the best things that are happening around skills and education provision—

Duncan Dunlop: I am sorry to interrupt you, but do you think that a key part of public sector reform should be looking at devolving that power down to localities?

James Withers: Yes, that absolutely should be looked at. At the moment, city-region partnerships can direct billions of pounds of investment, but we have not trusted them with a few million pounds for the skills provision that might sit alongside that. That is an odd set-up, so we absolutely need to look at that.

The skills requirements in different parts of Scotland are different. Through regional skills planning, we have a good regional skills plan, which has demonstrably involved colleges, universities, businesses, councils and all stakeholders in that area. The prize for regional integration and the bringing together of different interests around a coherent plan should be the control of funding that sits alongside it.

Dr Brown: Could I add just one thing? The movement of everything into the SFC was a structural one. We still have not changed the funding mechanisms, so we do not have parity of funding for the different types of tertiary pathways.

09:45

Duncan Dunlop: So the budget lines have not moved.

Dr Brown: No, just the people.

Duncan Dunlop: One of the committee's first evidence-taking sessions was with Universities Scotland and its college equivalent, Colleges Scotland. They came together, but it seemed that they were competing for this finite resource—the funding that the SFC now holds. I still do not see how, realistically, the money that is in the SFC for universities is going to move towards the college sector, if no more resource is forthcoming.

Dr Brown: The challenge lies in understanding what sort of tertiary sector we need. When I say "tertiary sector", I mean all of it—everything that happens after people leave school. At the moment, Universities Scotland is working on the future of universities, and what they will need to look like, and colleges are thinking about what they will need to look like in the future, too. However, we need to think about all of that as one system—and that includes apprenticeships and other types of learning. After all, there are other ways in which people can get into work—

Duncan Dunlop: I am sorry to interrupt, but is such work on the radar at the moment? Is anyone doing it? Both sides seem to be on two very separate pathways.

Dr Brown: There is hope that it will come together. One of the things that the Royal Society of Edinburgh's education committee is focusing on for next year is very much this one-system idea. What does one system need to do? How do we bring people together? We have the ability to bring people into a space that is non-political to talk about how we change that divergence of approaches. The competition that you talked about is a real challenge.

James Withers: The structural bit is important and matters, but it does not deliver the cultural bit on its own, and neither does it deliver the more agile, flexible and fast-moving apprenticeship system—and, indeed, education and post-school education system—that we need. It takes a long time to develop an apprenticeship framework. I think that this has moved on a little bit, but when I was looking at graduate apprenticeships, individual universities were having to bid for funding for those placements. Why on earth can we not give universities the freedom to decide how much of their provision they want to drive through traditional full-time study and how much they want to drive through graduate apprenticeships?

Some of that flexibility might come, but we need to trust our institutions a bit more to know what the most appropriate provision for them will be. What the University of Strathclyde wants to do and what its ambition for graduate apprenticeships will be is going to be different from what one of the ancient universities wants to do, so we need to give universities the freedom to operate accordingly.

Helyn Gould: We have that now, but when the funding moved from SDS to the SFC, it became folded into our existing provision. Previously through SDS—and then when it first moved to the SFC—the money was additional funding for and investment in apprenticeships, then it was taken away and folded into our existing numbers. As a result, it was reduced. If we want to deliver graduate apprenticeships, we have to reduce the number of traditional on-campus degrees.

The move to the SFC was beneficial to our employers, because there was a mismatch between the timeline for employers planning to recruit someone to an apprenticeship and SDS's funding timeline. We were receiving funding indications a few months into the year, but actually they were needed towards the end of the year before. Companies are planning now for their recruitment next spring and summer. Having that lag and the strategic ability to plan into the future have been benefits of the move to the SFC. However, the funding for delivering graduate

apprenticeships has been removed from universities.

Duncan Dunlop: This is a bit of a different thought, but if having colleges and universities as separate entities does not really work, would it be better to have one institution covering everything that you have been talking about—from, say, SCQF level 6 or 7 to level 10—so that we do not have people saying, "Oh, you're going to this place rather than that one"? Could our institutions look the same and, therefore, be able to advertise and market all this in a different way?

Dr Brown: There is value in having separate entities, but there are examples across the country of very close working relationships between colleges and universities. We need look only at North East Scotland College—I think that that is the wrong way to describe it—in Aberdeen and surrounding areas and how it is working with Robert Gordon University and the University of Aberdeen. In that respect, I would highlight the seamless pathway to a computer course at those universities.

There are examples that we need to learn from, but I should also point out that the role of colleges is not just to provide apprenticeships. Colleges also have wider and hugely beneficial community engagement that responds to individual businesses and business requirements.

Helyn Gould: I am also on the board of Glasgow Kelvin College, and we need to understand the difference in identity. Glasgow Kelvin College does not deliver as much higher education at an HNC and HND level as other colleges, because it is the college in Scotland with the highest number of students from the most deprived areas, according to the Scottish index of multiple deprivation. A total of 41 per cent of the college's learners come from the most deprived areas, so the college is about further education and getting people into education rather than going straight into a higher-level qualification.

In part, that is about place, which is very important to a number of our colleges. It is about the place and the community, and lifelong learning and engagement. I see the benefit of having separate systems that work closely together, and pathways to articulation are a key way of achieving that.

Duncan Dunlop: I have one final question.

The Convener: James Withers wants in first, if that is okay.

James Withers: I will dissent slightly from my colleagues here. The idea is really interesting and, if you landed from outer space and looked at what we need from an education system and what we have just now, I think that you would question the rationale for having separate university and college systems.

I had not been in a college for 30 years before I started the review, and I was blown away. Colleges are incredible—they are rooted in their communities, and they are better connected into schools and businesses—but they are hugely fearful for their future and their financial sustainability. Some of the best work is happening when a university and a college are working with each other in a particular area—I looked at Forth Valley College, for example, which is working with the University of Stirling.

I did not look at the idea in my review but, if we want to be radical, that is exactly the kind of thing that should be on the table.

Duncan Dunlop: I will move to one last area, which Helyn Gould mentioned. Helyn, you said that there are no widening access requirements for graduate apprenticeships. How can we change that? One of the ways in which we have improved the university system in Scotland is by making it a more available route for many people.

Helyn Gould: It is a real challenge, and I think that you cannot land universities with that, because while we message on the value, as we all know, of diversity in recruitment—and there has been significant activity to encourage employers on that—places are incredibly competitive. Part of it has to be about encouraging employers to consider diversity in their recruitment activities. It is a key area that universities have been trying to influence, but our ability to do that is limited.

Duncan Dunlop: What would we need to do to give us more levers of power over that?

Helyn Gould: I am not sure that that is easily achieved, in part because the employer starts with the place but—in contrast to the situation elsewhere in the UK—as soon as a learner begins a graduate apprenticeship, the place then becomes theirs rather than the employer's. It is a complicated situation, from that point of view.

Duncan Dunlop: In something such as the renewables industry, where there is a lot of procurement and big contracts—it is not SMEs operating in that space—could we say, "If you want to get this contract, part of the community benefit is that you will take on widening access apprenticeships"?

Helyn Gould: I think that you could ring fence certain areas, but you would risk employers stepping away. The issue definitely needs addressing, but it has to be tackled collaboratively. My hope is that the new graduate apprenticeship committee will take that as a key priority area to address.

Katherine Sangster (Edinburgh and Lothians East) (Lab): My question is for James Withers. You mentioned in your original review that the skills system felt fragmented and there was drift, and it struck me that you said that there was "an absence of prioritisation". Have we made progress in that area? Is there sufficient planning in our apprenticeship system for the skills that we need in Scotland at the moment and in the future?

James Withers: I think that there has been progress, and it would be churlish not to say so. If I was sorting it into buckets of good progress, slow progress and no progress, I would say that there has been good progress on structures, slow progress on delivery and little or no progress around the cultural aspect.

It is three and a half years since the review was done. We passed the Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) (Scotland) Act 2026, which is good; Audit Scotland recently reported on progress against the reform agenda and identified the absence of good strategic planning around it, so that is an issue; and ministerial churn is a factor. Progress is there, but delivery has been slow. We are unlikely to see significant progress on how apprenticeships are shaped and delivered until after April next year, which will be almost four years since my review was done—and it was just one in a series of reviews that happened around the issue at the time.

The need for strategic leadership and a strategic plan from the Government is absolutely critical. Having lived through a bit of that experience, I observe that albeit reform is always difficult, public sector reform is the most difficult of all. That is partly because it might be 10 years—two electoral cycles at the very least—until you see the benefit and, in the meantime, you get all the disruption and challenges, so you really have to stick to the course to get through those choppy waters before you reach a better place. It is also partly because of the nature of the process that gave rise to a fragmented system, which is that you have to break up the system into manageable chunks for different departments and different agencies to work on. When my review was done, which called for a more cohesive system, it was sliced and diced into lots of different sections and sent off to different departments and agencies.

Therefore, you need strategic leadership—which must be political leadership—to take a whole-system approach to the process. You need to be ruthlessly focused not on all the issues with which institutions and agencies will have problems and about which they will complain, but on the end user, which is difficult to do in the context of public sector reform. However, I remain hopeful that there has been progress.

Katherine Sangster: My next question is for everyone. The target is 150,000 apprenticeships by the end of the parliamentary session, which James Withers said at the start was about a 10 per cent increase. Will we hit that target? What are the challenges in hitting it?

Dr Brown: One question is whether we should be measuring the number of people who come into apprenticeships or the number who complete them. Getting people out the other end is one of the challenges that we have with apprenticeships. For me, first, the measures need to be addressed—indeed, part of Audit Scotland's feedback on progress was that we do not have sufficient measures in place to understand whether we are making any progress, because no milestones or measurements are associated with this.

Secondly, you asked whether we think that we will make the target. Large employers are generally okay with it, but some of the feedback from SMEs is that they are worried about the financial situation and whether they can afford to take on apprenticeships—the fall in numbers in the past couple of years is probably a reflection of that. We need to think about the issue in the round and find ways to encourage people.

Procurement in the public sector is a real driver for the ability or inability to take on a modern apprenticeship. If an SME has only a one-year contract, will it make a four-year commitment to an individual? It is not just about putting more money in the system or having targets; it is about having people who come out at the other end with a successful apprenticeship that gives them a good career path.

James Withers: I agree with that. We have a habit of measuring process instead of outcome. There is a value in the 150,000 apprenticeships target because it sets a direction of travel, but we count bums on seats all the time and I am not sure that it is a particularly good measure of the success of the system.

Modern apprenticeships have an 80 per cent completion rate on average. Interestingly, in the sectors that I know best, such as food and drink manufacturing, the completion rate is higher for over-25s than it is for younger people, yet age discrimination is built into the apprenticeship system—you get higher contribution rates for younger people than for older people.

