



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

EDUCATION, LIFELONG LEARNING AND CULTURE COMMITTEE

Wednesday 3 March 2010

Session 3

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CONTENTS

	Col.
DECISION ON TAKING BUSINESS IN PRIVATE	3221
CLASS SIZES (GOVERNMENT POLICY)	3222

EDUCATION, LIFELONG LEARNING AND CULTURE COMMITTEE
6th Meeting 2010, Session 3

CONVENER

*Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
*Aileen Campbell (South of Scotland) (SNP)
*Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab)
*Christina McKelvie (Central Scotland) (SNP)
*Elizabeth Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD)

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

Ted Brocklebank (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Hugh O'Donnell (Central Scotland) (LD)
Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab)
Dave Thompson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO ATTENDED:

Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD)

THE FOLLOWING GAVE EVIDENCE:

Councillor Catriona Bhatia (Scottish Borders Council)
Jim Gilhooly (South Lanarkshire Council)
Terry Lanagan (West Dunbartonshire Council)
Councillor Derek Mackay (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities)
Leslie Manson (Association of Directors of Education in Scotland)
Maureen McKenna (Glasgow City Council)
Robert Nicol (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities)
John Stodter (Association of Directors of Education in Scotland)
Andrew Sutherland (East Ayrshire Council)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Eugene Windsor

LOCATION

Committee Room 1

Scottish Parliament

Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee

Wednesday 3 March 2010

[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:01]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Karen Whitefield): Welcome to the sixth meeting of the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee in 2010. We have received apologies from Margaret Smith, who is unable to attend today's meeting as she is giving evidence to the Forth Crossing Bill Committee.

I welcome Mike Rumbles to the committee. He has joined us to take part in our deliberations on class sizes.

Under the first item on our agenda, I invite members to agree to consider our budget strategy in private. Do we agree so to do?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Class Sizes (Government Policy)

10:02

The Convener: The second item on our agenda is the committee's continued consideration of issues around class sizes. Today, we have an opportunity to take evidence on the Scottish Government's class size policy from two panels of witnesses.

On our first panel, we have representatives from the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities: Councillor Derek Mackay is the leader of Renfrewshire Council and Robert Nicol is the team leader of the children and young people division in COSLA. Councillor Hugh Hunter was to give evidence, but is unable to do so due to illness. We wish him a speedy recovery. Also on our first panel, we have representatives from the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland: Leslie Manson is the president of ADES and John Stodter is the general secretary.

I will start by asking a general question about class size policy. How are local authorities working with teachers, and training teachers, to make the most of smaller classes, where they exist?

Leslie Manson (Association of Directors of Education in Scotland): To be frank, at this stage, I would be surprised to learn that there were specific training opportunities that relate to smaller classes. It is regrettable that some research evidence shows that teachers teach large classes in much the same way as they teach small classes. That is more likely to be addressed through broader continuous professional development or training.

The Convener: Is that a challenge for local authorities? Some of the academic evidence that the committee has received has suggested that, if we are to secure benefits from smaller class sizes, we need to ensure that teachers get the most out of the children and increase and improve attainment. Should local government and the Scottish Government discuss ways of ensuring that our teachers are effectively trained to enable them to take advantage of reducing class sizes?

Leslie Manson: I tend to hold to the line that there is little, in terms of staff development, that can be done for teachers of large classes that would not also benefit teachers of small classes, and vice versa. The generic aspect is that, through initiatives such as curriculum for excellence, there is a well-recognised need to continue to develop the skills of what is already a highly trained and skilled workforce through, for example, training around active learning, participative learning and so on. If those skills were further developed, they

would benefit learners irrespective of the size of the classes that they were in.

The Convener: Does that suggest that there is little point in reducing class sizes?

Leslie Manson: It does not suggest that at all. All things being equal, it would be perverse to prefer a larger class to a smaller class, although clearly classes can get too small. I work in Orkney, where some classes consist of two or three children, which brings its own challenges. By and large, however, in comparing class sizes of 20 and 30, a class size of 20 will obviously provide a better learning environment. Having a small class does not immediately make a teacher better, but it offers certain opportunities for better teaching, such as increased time for one-to-one teaching, which is the most effective means of instruction for subjects such as mathematics. Furthermore, challenges around behaviour become easier, so the focus of the teacher can move from classroom management to quality teaching. There are many benefits to having smaller class sizes.