Helyn Gould made a very good point about university access and learning throughout life. Although we need to focus on the completion rate, we also need to ask how long the people who get a qualification stay in employment and in that sector. A more nuanced set of measures would

provide a much more valuable assessment of whether the system is working.

10:00

Helyn Gould: I have a few comments that relate to this point. The target for graduate apprentices is only very slightly higher than the number of those being recruited. I would expect the numbers of graduate apprentices to continue in that way and to achieve the overall levels.

It is important to look in detail at what we do as a measurement of success. I echo what my fellow witnesses said, in that this should be about attainment. One issue with attainment and the measurement of graduate apprenticeships is that a number of apprentices leave at the end of third year, having achieved their degree. That is because the Scottish system is different: those people do not need an honours degree for their particular career path. However, what they do is not seen as attaining on the degree programme.

You will notice that it is predominantly those over 25 who undertake a graduate apprenticeship. There is a balance to strike between the different elements. Apprentices often receive promotions, their jobs are more demanding, and they have achieved a degree. That is a really successful outcome.

That brings me to another area. Looking at the research into what we are achieving with our graduate apprenticeships, we find that they have been particularly effective in social mobility, upskilling and reskilling, but not so much among school leavers. Back in 2017, when the graduate apprenticeship was brought in, there was much talk about a different route, upskilling, reskilling and the needs and demographics of Scotland, with a requirement to reskill our population. Over the years following that, there was a move to place much more emphasis on school leavers. From a social mobility point of view, there is much more impact for our older learners. We should not lose sight of graduate apprenticeship roles being not just for school leavers but for that aspect of lifelong learning.

There is an opportunity here, which is covered in Professor Sally Smith's submission. Professor Smith was originally going to attend this panel, and she wrote the submission. There is an opportunity for us to increase master's level provision, which allows for reskilling. That would give us the ability to reskill our existing population in one or two years, without people having to undertake a four-year undergraduate degree. That would be financially beneficial for Scotland, and it would be beneficial in targeting those who have prior learning or experience that would allow them to come in at that level. That would be generalist master's provision, not specialist master's provision.

One of the strengths of the graduate apprenticeship model has been that it is a system that allows someone to repeat degree-level education, as long as it is not in the same subject area. That has meant that someone can find employment somewhere that may not be where they previously held qualifications and retrain within that area. That is the reskilling aspect.

As a sector, we would very much welcome the opportunity to focus on generalised master's degrees.

Katherine Sangster: If you were to come back and do another evidence session in the future, and if we managed to retain our skills minister and all the members of the Education and Gaelic Committee for a year or so, what would you see as measures of success? What would you like us to be considering as a committee?

Dr Brown: I would like to see an increase in the number of successful completions, and I would like there to be a way in which we can help SMEs that want to take on apprentices. They should be given support. I do not necessarily mean just financial support in bringing on those people; it could involve a structural change in how the education system gives credit for other things that have been learned. I would like to see that.

At some point we have to make progress on culture. That means that the committee and politicians of all parties should be shouting to the hills about how great other pathways are over and above universities. That is a role for politicians.

Finally, I would like to see cross-party agreement on the direction of travel for education and skills in Scotland.

James Withers: I definitely like that last bit about cross-party agreement. My background is working in the business community, where some things are deemed pre-competitive—that means that those things are so important that companies will not compete with each other on them but will instead collaborate and work together.

Education should be politically pre-competitive, in my view—although that is an incredibly naive statement to be making in a Parliament, where there are lots of different views on education. A board of reform with a member from each party would potentially be a good way forward, and it might start to challenge some of the issues around public sector reform.

Culture is coming out as a common theme, but it is really difficult to measure culture. The Government defaults to things that are easy to measure, which is stuff that is easy to count, such

as jobs or the number of apprenticeship places. We need to grasp what percentage of our population believe that they have reached a positive destination as a result of their learning. That might be someone who is a lawyer or a doctor, or someone who is a plumber or a welder. It might be someone who is volunteering in their community or being a voluntary care worker. At the moment, the Government determines what a positive destination is, and I am not sure that that necessarily correlates with real life.

I would also like to see a measure of perceptions at school and what percentage of young people say that a foundation apprenticeship in software development is as valuable or important, or as successful an achievement, as higher maths or physics. If we start to get those to broadly the same level, that will be a good measure. Those things are difficult to measure because perceptions in surveys are not easily countable. I am sure that the chief economist in the Scottish Government will hate those kinds of things because they are a lot more difficult to measure, but they would be barometers of cultural progress.

Helyn Gould: I echo the call for a focus on outcomes and attainments rather than the entry points. We are very much focused on a funnel out of schools into colleges and universities, but I would like to see as broad an understanding of the cultural shift to pathways and the multiple routes through. We should look at it from a systems point of view and recognise that, when you leave school, you are not just getting a job but starting your career, which is a completely valid way forward. Parity of esteem for our young people is really important, as is looking at lifelong learning rather than just the next year or two.

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): Where to start? I quite like James Withers's idea that the skills minister's post is becoming like the Aberdeen Football Club manager's job just now. I say that because Graeme Dey, the guy who initially put through the Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) (Scotland) Act 2026, is an Aberdeen fan, but he is probably on a golf course somewhere at the moment.

To go back to your report, James, you said that public money should support the learner and not benefit the provider. When the tertiary education bill was going through, I asked a simple question of the Scottish and Northern Ireland Plumbing Employers Federation, which also provides training. I asked how much it takes off the top of the SDS money that it receives. SNIPEF came back and, surprisingly, did not try to dress up its answer. It just said 40 per cent—boom, like that. My argument then was that we should look at the traditional college-first model as opposed to the model that we have fallen into, where the trade bodies do it.

I have a fair idea of what you are going to say, because I have read your report, but, at this stage—having done the report and looking back now—do you think we should consider a college-first approach as opposed to the more traditional method? My father became an armature winder—an engineer—and he went to college for so many days while working full time as an apprentice. Is the college-first model the way forward, to get us away from the fragmentation?

James Withers: Independent training providers have a role and they fill a gap, but my view is that a college-first model is appropriate. It would support our colleges and the brilliant job that they are doing. I would like to see colleges determine where the gap in their provision is and whether they want to bring in third parties to help to deliver training.

George Adam: It normally works the other way around.

James Withers: Yes, it does. SDS will contract for third-party delivery. Some brilliant work is done by independent training providers, including Scottish Bakers and National Food & Drink Training, which deliver apprenticeships across the whole food and drink manufacturing space, which colleges do not necessarily have the provision to do. That approach is absolutely appropriate where colleges do not have the provision—or they deem themselves not best placed—to deliver that training. However, our process is such that that is not how it works, and we have individual training providers contracting directly with a public sector agency. Given the fragility in our college system, I am not sure that that is the best way to serve the apprentice, the learner or person who is being trained, or our college sector.

In short, I agree with your point, but that is not quite the same as saying that there is not a role for independent training providers.

Dr Brown: Just to follow up on that, I point out that, in some cases, independent providers operate in specific or niche areas, although not necessarily the one that you mentioned. However, there is definitely a place for them, and it is really important that we recognise that.

That said, if we are to go down a college route, we should not forget that colleges must have the equipment that will allow them to be at the leading edge, as industry requires. Significant investment is being made in engineering courses that are run in colleges so that they have the necessary equipment to deliver modern apprenticeships efficiently and effectively. It is important that colleges are funded to the level needed to enable

them to do that, and that will not involve a small amount of money.

George Adam: For me, the big thing is following the public pound. I have been on various forms of this committee for quite a long time now. I had brown hair when I came in here; some might say that the committee is the cause of its not being brown any more. I know the frustration that arises when you try to follow the public pound and you see 40 per cent, which is a big number, being taken off the top. When you look at the college model, you will see that 90 per cent follows the pupil and about 10 per cent goes towards the administration of the college. That seems like a no-brainer to me. Surely it is the natural way for us to move forward, even with the investment in the whole system.

Dr Brown: To be honest, I think that it will be a case-by-case thing, depending on the nature of the apprenticeship.

James Withers: It should also come out of really good skills planning. That sounds kind of anoraky and dull, and as though it is more about paperwork and plans than delivery. However, for a start, if you had national skills planning—I know that it has been brought back into the Government, which is a good move and was certainly one of my recommendations—and then you unleashed the regions through regional skills planning, you could do mapping work on what was needed and who the providers were. A more strategic approach of looking at what we need and where the gaps are would be better than having some beauty parade and saying, "Right—there's £90 million in the apprenticeship fund. Who wants to bid for it?"

When it comes to budget scrutiny, I think that it would be better—or equally as valuable—to look at the £3.2 billion that we spend on our entire post-school skills system and to work out whether that money is being put to best use. A tiny proportion of it goes on apprenticeship funding. Indeed, the latest figure, which I think is in the Scottish Parliament information centre paper that we have all received, is £120 million or £140 million out of that £3.2 billion. Another £1 billion is locked into the free or no-cost tuition fees policy that we have in Scotland, on which I did not make recommendations because I was concerned that it would become the sole focus of the report. However, we need to look at all that in the context of the tightest financial settlement that we have had in 30 years of devolution.

George Adam: Finally, and going back to public sector reform, I think that it is all about delivery and ensuring that we actually change things. That might sound idealistic of me after all these years in the Parliament, but I think that, if you are going to go through this difficult process in the knowledge that it will take years before you get any kickback, you really have to look at delivery.

James Withers mentioned structural change. Politicians inevitably get caught up in the idea, but my experience is that structural change tends to lead to cultural change, because you get a turnover of the leaders in a particular area. When politicians try to encourage cultural change but it does not really happen, because of leadership or whatever, they inevitably end up saying, "Right—structural change has to happen." Surely, James, there has to be some structural change if we are to get the other changes that you highlighted in your report, which we are discussing now.

James Withers: Absolutely, and that is why my recommendation in that respect set out that comprehensive structural change needed to happen. For some people, that would be very uncomfortable. It would have been easier for me to say in my report, "Just throw more money at apprenticeships." We do need more money for apprenticeships—we all agree that we would like that to happen—but if we simply throw more money at one part of the system we will just deepen that particular silo or that aspect of the fragmentation. There has to be structural reform. I remain optimistic that such structural reform is being put in place, but it will not be the end in itself. It is the first step towards achieving delivery change, which will rely on there being cultural change.

I am an advocate of what the Government is seeking to achieve through the Tertiary Education and Training (Funding and Governance) (Scotland) Act 2026 and of bringing together the funding into one place.

The Convener: We now have questions from Laura Moodie.

10:15

Laura Moodie (South Scotland) (Green): My first question is to all of you; I will then have shorter follow-up questions for each of you.

For many years, we have known that apprenticeships remain quite heavily gender segregated, with different routes leading to very different earnings and progression outcomes. What specific changes are needed in schools, among employers and in the apprenticeship system to ensure that apprenticeships widen opportunity instead of simply reproducing existing inequalities?

Dr Brown: Part of that is about what SDS is left with when the funding system has moved out. It is about encouraging people to understand what the career paths and opportunities are and how those

can benefit different types of people in different ways.

One of the challenges in the skills agenda is that people do not understand what the job market is like. If we look at careers planning in schools, for example, we see that careers teachers have often been through the system and, therefore, are not familiar with the wider aspects of career opportunities. It is really important that we showcase people who have already gone down non-traditional pathways and highlight how successful they can be, how happy they are in their jobs and how they have progressed well. It is important that we get that message across to the people who have influence on our young people, who include teachers and parents. I would argue that it is also a job for politicians to showcase that message.

Helyn Gould: I echo that. Universities have looked at that issue a lot. Part of it is down to perceptions and to choices that people make in secondaries 1 and 2 and once they start down their pathways from national 5 qualifications. Female students, in particular, sometimes take themselves out of certain routes because they perceive that some science subjects are very male orientated. That means that, when they get to the later stages in secondary school, their options are much more restricted.

It is about moving the narrative away from there being gendered occupational roles. Recently, the BBC had a news item on the representation of female scientists, which people might have seen. It showed how few female scientists are flagged up at nat 5 level—and in England, too—compared with male scientists. We must provide and showcase those examples, change the narrative and change the expectations of people—parents, school staff and our young people—to move them away from the idea that there are gendered occupations. We must open that up.

James Withers: I certainly found that there were gender-based and disability-based inequalities and that care-experienced young people had limited opportunities and less successful outcomes in terms of reaching positive destinations.

There is something interesting about the showcasing idea. Helyn gave the example of female scientists. There is an old phrase that says, “You can’t be what you can’t see”. The reason for colleges being inundated with young women who want to go into the beauty sector is that that is what they see—they go to beauty salons at a young age or they might see their older sister going into the sector, for instance. There is work to do on trying to arrest some of those stereotypes.

As Janet said earlier, the visibility and line of sight are really blurry from course options, subject choices at school and qualifications that people take through to careers, and it is difficult to navigate through all that. One thing that I was asked to do in my review was to look at our national careers system, but I could not find it—instead, it seemed that we had a patchwork of things in different places. Earlier, Mr Dunlop referenced AI, and it bemuses me that we do not have the careers system equivalent of Skyscanner, with a digital training passport that, through AI, links the user to visible career options. You could see the SCQF qualifications ladder and how one leads to the other. It should be possible to do all that on your phone now.

However, at the moment, there is not a huge amount of private sector commercial incentive to go down that route, so the public sector should maybe fill that gap. The public sector is, in part, supposed to address that kind of market failure—and there is market failure in relation to that provision. Investing a small number of millions could make a big difference, which could help to provide a line of sight from subject choice to career and address showcasing the reality of opportunities for different genders.

Laura Moodie: To follow up on that point, if funding were redesigned in the way that you have proposed, would you like funding incentives to be linked to outcomes such as tackling equality objectives or occupational segregation, or is that too complex or too focused on the end instead of the start of the process?

James Withers: Funding has a role because we know that it influences behaviour. Earlier there was a reference to how we could use public sector funding to encourage businesses to do more. If you are a grant recipient, it is legitimate that the public sector should ask you to do certain things in return for that grant, which might include apprenticeship offers. Funding has a role to play where clear barriers—whether gender based or otherwise—exist to certain parts of our communities accessing opportunities.

The challenge is that everyone always wants the system to be simple. However, I think we need to give up on that idea, because it is a fallacy. The system is really complex: people and their aspirations are complex, how they learn is complex and the job market is complex. Complexity is not a bad thing. The challenge with the current system is that it is difficult to navigate because we do not know who is doing what; it needs some embedded complexity, and funding has a role in addressing barriers to entry to different types of job for different types of people.

Laura Moodie: Dr Brown, in the RSE's evidence, you talked about the need to better align apprenticeships and Scotland's future economic needs. If women remain underrepresented in sectors such as engineering, digital or net zero, can Scotland realistically meet those workforce ambitions?

Dr Brown: Absolutely not. I was a female scientist in my past, and I think that we are missing a trick by not encouraging all genders to go into all practices. Nursing is a classic example: a lot more men are going into nursing, which is hugely positive because of the nature of the people being looked after. So, no, we cannot do it without women.

I go back to what Helyn Gould said earlier: we need to get the career opportunities and the exposure to different jobs much earlier in schools. By the time someone is exposed to careers, they are in secondary 3 or 4, which is way too late. Arguably, they need to be excited about science and everything else when they are in primary school.

I will give you a classic example: me. The reason I got interested in science was because I had a teacher called Mr Horton—the only one of my primary school teachers whose name I can remember—who once made us put one hand in a bowl of hot water, the other in a bowl of cold water, then both hands in a bowl of medium-temperature water in the middle. You should try it when you get home—it is amazing. It is something really simple that teaches you about science. That excitement about science or engineering needs to start in primary school.

One of the challenges that we have, and which we must address, is that the vast majority of our primary school teachers are uncomfortable with science and maths. That goes back to James Withers's point about the system being very complex—there are lots of complex problems in there, so we must think about it as one system. If you want more women in engineering and modern apprenticeships, you must think about what you are teaching young children in primary school—it is not only about doing that at the end.

Laura Moodie: Absolutely. Helyn, to pick up on the widening access work that the universities have been doing, could we learn some lessons from it that could be applied to gender imbalance in apprenticeships? Should we focus less on the start of the process, and how many people are going into apprenticeships, and more on where those people are five years afterwards with regard to pay, progression and job security? Sometimes it feels as though we focus very much on how many people are achieving or how many starts we get instead of what the outcome is for those people in five years.

Helyn Gould: The question of how we should measure success is really interesting, and there are opportunities on that. For example, one proposal that keeps coming up in several areas is the individual learner number, which would provide a way to tie together records and evidence to enable us to look at that data. For us to do that would be top of my Christmas list, because data is very powerful in allowing us to interrogate and understand what has been happening. Analysing what happens in graduate apprenticeships from a widening access point of view, looking at graduate outcomes, understanding the upskilling and reskilling aspects and exploring the various elements all come down to our ability to interrogate our systems. That is the first component of what we need to be able to do.

On universities' widening access activities, I echo Dr Brown's point on primary education. A lot of those activities involve universities going out into primary education to do outreach work and address the various issues, recognising where we have work to do and trying to do the messaging associated with it.

There are success stories there. In particular, we have evidenced the attainment that has happened out of some of those routes. I have to be honest: our graduate apprentice graduates are absolutely phenomenal, because they finish their courses with not only a degree but four years' work experience. I have always likened that to the difference, at the end of four years, between having been taught Spanish in Glasgow and having been taught it in Madrid. So, it is also about evidencing the success that we have had. I agree that many opportunities exist in widening access activities more generally.

The Convener: That takes us to the close of this evidence session. I thank you all for your participation.

I now suspend the meeting for up to five minutes for a comfort break before we go on to our next evidence session.

10:27

Meeting suspended.

10:35

On resuming—

Support for Pupils with Persistent Absence

The Convener: We now come to our second evidence session in our short inquiry into support for pupils with persistent absence. I welcome you all to the meeting.

Billy Anderson is head of services and influencing at Children in Scotland; Gavin Yates is executive director at Connect; and Lisa Weylandt is senior policy and public affairs officer at Includem. Thank you all very much for your written submissions to the committee.

Before we hear from other members, I have a question to ask you. Last week I raised the fact that

"Pupils with additional support needs are around 40 per cent more likely to be persistently absent, and almost half of secondary pupils now have an identified additional support need."—[*Official Report, Education and Gaelic Committee*, 3 November 2026; c 1.]

I am interested in your thoughts about that. How well do we understand which children—in particular, neurodivergent children—are persistently absent, and why? Are schools equipped to respond to those different needs?

Lisa Weylandt (Includem): Good morning, everyone. We find that a lot of the children and young people we support who are absent have either diagnosed or undiagnosed neurodiversity. We feel that schools try really hard to make adjustments for young people. Sometimes that concerns the size of classrooms, or other students can be difficult. Young people experience bullying and they can feel isolated and stigmatised. Although efforts are being made, we do not know that the resources are sufficient for the adjustments to be put in place.

Billy Anderson (Children in Scotland): The majority of the people who contact our helpline and access Children in Scotland's services have additional support needs—as that is what the services are designed for. A consistently high percentage of inquiries to our services involve issues around attendance. They can involve a wide variety of things. The attendance issue should not just be considered as a need for additional support. It can concern the whole situation for the child or young person. It can involve their whole family situation. There can be a multitude of different reasons why a young person may become persistently absent.

Although schools try very hard, the support that schools put in place for children and young people is very inconsistent across different local authorities. As Lisa Weylandt has said, there are resourcing issues. To my mind, however, the blame should not purely lie with resourcing; there are also cultural issues, such that things are inconsistent across local authorities.

Gavin Yates (Connect): It is nice to be able to agree with both my colleagues, who have knocked the proverbial nail on the head.

Connect, the organisation that I represent, did a lot of work this time last year. We did a whole survey into attendance issues, in the main. In the focus group work that we did after that, we spoke to lots of sets of parents, and they consistently told us that the lack of consistency between schools was a big problem. Some schools managed things really well, while that was certainly not the case in others. Something like half the parents whose children were long-term absent were receiving communications from the school once a term. That is not adequate. There needs to be national consistency to ensure that that happens more frequently.

We got lots of evidence about parents and young people not being listened to. The return-to-school plans were not being communicated to them and were not being arranged with them. There need to be better, clearer channels of communication between parents and carers and school staff. We need a more compassionate system, too.

Another aspect is that, when young people start to be absent, rather than blaming the child or the parents, we should look at the systemic issues that might make that the case. Kids do not just want to drop out of school; there is usually a prime mover for that.

I do not want to bombard you with lots of statistics; I can do that until the cows come home, but I would rather write to the committee, and you can look at that at your will. However, I will share a little anecdote from this weekend. On Sunday morning, I spoke to a set of parents whose child is 14. He is a good lad—I know the young man in question. He is struggling at school, which he absolutely hates. He is on a part-time timetable, which is a normal approach for some schools, but it is not working for him. When his parents picked him up on Friday this week, he got in the car and said, "I do not know why I am here. I want to die." When for some young people the horror of school is so awful that they get suicidal ideation because school is not working for them, there is a problem.