The Convener: The Government's original policy was to have class sizes of 18 for all primary 1 to 3 children. However, in discussions with COSLA, the new Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning has agreed to a target of 20 per cent of primary 1 to 3 pupils across Scotland in classes with 18 pupils or fewer by August 2010. What is the likelihood of that target's being met? What might be the consequences of a variation in class sizes across the country, given that there will still be some primary 1 to 3 pupils in classes with 27 or 30 pupils until the legislation is changed. What effect will there be on classes higher up in primary schools, and in the first two years of secondary education, where commitments were made in relation to maths and English teaching?

Councillor Derek Mackay (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities): Your first question was on the change in the aspiration to have all children in classes with 18 pupils or less. Because of the financial position that we find ourselves in, we all welcome a more targeted approach. Now, the situation will vary across the country, but that will be in keeping with what local authorities feel is right for their area. It has been suggested that the areas of greatest deprivation could be targeted, because they are where a reduction in class sizes could make the greatest difference. That suggestion has been welcomed.

We are confident that the 20 per cent target will be met and that we will have the required number of pupils in class sizes of 18 or fewer in the coming academic year. That will require work to be done across Scotland, and there is evidence to suggest that the work will be done. We remain confident about that, although there are other

targets to meet, which make it hard to give a cast-iron guarantee.

You also asked what meeting those targets would mean for other year groups. When the concordat was signed, it contained various clauses on how we would work with the Scottish Government. That is happening.

On the position on a universal class size approach and free school meals, the new cabinet secretary's coming to an arrangement with COSLA to go to our current approach has allowed us financially to deliver the package. It is clear that the finances have changed. However, the approach should not mean financial displacement from elsewhere, or educational displacement.

I will give an example from Renfrewshire Council—many other councils have done the same as it has done. We planned for providing free school meals and class size reductions as a result of the concordat. When it was clear that we would move towards a deal, it was clear that, if we moved the money for free school meals to dealing with class sizes, that would mean that there would be no displacement of any other education budget, but there would be a dramatic improvement in class sizes over and above the 20 per cent target. The resources to achieve that already existed through the financial settlement, but a targeted approach was required, especially in view of the budget changes that we have experienced this year, largely as a consequence of Westminster's cut to Scotland and Scotland's review of local budgets. That was how the finances came about. There will not necessarily be financial or educational displacement. The approach should not mean larger class sizes elsewhere.

The policy of the previous Scottish Executive on S1 and S2 maths and English will also be unaffected. We are talking about separate budget issues, but the class size policy in itself should not mean displacement from anywhere else.

The Convener: I am struck by some things that you have said about finances. You claim that the new financial settlement does not allow you to deliver on the original class size commitment, but my understanding from what the Scottish Government and the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth have said is that Scotland's local authorities have received their best-ever settlement. If they have more money in this financial year than they had in the previous financial year, how do you find yourself with a new financial settlement that does not allow you to meet the class size target?

Councillor Mackay: The cabinet secretary is absolutely correct. In cash terms, the settlement is local government's best.

The Convener: So you have a lot more money and you could meet the target when you were committed to doing so. Why cannot you do that now?

Councillor Mackay: I am happy to explain why. Local authorities have received more money than ever before, and the settlement is good for local government, but it has had to take its one-third share of the Scottish Government's reduction from the United Kingdom Government, and that has had consequences for our aspirations. The concordat financial package was reopened as a consequence of London's cut to Scotland. The issue is as straightforward as that. The fact remains that Scottish local government has more money than it had in previous financial years, and its share of the Scottish Government pot is growing—it is accurate to say that—but the pressures on our services are such that we cannot do everything that we originally set out to do with the concordat. There were provisions to renegotiate where problems arose.

The Convener: I take exception to points that you are making, Councillor Mackay. If you come to the committee and suggest that the Scottish block grant has been cut, you must give the figures and be accurate. The reality is that the Scottish Government's overall block grant from Westminster is greater in this financial year than it was in the previous financial year, and that it is greater than it was in 2007. The budget is increasing, but you are not meeting your class size pledge.

Perhaps we should move on, because it is clear that we will not reach agreement on that matter. We will talk about class sizes.

I asked a specific question about the 20 per cent target, and I welcome the fact that you think that you will be able to meet it. However, I would be interested to know whether you believe that the other 80 per cent of young people in primary 1 to 3 who will not benefit from the meeting of that target will, at any point in the foreseeable future, benefit from a reduction in class sizes.