My final point is one that you made, convener, which is absolutely right. When 50 per cent of pupils in our secondary schools have some kind of additional support need, is that mainstream education any more? Does mainstream education have to fundamentally change to encompass all

neurodivergent children, or are we going to continue to fail them all?

The Convener: Thank you, Gavin. On the example that you just gave of that one young guy, is he being listened to? Is there feedback from these young people? Does he get to say, "This is exactly the reason why I do not want to be at school"—

Gavin Yates: Yes.

The Convener: —and is that being taken into consideration?

Gavin Yates: I apologise, convener. You can imagine my emotion around this.

That young man had wanted to try to make his way out of school. He was promised some kind of vocational route away from the school environment, which was causing him so much trauma and distress, and nothing has happened. I will be honest with you: now he is going to try to make his way to April—legally, he probably cannot go before then. His parents now are thinking, "Do we try to move schools? Do we try to home educate?" This is a failure, and I wish that I could say it was not a common or garden situation, but it is. Colleagues of mine at the Scottish Assembly of Parents and Carers have been running focus groups in the past two weeks, which we have not published on yet. I am reminded of a quote from that work, from about a week ago. A young person said something like, "I am in the class, I am sitting with the class, the teacher is talking to the class, but I am not actually included in the class."

We are great in this country at measuring whether kids turn up to school. I will get a message on my mobile phone if one of mine is five minutes late, and that is brilliant. What we do not measure is whether they are being included and educated while they are at school. There is a chronic problem of young people who might be in the classroom but are not learning. Who is recording what is going on there? It is not happening.

Duncan Dunlop: Good morning, everyone. Thanks for coming. Which schools are getting it right and what are they doing well? We hear a lot about what is going wrong, but where are there examples of this working?

Gavin Yates: For me, this is key: it is schools that have an ethos of inclusion. Educational theorists such as Professor John Hattie say that there are two indications of good schools: strong leadership and strong teachers. If you have both great leadership with a compassionate ethos and great partnerships with parents, you have a chance.

Duncan Dunlop: Can you say in practical terms what that looks like in day-to-day experience?

Gavin Yates: First, make sure that, if attendance starts to drop off, conversations are had with parents and the young person at the earliest point. Secondly, look at where problems may be systemic. Do not automatically say, "Well, there is obviously a problem with Johnny," when there probably is not but there is a problem with the school—the set-up or the fit of how things work together. The good schools are the ones that identify how they can alter things to make sure that they tailor the education to the individual, not to the other 27 kids in the class.

Duncan Dunlop: Can you give us examples of what that looks like? I am trying to get specific answers, because we have heard quite a lot about culture and ethos, but we need to understand what this looks like for a child or a class or a parent. That would be helpful.

10:45

Gavin Yates: I cannot turn around to you and say, "Well, look at the example of X primary or X high school," although I have seen good examples on my travels. However, I would say that it is about having a leadership culture that has an ethos of compassion, as well as open forms of communication and an education department at council level that backs these things.

There are also examples of extra provision for young people whose needs are not profound enough for special education but who are not being effectively managed in mainstream. Those third way options can be home bases or inclusion centres, which are a halfway house for children who are struggling in mainstream but whose needs are not profound enough for special education. Such provision is a way of making sure that they can be listened to, supported, welcomed to school and kept involved.

Duncan Dunlop: I will turn to the other two panel members, Billy Anderson and Lisa Weylandt. Do you know of an example of a school where provision works really well or a local authority that is succeeding in offering alternative provision that meets the children's needs?

Lisa Weylandt: I would not necessarily point out one particular local authority or school, but we have heard of good examples across the country, where schools have been really flexible and tried to get to know the individual child. For us, that relationship aspect is fundamental and makes such a difference.

Duncan Dunlop: Why will you not name a school?

Lisa Weylandt: Because I do not know the schools—I only know the local authorities. One good example is in Stirling; I also have good

examples from Glasgow and a good example from Aberdeen, so they do exist. It seems to us that, rather than being about the schools themselves, it is very much about individual teachers and headteachers who decide to invest in children and take that forward.

Billy Anderson: Similarly to Lisa Weylandt, I would not name an individual school, because we hear examples from multiple local authorities across the country. Within one school, there can be a difference in culture, even if the leadership is quite strong. I always remember going to a session at which we were talking about school behaviour and I was sitting around a table with multiple school leaders. A school leader said that they knew that a member of staff was behaving in an inappropriate way and was not supporting a young person's learning, but the leader's approach to that was, "But we know it's them—what can you do about that?" I was thinking, "You're the school leader and the headteacher, so it's your job to make sure you do that." There is that kind of difference of culture within a school, and I will give you an example of that.

Previously, I worked in a service where there was a young autistic lad who had been out of school for around a year and a half. We worked super hard on building his confidence and making him see the benefit in returning to school to try to do his exams. We managed to get to a point where we could get him over the threshold of the school, and I was the person who took him into school. He was highly stressed and anxious, so he lay across the chairs in the waiting room, just to self-regulate. The first teacher who approached berated him and said, "Do you think it's appropriate to lie across there? Other people need to use those seats." He sat up and got even more highly stressed, but a minute later, another teacher come along the corridor and said, "Hi, how are you doing? No seen you for a while. Come on, let's hae a chat and talk about what you've done." He never even gave me eye contact; he focused on the child and gave me a wee wink as he led him down the corridor. That contrast and the difference of culture within the school was stark.

There are pockets of good practice in multiple schools, so it is just about consistency across the board. As Gavin Yates said, it takes strong and committed leadership. It is difficult to implement person-centred processes and systems, and that is why they work. Schools need to commit to making that a whole-school ethos.

Duncan Dunlop: If a child is beginning to struggle to attend school—becoming what one might call a persistent non-attender—and the parent struggles to get the child to get to school, various judgments can be made about that, but I am more interested in whose job it is, in the school or elsewhere in the local authority, to help get that child to school. Whose job should it be?

Billy Anderson: To help get the child to school?

Duncan Dunlop: Yes. We found it quite difficult to get an answer to this last week. When the parents are clearly struggling to get the child out of the house and into school, whose role is it to get them to school?

Gavin Yates: It is a partnership. The Education (Scotland) Act 1980 says that it is a parent's job to get a child to school. Great—you can get the kid to school, but it does not mean that they are being educated. They can be sat there—that is great and fantastic; well done, that is a box ticked, which looks good—but effective partnerships are what make it work. It is about parents working with the local authority and the school leaders, with a shared ambition of tailoring education that is right for that young person. It is as simple as that.

You would be surprised, because you would think that all teachers get ASN education as part of their initial teacher education, but some do and some do not. Where is the continuing professional development for teachers and others who work with young people? It is sketchy and sometimes absent. This is an evolving area of public policy and I do not think that the effort is being put in to make sure that we deliver for our young people.

Duncan Dunlop: I get that, for whatever reason, the parent cannot get the child to school, and even if we can force a child into that environment, they are not going to be regulated to cope with that situation. Who therefore should be going out to the house, if that is necessary or appropriate, to engage with that child and family to give them the confidence to re-engage in the school environment? Would that be social work, a third sector organisation or the school itself?

Lisa Weylandt: It is something that the third sector does very well. We do a lot of whole family support, recognising—I think that this came up in committee last week—that education is really a whole society and a whole family issue. Parents, siblings and communities are impacted. However, I would not want to say that it is necessarily everyone's job, because we sometimes then end up with nobody taking the lead and nobody signing anything off.

It is about partnership working, but with clear accountability for who is ultimately in charge of ensuring that resources are made available and support is put in place. We have cases of young people on part-time timetables that drift and drift. The third sector organisation can do everything that they want to get that child or young person ready to continue or maybe even increase their

hours, but if that support is not forthcoming from schools, it does not work.

It is about partnership working, but schools need to ensure that education is being provided, whether in schools or in specialist settings. Schools really should provide that input.

Billy Anderson: I would echo that. We need to distinguish between attending school and attending education, because a child should be attending education in whatever form, and a school should be providing that education. We get many accounts through our Enquire helpline where a child has been provided with education at home for a short period of time and then it is withdrawn, or they have been promised education at home and they have waited for months for it. We will probably talk about anxiety at some point today, but that raises anxiety in the child and the parent about when that education is coming. If it does not come, the trust between the child and parent and the school goes.

You talk about partnerships, but when trust is gone from a partnership, it is very difficult to rebuild. That whole family support approach and multi-agency support, and the correct recording of the amount of education that the child is receiving, are far more important than any attendance data in a particular school.

Duncan Dunlop: We have a problem in that, due to how our society is run, the third sector organisations get short-term, part-time contracts. They are seen as nice to have, but they are not seen as essential and they will not be available universally. From my experience of working in the third sector as a youth worker, I know that, for the child, the consistency of a relationship matters. The child does not give a damn what job title you have or who employs you; it is Lisa who turns up. It is about that personal trust, which you mentioned in your evidence, and when the person changes, that is it—the child is not going to have it.

It is about having that role as part of the system. Maybe it could be part of a guidance teacher's mandate. From what you are saying, it needs that type of person—that leadership—but how do we ensure that the responsibility sits with the school or with social work? Who says, "Yes, this child is coming to be educated in an appropriate environment, and we are making sure that they are engaged"? Without that, I am seeing that they can be at home or on a part-time timetable that is not meeting their needs, or they can be doing internal truancy, if you like. Therefore, who is getting hold of the children who are really struggling and saying, "You are my kid. You are going to know that I care about you and I will make sure that you engage"?

Gavin Yates: I think that you have answered your own question, Duncan. It has to be somebody.

Duncan Dunlop: But we do not have that role at the moment.

Gavin Yates: No—indeed not. There is some sensitivity about this. You can imagine how, if we said, "It's going to be the headteacher's role," that could cause issues with parents, who might think that some of it should be up to them, too.

Perhaps the buck has to stop somewhere, but there could be much more of a partnership approach, where folk are working together in the interests of the child. Schools sometimes have a very different view about what is working with Johnny—as it were. The school might say, "We just need to get him into school, and we'll sort him out afterwards." That might not work—it might not be the best approach. It is a matter of having conversations with young people, their mums and dads and educators—and perhaps clinicians, too—to find the best possible plan.

To answer the question, I would say that this is perhaps not about individuals or the system; it is about having a plan in place. At the first instances of the absence, we should ensure that we have a strong, robust plan, which will be measured. Billy Anderson alluded to this: being in school but not being educated is a huge thing.

A lot of members here will be in the chamber this afternoon, because your whips will have written your report and they have said, "Right, chamber duty for you, you and you." You will sit there from 5 to 2 until 5 o'clock or whenever you vote. Perhaps you do not catch the Presiding Officer's eye when you want to make that killer intervention, so you just sit there until 5 o'clock, and then you press your button. Imagine doing that from 9 o'clock in the morning until 3.30 from Monday to Friday—sitting in the chamber and never catching the Presiding Officer's eye. You would not stand for it. And guess what—if you get a new mobile phone, you get told off. Perhaps Mr Gibson will start thinking about that in future, but who knows?

Duncan Dunlop: That is why you should be a Liberal Democrat, as we do not get chamber duty—I am just saying.

Gavin Yates: Mr Dunlop, I am sure that you are there every afternoon.

Duncan Dunlop: I am taking up too much time with this, but is there anyone who could consider the specific role? Should we have a role with a duty relating to people who are persistently absent—someone whose job would be in the school environment, who would make it happen?

Billy Anderson: We should not have one particular person. In my opinion, it should be the person who knows the child best, if we are going to be person centred about the whole thing. I used to work in front-line services, and the person who made the connections with all the multi-agency people would be the person co-ordinating the meetings, and people would look towards them. I think that we should get rid of the whole hierarchy, with the idea that it needs to be social work or an educational psychologist, say. It needs to be the person who knows the child and the family best. That is the person who should be getting the child into school.

Lisa Weylandt: That is a good point to hold on to. Sometimes an issue can become part of someone's case load, and there might be a person who holds responsibility for so many children without knowing the child or having time to understand the child. It is absolutely as Billy Anderson has said.

Patricia Gibson: I spent many days trying to catch the Speaker's eye in the House of Commons, only to be ignored for days at a time.

George Adam: But you are married to our one. [*Laughter.*]

Patricia Gibson: Moving swiftly on.

We have heard a lot of evidence from the witnesses today about attendance, which has also featured in written and oral evidence in previous weeks. We all want to get to the same place, and we realise that there is a real problem in our schools, with some children not attending.

I would like to project this point forward, as it goes to the heart of what school is for. I was an English teacher for 25 years, so I will use the example of English. It is about more than passing your higher English; school is about so much more than that. When we are thinking about what school is for, we are really thinking about what sort of citizens pupils will be. We are trying to shape young citizens so that they can go out and live the best, most fulfilling lives that they can.

This is only me surmising this; I wonder whether you have read or done any work on this. It strikes me that, if children are not at school, they are probably more likely to face child protection challenges, and they are more likely to encounter the criminal justice system in the longer term. They are more likely to be economically inactive when they are of working age. They are more likely to have poorer long-term physical and mental health. Those are lots of reasons to get kids to school. Do you know of any academic work or studies that have been done that demonstrate those links clearly? From where I am standing, they seem to be probable. However, I do not have any evidence of that.

11:00

Gavin Yates: Those links are well established. There is a lot of academic evidence on that regarding people's introduction to the criminal justice system, including a large-scale study on the effect of schooling by a former governor at His Majesty's Prison and Young Offenders Institution Polmont.

Certain elements are allied to that. Low levels of literacy give people a much higher chance of entering the criminal justice system. Those who needed, but did not receive, speech therapy have a much higher chance of entering the criminal justice system. There is no doubt about it, Mrs Gibson. You highlight the point about school being good for young people, and that is why this issue is so important. We need young people in school.

I return to the initial question about what education is for. That comes back to the Latin "educere", which means to draw out. We need to draw out and make the best of our young people. Unfortunately, I do not think that our education system is best at bringing the best out of all our young people. We have already heard today that children with additional support needs are behind their mainstream peers. There is no doubt about that; the evidence on that is absolutely clear. In some ways, they are slightly forgotten. Those young people are not particularly academic in their outlook. Where is the parity of esteem with vocational education and academic education? There is no parity.

You mentioned that you were an English specialist, and that is fabulous. One of my children is doing higher English this year, and he is very much enjoying his course, which is fabulous. However, I note that, whenever there is any discussion in the media on qualifications, it is always about nat 5 and higher. When was the last time you read an article discussing the pass rates at nat 4 or vocational education or national progression awards? Those are important awards, and they can be a pathway towards work. That is really important, too—it is vital.

The problem is that our education system is very much based on a factory system: we bring people in, we educate them and we spit them out at the other end, hopefully with the qualifications either to go on to work or to go to university. However, university is not really an option for about 40 per cent of young people. We need to do a lot more to ensure that those young people feel included and involved, and to find a positive destination for them.

You are absolutely right: if young people drop out of school early, the chances of their moving on to a positive destination become a lot more constrained.

Patricia Gibson: I will come to Lisa Weylandt and Billy Anderson in a minute, but I would slightly take issue with you about not counting nat 4s. In secondary schools where children are in danger of not achieving nat 5, there is a real emphasis—rightly or wrongly—on getting them through nat 4, so that they have something to show that they have achieved or reached.

Gavin Yates: I completely agree. My point was: when did you ever read in an editorial in *The Times*, *The Scotsman*, *The Herald* or anywhere else about that? We simply do not see that. The public focus is about "the national qualifications", as the press calls them. By that, it means nat 5 and higher.

Patricia Gibson: Do you think that part of the problem is intergenerational and therefore cultural, which is why it is so difficult to make the inroads that we would like? Cultural barriers are difficult to break down.

Gavin Yates: There is plenty of evidence that, if parents had a very poor experience of school, that sometimes goes down the ages, unfortunately. For some, it can be very much the opposite: it is a bump up. Different folks, different strokes.

My organisation represents parent councils, and some parents would love to be more involved in their school community. On the other hand, some parents had such a hideous time and were humiliated at school that they do not want to go anywhere near it again, despite the fact that they would love to be there to support their young people.

Lisa Weylandt: I do not have any examples of academic pieces of work on that. However, I want to highlight how children feel when they are not included or engaged with. We have heard a lot from children and young people saying that they feel really different, that things are too much for them and that their needs are more than the system can handle. When that messaging is internalised in children who are so young, it can set them up for a particularly tricky life or it can create additional challenges for them.

Although I do not have any studies to quote, I can tell you, from the children with whom we work, about the immediate and long-term impacts when their environment is missing the socialisation element and all the other things that we have mentioned that are part of school but not about learning. That has a significant impact on children in the long term.

Billy Anderson: If children do not attend school regularly, that has a longer-term impact in these specific areas. If you take groups of children out of that, you can say that, for example, children with additional support for learning needs will be affected longer term anyway, whether they are in school or not. In the same way as a lot of kids who are living in poverty, they will probably be negatively affected, no matter what their education is.

On the wider point of what education is, the purpose of a school is to get children to function in, and connect with, society. Examinations and qualifications are secondary to that. Our inclusion ambassadors, which is a group of young people who act as advisers, say that success looks different for everyone. Over the past two or three years, we have held the success looks different awards for schools that can demonstrate their support of that. Success should not only be measured by exam results; it should be measured by how a young person feels. That is right at the heart of what a school is for. As Patricia Gibson said, school is for far more than that. It is about how young people connect with other people; it is about developing skills for life and friendships for life.

We should be asking children and young people what success means to them. The constant pressure of having to come up to a mark, if you like, and the tests that measure only how well pupils can recall what they have learned over the past four years in order to get a piece of paper, do not fit with the way that the world is at the moment.

There is the even bigger question regarding what the point of education is. It was mentioned that it was set up for factories and so on in the past. We need to accept that society is changing. If we do not move with society and involve children and young people in what their vision for the future is, everybody will fail. We need to be superflexible. There is an opportunity to do that through education reform, but I am worried that that will not go wide enough. If we are going to do it, we need to hit the reset button and get children and young people involved.

Patricia Gibson: Of course, all those things are impacted disproportionately by poverty. We want children to be ambitious, but there is far less opportunity for social mobility now than there has been at any time since the war. It is much more difficult.

We talked earlier about colleges and the idea that, if you cannot see it, you cannot be it. In communities that are afflicted by poverty, there are not enough examples to look at, because social mobility is so dumbed down. That militates against

ambition and what school might be able to offer some of those children.

Billy Anderson: Ambition has shifted, too. A lot of people look at various sources for ambition and to see what is possible in the future. On role models in communities, you talked about intergenerational issues, and, again, society has shifted to a huge degree. If we do not help young people to connect with what it means to be an active member of society as it is today, they will have a completely distorted vision of what society is like, or have a competing vision with that of their parents. Where will they lie in that? We have to listen to them and find out what their visions for the future are.

Gavin Yates: The social mobility issue that Patricia Gibson raised is interesting, because if you are a pupil at a school in one of the more disadvantaged areas of Scotland, you will have fewer subject choices than if you are at a school in a more advantaged area. How is there any equity in education? How is there any equality in that?

If you are growing up in some parts of Scotland and you want to study economics, for example, you will be told, "No, you can't do that." If you want to study Spanish, you will be told, "No, we haven't got a Spanish specialist—you can't do that." That is par for the course these days. There are young people from working-class backgrounds who are deeply aspirational—they really want to get on in life and make the best of it—but it is a case of "Computer says no. You can't do that. We can maybe offer you history instead." That is not really fair, is it?

Patricia Gibson: Sadly, that has always been the case.

Katherine Sangster: Thanks for your evidence so far; we are hearing consistent themes in this discussion.

As you all represent children and parent-focused organisations, I want to ask a question that touches on Duncan Dunlop's point. Gavin Yates, you said that parents get their kids to school. Through our casework, we hear from a lot of parents who do that but then get a phone call saying, "I'm sorry, can you come and pick them up? They're not coping. The school is not coping." Who is accountable in that situation? How do we embed rights realisation into our education system? A lot of parents feel that school is not working for their children, for whatever reason, and they do not know where to go. It then comes down to which parents can advocate the best, which becomes an equity issue.

Gavin Yates: That takes us back to some of the opening questions. As you pointed out, when you have a situation in which the school cannot cope with a child—Johnny, if you like—the question is, "Why not?" Lots of parents will come to my organisation and my colleagues' organisations and say, "Mainstream education is not right for my child. They need to be in a different setting." I have spoken with parents about exactly that in the past couple of months.

That goes back to my earlier point about individuals whose requirements are not so profound that they need to be in specialist education but who find that mainstream education is not working for them. What are the options for them? They are limited, and they are shrinking. I regularly have parents coming to me in tears, saying, "I know the type of school my child needs to go to." They say that their child needs smaller class sizes, one-on-one provision, and this, that and the other. The problem is that, if the resources are not there, they are not there. We need to be honest with ourselves about this. Who do we want to make decisions about what will best meet the needs of a child? Do we want it to be parents, educators, clinicians or accountants? You choose.

Billy Anderson: I am sorry, but can you remind me what the original issue was?

Katherine Sangster: The question was about how parents advocate for their children within the system. We have the headteacher, the local authority, the education director and the social worker—if social work is involved. To whom do parents speak? How do they realise their rights in this quite complex system?

Billy Anderson: For parents in that scenario, it is all about the availability of information and information sharing. We run the Enquire helpline, which is designed for that purpose. Often, parents call the helpline and say, "This is what's been tried, this is what's been put in place; this is what we like, and this is what we see would work, but how do we go about doing that?" We can provide that information: we tell people what their rights are, what they should be getting and what the law says. However, we know full well that, 90 per cent of the time, they will not get that in real life.

It is difficult. We have highly emotive telephone calls, but we need to be open and honest with people and say, "This is what you should be getting. We know that it's difficult and this might not happen, but what else can we try and how else can we support you to get your view across? Can we create a template letter for you that helps you get your point across to school?"

We are a very small organisation that can do that in pockets. We also do loads of outreach work with parents and carers, and sometimes parents and carers will bring their children along to those sessions, but information needs to be tailored in the way that parents want to receive it. Parents

have told us that they do not want to receive information just fae a website or phone a helpline. They need the information fae multiple places. We host online and in-person sessions, and information must be tailored to what people need, because people need to be supported through receiving the information.

11:15

It is also not good enough that the third sector has to try to put together the pieces of the puzzle to give people that information. It should be coming fae the source. As soon as an absence is flagged as an issue, that information should be coming fae the local authority and the school. In my opinion, and as I have seen over the years, some schools will wait until the absolute last minute before they refer to someone else to ask for help. They just do not want to say "We can't help. Help us." They do not ask for help quickly enough. Given that we are sitting there with loads of resources and connections, it would be far easier if schools would press that button a bit earlier. It is about timing.

It is also about the method that is used to get information to parents—it needs to be provided in a way that they want to receive it. Further, it is about supporting parents through this, because we are not just talking about absence but about the most precious thing to them: their kids.

Lisa Weylandt: I would agree with everything that has been said. It is also worth remembering that parents often face similar challenges to those that face some of the children and young people we are talking about, such as poverty. Digital exclusion can be an issue for some families.

The third sector can be really helpful in supporting families on that journey and advocating alongside them. My colleagues will go to school meetings. They will be alongside families advocating for their children. The issue is whether that support is triggered and whether it is available.

Katherine Sangster: Gavin Yates, you said earlier that we need a national approach to sharing best practice. That theme is coming out clearly—we need consistency in data and how things are measured. How do you see that national approach working? What would you like the committee to do to take that approach forward? What would be some of the barriers to doing that?

Gavin Yates: I should have answered your earlier question properly. I think that I failed to do so.

At the moment, this is what tends to happen if parents realise that there is a problem. They complain to or raise the issue with the school. The school says, "Well, there's probably not a lot we can do." The parents then complain to the education authority through a stage 1 complaint, which turns into a stage 2 complaint. The complaint ends up with the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman probably 17 weeks later, and then the ombudsman probably closes it. All that is left is perhaps a stage 1 tribunal, at which the chances of success are limited.

I highlight the excellent work that Enquire does. We do lots of online sessions with Enquire, because it is an important organisation for us and for mums and dads. It really supports them.

A proper national standard is needed. If a parent or somebody else who cares desperately for a child—it could be a teacher—raises the issue that the child needs more support, we need a proper process that enables that to be fast tracked. As committee members have heard, at the moment, if someone says, "We suspect that Johnny has ADHD," the response is to wait for perhaps three years and then see where to go to get a clinical diagnosis. That is fine, because support is provided straight away, apart from when it is not, because the local authority wants to see a diagnosis first, although it breaks its own rules.

We need a proper process that parents can rely on, with stages A, B, C and D. Parents should be secure in the knowledge that, at every stage, everything that should be done—everything that is reasonable and practicable—is being done. A proper, robust approach is needed. As Billy Anderson said, it is about timing and ensuring that the process is speedy and efficient. It might take two years for a piece of legislation to go through the Parliament, and the implementation period might be another two years, so that would be four years—a child's entire senior phase at school—gone in a bang. It is really important that there is immediate action.

Billy Anderson: I agree with everything that Gavin Yates has said. My only concern is that, as soon as we talk about process, alongside that often comes certain language, with various understanding and meanings. As Katherine Sangster mentioned, a certain type of person or demographic can access that type of information, whereas other people are left by the wayside. That is not good enough.

There needs to be infrastructure around that system. From our outreach work, we know that we cannae reach every parent in the country, so we partner up with people who work in communities. We reach out to communities and ask which organisations—it might be Includem—are working with families. We think about whether we can partner with and upskill that organisation, with reference to all the legislation, and we try to communicate what is technical information to parents so that they understand it and access

support. A network of information, connections and partnerships needs to be built before systems that people can access are put in place. If we put systems in place first, only certain people will access them. We need to put in the work to provide the networks and the information, with partnerships to support that.

Senga Beresford: We were talking about Johnny earlier. I think that every child should be treated as an individual and should have their needs met. What would be the solution to that? Should there be a separate classroom or a smaller class, or should that pupil be out of school altogether?

Gavin Yates: It should potentially be all of the above. If mainstream education is not working effectively for a young person, we need to come up with different methodologies. I work with a lot of parents, who will say that their young person needs more specialist work with teachers who have great experience of working with, say, autistic young people. That might be the best fit for that young person. In relation to the parents I spoke to at the weekend and the horrific story that I told earlier, school will probably not work for that particular young person, but some form of vocational education, with core skills being backed up, might be a better treatment. There needs to be individualisation.

Mainstream education will work for the majority of our young people but, for those it does not work for, it really does not work, and those young people get left behind. As Patricia Gibson said, those are the people who will cost society more in the long term through economic inactivity and will have a greater chance of having a relationship with the criminal justice system.

It might seem expensive to parliamentarians to say that we will have to come up with extra provision, but doing so bakes in more success for the future.

Senga Beresford: I agree. We have to consider the future that we are going to provide.

Did we not have something like that years ago? I am sure that, in the 1990s, we had special schools for children who struggled in mainstream schools. I am sure that we did where I lived. However, everything then got pushed back into mainstream schools.

Gavin Yates: There have been lots of examples of really good approaches over the years. The sure start system from the 1990s was beneficial.

Senga Beresford: I wonder whether we could go back and see why we changed that system.

Gavin Yates: There was a push, quite rightly, to recognise that some people with disabilities had been forced into specialist schools where they did not need to be—where they were excluded and faced being labelled at a very early age. The genuine push towards more mainstream education was a good thing. However, there will always be people at the margins for whom that will not work.

I return to the point about individualised, tailored education that takes into account the needs of the individual, rather than a cohort.

Senga Beresford: Without anybody being labelled.

Gavin Yates: Correct.

Senga Beresford: That means having a choice of what school to send children to.

I have spoken to parents, and I have young children, too. If some children are disruptive in class, that affects the whole class—it is not just about that person. A parent I spoke to said, “He does not behave like that at home. He gets with his mates and all hell breaks loose, but the teacher will not tell him off.” We seem to have gone too far the other way in some cases.

Gavin Yates: I hear a lot of anecdotes exactly like that. However, it might be worth thinking about the reasons for it. Could it be that a different approach needs to be taken by the teacher in that particular classroom? Could it be that a number of individuals are not being challenged and are not having their needs met, and they become disruptive? I work with a lot of parents whose children are highly able—you could call them wee geniuses. However, if they are not challenged in the way that we would like, they can also become disruptive.

Again, it is about providing individualised, tailored education, which, by the way, is really difficult to do. I feel sorry for teachers. If there are 28 young people in a classroom, some of whom are really toiling in making the level of progress that we would wish them to make, while others perhaps think that the work is far too easy for them, how do we expect one educator to deliver to all those markets at the same time? The answer is that we need more pupil support assistants in our classrooms, and we need more teachers.

I find it remarkable that, at the moment, we have a so-called oversupply of primary teachers. I would love currently unemployed primary teachers to be in our schools, helping our young people to develop their talents and raise their expectations.

Senga Beresford: I definitely agree with that. When I visited a school recently, that was the exact position. A mixed-age class, from primary 4 to primary 7, was being taught by one teacher. She would relish having a classroom assistant, but

there just is not the funding, so that definitely needs to be looked at.

Gavin Yates: Rural schools particularly struggle with that issue, and teaching composite classes makes it more difficult.

I will defer to my colleagues on this issue.

Billy Anderson: On the point about individualised learning, I go back to my earlier point that person-centred approaches are easy to talk about but not so easy to put in place. You must commit to that approach if you are going to take it.

On what is key in that regard, I will once again bang the drum for listening to children and young people. It is far too easy to think that we know what is right and what they need. We must involve them in discussions about how they want to learn and what their learning should look like. As I said, putting in place a person-centred approach is difficult—nobody is holding it up as an easy thing to do.

I totally empathise with a teacher in a class with X number of pupils who is trying to educate each of them. I go back to these questions. What is the education system for? Why are we putting loads of kids with various needs into the same class and expecting one person to stand at the front of the room and teach to a set curriculum so that the kids can gain a qualification? How does that even work? What is the role of a teacher in that situation?

Senga Beresford: It is impossible for them to see to everybody's needs.

Billy Anderson: Totally. Are we training teachers in the right way to teach the kids of this generation?

That approach works for some, but it does not work for everybody. However, if the presumption is mainstreaming, with everyone in the same school being taught the same curriculum, we must adapt to that system.

Lisa Weylandt: We work with a number of children for whom there are great examples of creative approaches to their learning. They spend some of their time in their mainstream school and some of it at a pupil support unit. Some of them get learning that they take home. Such approaches exist. The ones that work best are those that are led by the child and that speak to what they are interested in and what they need.

We find great success in such approaches, with young people perhaps coming back to education a little more. Those approaches also increase their confidence and their ability to engage with others and make friends. Doing more of that would be absolutely welcome.

Laura Moodie: Billy Anderson, I would like to ask you about anxiety and unmet need, because that issue came across strongly in your written evidence and in what you have said so far. What practical interventions appear to be making a difference in helping young people to re-engage with education after a period of absence?

Billy Anderson: We need to understand where a young person's anxiety originates. Anxiety should not be used as an explanation for absences—it is an outcome. What is that anxiety caused by? Is it caused by a young person's neurodivergence? Is it caused by environmental triggers or poor design of the school? Is it caused by bullying? Is it caused by systemic poverty? Is it caused by constant academic pressure? There are multiple types of anxiety that a young person might experience, and we must not collapse all of them into one issue and call it anxiety. That is why people misunderstand the whole issue. They say, "There wasn't as much anxiety in my day, but everybody seems to have it now." You hear that all the time, but everybody has experienced anxiety. We experience it as an outcome of something. It is not something that prevents you from doing something, but there is something that causes it.

11:30

We absolutely need interventions that help with anxiety. A person-centred approach, for example, involves sitting with a young person to understand where the anxiety comes from. If your question is about how we can successfully intervene to stop anxiety, we need to take tiny baby steps with people and try to rebuild their confidence in what they are trying to achieve. We build their confidence by building their trust, so that they understand that we are really listening to them and understand their anxiety. It is about allowing them to take the tiniest steps that they can until they achieve wee bits of success and build on those. You cannot just put something in place and then expect, all of a sudden, there to be no anxiety and everything to be all right. It is not a case of someone saying, "That was yesterday and today I'm fine." It is a long journey for people with anxiety.

Laura Moodie: I want to follow up on that with Lisa Weylandt. One part of the baby steps approach to intervention involves compressed timetables when children return to school. Your evidence highlights examples of children attending school for only an hour a day. How can local authorities ensure that a reduced timetable is temporary, is a baby step to something else and is educationally meaningful? It is hard to see how a child will get much educational value out of an hour a day at school.

Lisa Weylandt: There are two parts to the question. First, on monitoring, we are keen to see

a bit more detail on how part-time timetables are recorded. In particular, as you referred to, we want to look at the educational input that is provided through part-time timetables. How long has the timetable been in place? What is the plan for progression? We do not want part-time timetables that never lead anywhere. That is especially the case when children ask for more contact time in school. We have cases in which children say that they want to be in school more, but it can be a slow process for schools to increase the child's hours.

We also need better monitoring of what that feels like for the child. As the committee has heard previously, we can be good at recording things such as bums on seats, but we are not always good at finding out what something feels like for a child. Do they feel that the approach is working for them? Do they feel that they have a chance of returning to school, either full time or with more hours? That relates to the first question.

The other question was about the education that is provided. That is really tricky. A child might be in school for an hour a day, but that does not necessarily mean that they are accessing any meaningful learning. We know of examples in which children have, in essence, sat in a base for a couple of hours, had a good time and then gone home again. We need individualised planning and learning, and we need to think about what interests the young person. Can we be creative in how we teach them? That requires getting to know the child and listening to them, and it requires flexible resources around them.

Billy Anderson: I will add to what Lisa Weylandt has said. It might seem that placing a child in a learning base for an hour will fix a problem in that moment. However, we have been talking about anxiety, and that generates phenomenal anxiety in an autistic child, because they have no plan and no idea what they are meant to be doing there, which feeds into their anxiety instead of easing it. It might ease the situation for the school, but it does not ease it for the young person.

Laura Moodie: Anecdotally, I have heard from a lot of young people that they often find bases and hubs quite stigmatising, which does not necessarily help a child to ease into wider schooling.

I would like to pick up on some of the comments that Gavin Yates made earlier. I used to chair a parent council for a small rural primary school. We would often have 100 per cent attendance from the parent body. Every family would be represented, and sometimes both parents would attend. I went on to chair a parent council for a small rural secondary school, and we practically had to drag people to meetings. That made me think about early intervention, because attendance often does not become a major problem until secondary school. Parents often have fond memories of primary school, but they might not have them of secondary school. How can we make effective early interventions before attendance becomes an entrenched problem, especially at primary level, when there are good relations?

Gavin Yates: You raise a fantastic point and you are absolutely right. It is about trust and community. Primary schools have a more ingrained approach, because they are more community focused than some of our larger secondary schools—which, by the way, can be an absolute and utter nightmare for some children with additional support needs, because they are such vast and noisy places.

Billy Anderson made the point earlier that it is all about trust. For individuals who are, for instance, coming back to a part-time timetable, it is about having the same teacher there every day to welcome that young person and say, "Come on in." It is about building that trust and relationship. That is the only way to make it work.

I am looking at the survey that we carried out last year, and this is a direct quote from one of our mums and dads:

> "The school could have ensured transition into this year was carried out more thoroughly, to enable a relationship and trust to be built. There is one day a week with a different staff member which is very difficult and that staff member being prepared to offer pre-learning would have at least meant my child could have attempted to attend those days."

You are right that it is a particular challenge for secondary schools to have an individualised relationship with a young person. I have an admission to make: I have only two children left at school and I am not sure whether I know the names of their guidance teachers at the moment, because they have changed recently. That is a terrible admission to make as a parent, but I do not think that that is unusual.

Laura Moodie: I have a final question for all of you. Let us fast forward to the end of this parliamentary session and say that, in 2031, this committee is looking at whether revised attendance guidance is actually making a difference. What evidence would you be looking for that would convince you that revised attendance guidance has actually made a difference to children and families?

Gavin Yates: I will kick off. What we need to do is measure what happens in schools, not just whether the kids are there at the school gate at the appointed time. That metric is not as important as measuring the quality of teaching and learning that is going on in a school at any one time. That is one thing that I would be looking for.

This may sound a little bit esoteric, but I do not think that it is, because it is about the happiness of young people. It is not at all flouncy, but really important. If we want children to have better attendance, school must be meaningful, challenging, supportive and individualised. If you want to go down this line, we should measure the real metrics of school, not how many nat 5s or highers a particular school has knocked out. Instead, we should measure the baseline of the young people when they entered the system, and what difference we made to those young people as they went through it. These metrics should not be just about qualifications. These days, the ability to communicate to a group of people, such as this committee, is probably a more advantageous skill than remembering the repeal of the corn laws.

Billy Anderson: I would love to be sitting here in 2031 witnessing something different. At the moment, we have data-heavy, relationship-light systems. I understand why that is, but it would be terrible if it remained that way, because systems need to evolve. If we are looking at what data we would want to see when we come in here in 2031, I would like to see meaningful participation of children and young people in analysing that data, and them being the people that come up with the systems, solutions and peer-led approaches to what makes things work.

We should be asking what strengths we can build on and what helps attendance, not what stops attendance. It should be about what works. That needs to be framed within children's rights: children have a right to an education, and what we do should be framed within that.

There should be school climate measures within that, as Gavin Yates mentioned. How are children and young people experiencing school? We should be looking at data that tells us about belonging, safety, relationships and inclusion within the school, and what that means to the child or young person. We should also bring in the experience of parents. If you want to say that it is everybody's job to educate the child, and if there is a partnership with parents, then the door should swing both ways. We need to ask parents' opinion about how their child is when they get home.

For a child, the school day doesnae just start when they walk through the door; it starts fae the minute they wake up in the morning to the minute they go to bed at night—and everything else in between. It can fill a young person's head completely throughout the whole week, and there is the knock-on effect on the finances, health and mental wellbeing of parents. It is all encompassing. We need to measure that stuff, because it is important.

I would love to be sitting here in the future having a conversation about this stuff really improving—not the numbers, but people's experience.

Lisa Weylandt: As both my colleagues have said, we would be keen to see a move towards something embedded in children's rights that captures children's experiences of being in education, receiving education and accessing education, in whatever shape or form that might take for them individually. Data is really important, but we are keen that those voices and experiences are at the forefront of any changes that we make or of any future developments.

George Adam: Good morning, everyone. I would like to start with something that Gavin Yates said about who you want to be making decisions for your children—parents, teachers, the children and young people themselves or accountants. I found that an interesting question from the perspective of dealing with education and decision making.

The last time I checked, about a quarter of the chief executives in local authorities came from a finance background. That changes the dynamics. If we are living in an environment of public sector reform, surely we should consider the delivery of the service. Nine times out of 10, in my previous experience as a councillor, if someone came from a finance background, it was that finance guy or finance woman who got the job. Is that part of the problem? Should we perhaps find the people who are actually delivering services for those posts?

Gavin Yates: My two colleagues have knocked the nail on the head on this point: the approach needs to be children's rights based, which is about giving young people what they need, rather than saying, "If it's not in the budget, you're not getting it."

The standard thing that I will get from a parent is: "My child is really struggling, they are not getting the support they need, and we really need a PSA." The teacher will probably respond, "You know what? A PSA would make a big difference here." The educational psychologist—who the parents need to use two buses to see—says, "You know, that would be a really good thing." However, if the budget is not there, it is not there, and that is it. It turns into a situation where the decisions have perhaps been taken at a budget meeting years before—but who is to know what will go on in a particular area?

George Adam: When I was a councillor, I used to work with an old social work director, who is retired now, but he got it—he understood it. He went for a chief executive job but never got it. I always use that as an example of someone who I believed could have made a difference to the lives of people in Renfrewshire, because of that

background. It is an important part of the job to balance the books in local government—

Gavin Yates: Indeed.

George Adam: The actual service is the important process as well, however. I feel that we are moving away from that ethos. Should we be considering that when we are talking about public sector reform?

Lisa Weylandt: Yes. Audit Scotland's review of additional support for learning highlighted two main points. First, there were not enough resources—end of.

Secondly, parents ask me why ASL funding is not being ring fenced. I know that that is deeply controversial—I understand the Verity house agreement and all of that. However, mums and dads are saying to me, "My kids are special, and we at least should be able to ring fence the ASL budget." A bit of me thinks that there are other things at play here, but I cannot formulate an argument against it. I am now speaking to teachers who are saying similar things—that maybe ring fencing is needed to make sure that the young people who need our support the greatest are not left at the bottom of the queue when it comes to resources.

11:45

Billy Anderson: There was a time when people with financial backgrounds got into certain positions because there was a need at that time, and the situation now is probably reflective of how society has moved as a whole. I spoke about evolution earlier. We need to see an evolution towards people having a multiple skill set of being able to deliver services but having financial nous as well.

Education is a right, not a requirement. In Scotland, we have amazing laws, and we should be proud of having the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child enshrined in law, but we are playing a bit of catch-up psychologically with what that actually means. If you are talking about finances and saving money, we must get this right, because children's rights are in law now. It is not good enough to say that we will just put a plaster over it to fix it. This will come back to bite people if we do not get it right now, because when it is law, it is law. When the systems that will allow people to access the proper courses of redress for this are worked out, it could be catastrophic.

We need to get the right balance between having people with the right skill sets in the right positions to provide that social care background, and having people with financial nous, who know the benefit of partnering with other organisations and pooling resources to support the rights of children and young people. It is not just about balancing the books any more; you are balancing people's lives.

George Adam: Last week, I asked about how poverty creates barriers to young people going to school, and I have touched on that point today. Lisa Weylandt, in your written evidence, you gave a few examples of those barriers, including the ones that I asked about last week—transport, clothing, food and housing. Which of those barriers would you remove? If you were talking to local authorities and the Scottish Government, the removal of which barrier would you say would have the biggest impact when it comes to helping these young people to get to school?

Lisa Weylandt: Poverty impacts all areas of life for the children and families who we work with, so if we were to tackle and eradicate child poverty, that would certainly make a huge difference to children across the country. That would be it, because poverty touches on everything.

George Adam: Gavin, do you have something to add?

Gavin Yates: Yes, I will come in on that one, because you raise a really important issue. I concur with my colleague. Poverty is the biggest scourge in children's lives—there is no doubt about that—but your point about transport is very apposite. We know that councils are under pressure, and increasing numbers of local authorities are reducing their transport availability, for both ASN children and most other children. A lot of local authorities take a 3-mile view rather than a 2-mile view. That provision is diminishing all the time. At least three local authorities in the past three years have gone to the Government minimum, and there is no doubt that that has an effect on attendance. That is particularly the case with local authorities that have decided to go for a nine-period week—a four-and-a-half-day week—because it is easier to deal with teacher contracts. We know the reason why they have made that decision—it is a way of saving money.

Can you imagine if you are a secondary pupil and on a Friday morning, you have core physical education and personal and social education? Do you reckon that you will go to school in February if it will take you 45 minutes to walk there and 45 minutes to walk back? Probably not. Trying to save a few quid in local government budgets by reducing the quality and experience of school transport can have a knock-on effect on attendance.

George Adam: The bus one is a classic example, because councils do it. When I was a councillor, we did that. Politically, it was probably one of the biggest mistakes that I have made in my life, because the local campaign became

overwhelming and we went back on that decision. You tend to find that that is what ends up happening.

Gavin Yates: It is always better that a sinner repenteth. [*Laughter*.]

George Adam: Well, I cannae get it right all the time—just 90 per cent.

Gavin Yates: At least three local authorities have gone down that line in the past few years. Unfortunately, the directors of education who were responsible for that, along with their political masters, refused to even meet parents. It was shameful.

George Adam: Part of the reason why we made a difference is that we went around to meet the parents and they said, "That's not going to work".

Last week, I asked about another issue with regard to getting young people back to school, and I have probably asked you about it before, Gavin, when you have been giving evidence. There are various soft-setting resets to get young people back to school, which involve them doing things that they actually like. Last week, I used the example of St Mirren, which does various things in football, and I heard in the previous committee that Spartans on the east coast is very good. It has a soft-setting restart for young people to go to.

Is there scope for more of that work, not as a full-time replacement for school, but as a way to re-engage young people through whatever they are interested in? Is there a place for that in order to try to get young people back into the school environment?

Gavin Yates: Planning, tailored, child centred—all of the above. Third sector organisations, such as sporting organisations, can offer that. Plenty of voluntary organisations and others do similar things, but they need to involve communication and planning. Particularly for children with additional support needs and autistic children, it is important to have a plan and a focus and for them to know what is going to happen today, tomorrow and next week. The element of trust, which we talked about earlier, is also important. The best results are seen where, as often as possible, the same people work and interact with the young person.

Billy Anderson: Going back to my youth work roots, I wonder where mentoring went. For me, it was so effective years ago. I am not going to dwell on the past, but I have often wondered what happened to that. A mentor can build a relationship with a young person and be the person who helps, supports and encourages them. We are talking about the whole family support model, and mentoring is a huge part of that.

The purpose of the services that we used to have was to reintegrate young people who were completely out of school. While they were with the service, they were still marked as attending education, because we were building up their social education, their confidence and their skills.

George Adam: That relates to what I am going to ask about next, which I also asked about last week. In effect, we are talking about role models that families will trust. As you have all been saying, it is about investing in things so that people can see the light at the end of the tunnel.

Billy Anderson: Absolutely. It is easy to say that we should have person-centred approaches, but it is difficult to put them in place. If we are going to do this properly, we need to have person-centred processes that involve everybody who knows the child. That might include a taxi driver or the newsagent they go and speak to every day. Every person who knows the child should be in the room helping and supporting them with their needs and their challenges.

We need to get away fae the idea that it is only about the professionals who sit round a table with their prepared papers in front of them and wait for their turn to speak. It needs to be more person centred and it needs to be about people who know, love and support the child and want the best for them. That is what we need to get back to, and I see mentors as a huge part of that. We have lost that relationship-based support. People often see mentoring and youth work as being about going out and kicking a football about with a kid in a field, although I know that nobody in this room has that belief. It is so powerful when a young person has a consistent point of support and connection with an individual who can make a huge difference. That takes me back to the importance of trust and relationships.

George Adam: Finally, on ASN, I was struck by Gavin Yates's comment that 50 per cent of the young people in our classrooms have additional support needs. As I have said to unions and everyone else who has come in, should we be looking not at having additional support needs teachers as such, but at embedding that approach as a main part of teaching? Three of my five grandkids are neurodiverse, and I am sure that I am not the only person in that position. Would such an approach give families more support, and might it help those in the class feel able to deal with it? I know that doing something along those lines would probably require national negotiations to be reopened with the Educational Institute of Scotland, but might that be part of the solution? I know that it was mentioned briefly earlier on.

Gavin Yates: Yes. Interestingly, in the survey work that we did for our parents charter with our

entire membership—that is, 2,500 schools from Shetland to Stranraer and everywhere in between—we found that additional support needs were the number 1 issue that came up. As a colleague mentioned earlier, not providing effective additional support affects not just the young people who have such needs but all the young people, and the adults, in the school. It is absolutely vital that we start treating education as a space where everybody who has a need gets the support that they need. There will always be individuals with really profound disability for whom only a specialist school will work and who will need one-on-one support, but for others, there is an opportunity for us to do much better.

However, the current model of one teacher teaching 28 kids is perhaps not the model for the future, and we might need to look at different, more tailored and smarter approaches. Our parents charter is very much based on that, because that is what mums and dads are telling us.

Billy Anderson: Given that about 50 per cent of kids in school have additional support for learning needs, why does it not make up 50 per cent of teacher training? Why are 50 per cent of the teaching staff not neurodivergent, too?

George Adam: Billy, that is the two of us reopening national negotiations with the EIS.

Gavin Yates: And why not? Teaching unions are really important, but they should not be the prime mover in this. It should be the public; it should be mums, dads and kids—every member of society—who are driving this, rather than professionals, academics or even politicians.

The Convener: I am sorry, but we are getting really tight for time. Have you wrapped up, George?

George Adam: Yes.

The Convener: I will take a brief supplementary from Katherine Sangster, who had indicated that she wanted come in. We will have to keep it very tight, though.

Katherine Sangster: I will be really brief. I do not want to open up another big discussion when we are so short of time, but I did want to thank Gavin Yates for raising the issue of schools having a half-day on a Friday. It was really good to hear.

I have been sitting listening to all the evidence, and we have heard about the school environment, support and subject choice, but we have not actually talked about the timing of the school day, which has not changed since Victorian times. Does anyone want to make a short comment on that? Should we just go away and look at what happens internationally in that respect?

Gavin Yates: Possibly. As the dad of two 16-year-olds—

Katherine Sangster: I hear you.

Gavin Yates: —I know that getting their backsides out of bed in the morning is always a challenge, and if any member of the committee would like to assist me with that, I am in Dalgety Bay in Fife.

Billy Anderson: The timing of the school day is a really interesting issue. Perhaps I am being idealistic, but—and this brings me back to the "Why not?" question—why can we not look at a system in which children learn when they are ready to learn? Everybody has different body clocks. You will know yourself that maybe you are mair alive in the morning or later in the evening, and there are times when you can take stuff in better. So, why not have a system in which you have, say, an education card, you need to be in a certain number of hours a week, and you punch in and out when you want to? It would be a wider system of support. That would be my idealistic view.

Lisa Weylandt: The only thing that I would like to say about the school day is how it affects children when they have other things to do. We have not talked about appointments and other services that children have to attend and which can interrupt their school day.

Gavin Yates: That is a really important issue.

Katherine Sangster: Thank you.

The Convener: I call Patricia Gibson for a very brief question, and I must ask for very brief answers, too.

12:00

Patricia Gibson: It will be a very short question. It was Gavin Yates, I think, who said that 50 per cent of kids, or thereabouts, have additional support needs, and he also said that we need staff who can deal with that. The only point that I would make in that respect is that demand for support for additional support needs has gone way up, and no workforce planning could have been done to deal with it. Do you think that it has something to do with the aftereffects, or aftershocks, of the Covid lockdown? I just think that we could not have planned for it, because we could not have seen it coming. If you look at the graph, you will see how things went up in a very short period of time. Of course, that does not mean that we should not try to tackle the issue, but we were not prepared for it, because we could not have been.

Gavin Yates: I understand that view, but is it that demand has increased or is it that identification has improved? Perhaps this is a good

comment for me to end on, but at least there is now a realisation that we have in our society neurodiverse young people, and neurodiverse adults, too, and they are perhaps more respected than they were before. I know that the services are not perfect by any means, but that is a good thing.

I will tell you what—when I was at school 40 years ago, those young people were just written off completely. We do need to see progress, but there is so much more that we have to do. As Billy Anderson has said, you are, legally speaking, going to have to get your heads around this quickly. Otherwise, public bodies are going to end up in court, where they will lose.

Billy Anderson: I have just a quick comment to make. I think that it all comes down to identification. I should also say that our eyes have been closed if we didnae see this coming, because it was happening way before the pandemic. The pandemic was a horrendous time, but for a lot of young people, it was the best time ever, because they got educated properly. That speaks volumes, because it was about a lot of young people getting education in the way that they wanted to receive it, and they felt the benefits of that. When Covid was over, that got taken away.

We have not looked at why we are not implementing that sort of approach now. It was proved during Covid that it could work, so why was it just taken away? Young people now have a different connection with education; they are saying, “Well, I know that I can do this at home, so why is that option not there now?” There is a whole load of stuff in there.

The Convener: Thank you so much for that. I had some additional questions, but we are running out of time.

I do want to mention a couple of things before we close, though. The evidence today has been really helpful, but when you were talking to George Adam about the finances, two of my own passions came to mind. If we want the getting it right for every child—or GIRFEC—model and the UNCRC to be fit for purpose and ensure that they are serving our children in the way that they should, we should be looking at a human rights budgeting approach and a wellbeing economy. Those ideas seem to be quite abstract for a lot of people, but that kind of preventative spend would allow us to save money and would provide support for our children. Do you agree with those models?

Gavin Yates: Yes.

Lisa Weylandt: Yes.

Billy Anderson: Yes.

The Convener: Perfect. Thank you so much for allowing me to get that in.

With that, I close the meeting.

Meeting closed at 12:03.

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