10:15

Councillor Mackay: It is hard to tell right now whether the class size policy could be extended beyond the 20 per cent. The current figure relies on the co-operation of 32 local authorities to contribute what they can to the class size policy, so it would be in the hands of individual councils to determine whether they could go further than 20 per cent in the current financial framework.

Targeting of the most vulnerable children in achieving the 20 per cent target is surely the right thing to do, and it is what many councils have done. It will make the biggest difference

educationally, it is good in cost benefit terms and it is practical. There may be different policy approaches in different areas. In an area of deprivation, for example, reductions may be easier to deliver because the class sizes are sometimes smaller to start with. It may be easier to get to 18 there than it would be in a leafy suburb where people want to reach the maximum rather than the smallest class sizes.

The question whether we can go beyond the 20 per cent is really in the hands of individual local authorities. Considering the current financial situation, and what we are all predicting for the years to come, it will be very challenging to extend beyond the 20 per cent.

The Convener: Are you confident that that 20 per cent across Scotland will encompass all children in areas of deprivation or all children who would benefit? I would have thought that the reality is that the vast majority of children will not benefit at all from the reduction in class sizes.

Councillor Mackay: If the resource is targeted at the 20 per cent, local councils will, arguably, choose what is right for them. Most have chosen to target reductions in areas of deprivation, which seems to be the right thing to do. It will make the biggest difference, and it is the most practical approach. It is also in keeping with the early years framework and ties in very well with the early years work.

Of course, we would like the level to be 100 per cent. If Parliament chooses to give us the resources to do that, that is fine, but we have to manage the resources that we have and we are doing that within the current financial envelope.

This is actually a good news story about councils working with the Government to get a very good result for Scotland's young people, and it should be welcomed. Class size reductions will work very positively with the policy on free school meals and other work to support the early years framework, to which all parties and COSLA have signed up.

The Convener: My understanding is that free school meals are not a given—some local authorities will take decisions about not delivering them. You cannot therefore say that there is an entire package, because all other policy commitments have been jettisoned in favour of a commitment on attaining 20 per cent of the class size reduction. That is the evidence that we got from Argyll and Bute Council yesterday—its commitment and main priority will be on a reduction in class sizes in primary 1.

Councillor Mackay: There is, for good reason, a focus to deliver on class sizes, on free school meals and on early years intervention, and that all works well together. Under the financial position

that we all face together, it is of course challenging to fulfil every commitment and every aspect of the concordat, but local government is working positively with the Scottish Government to do that.

One crucial point is that each local authority has come to the table with its solutions—a solution has not been forced on local authorities. We have worked together to achieve class size reductions, so it cannot be suggested that commitments have been jettisoned to make way for them. It was a positive way forward in view of the financial situation that was presented to Scotland by Westminster cuts.

The Convener: There were very clear commitments: a commitment that all class sizes for primary 1 to 3 children would be 18 or fewer and a commitment that every P1 to P3 child would receive a free school meal from August this year. The reality is that although a little progress has been made—I am sure that we all welcome that—we will not see those commitments fulfilled when schools return in August after the summer break this year.

Councillor Mackay: Convener, is not the purpose of this inquiry to find out why class size reductions are worth while and what we are moving towards? Surely we are looking at what is best educationally: if I may say with the utmost respect, you have not asked any questions on that. As a consequence of the joint partnership working, there will be a marked difference in the class size numbers in future years compared with where we have been. That is a good news story.

The Convener: Councillor Mackay, I point out to you that my first question was, indeed, about what work you were doing with teachers on taking advantage of the class sizes.

Aileen Campbell (South of Scotland) (SNP): —

The Convener: I remind committee members that they should remain silent when another member is speaking. They will have an opportunity to ask their questions at a given time. It is highly disrespectful and ill mannered—

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Hold on a second—

The Convener: Mr Gibson!

Kenneth Gibson: No—do not shout me down.

The Convener: Mr Gibson, I am not—

Kenneth Gibson: If you are asking a question in a certain tone, convener, you cannot expect members to sit completely silent throughout. The witnesses have come here of their own volition to give evidence and I think that they expect not to be interrogated but to be asked questions. That is why my colleagues have taken umbrage.

The Convener: Mr Gibson, I remind you that all parliamentary committees are robust in their scrutiny. I am sure that Councillor Mackay and other panel members are more than able to defend themselves and their record in local government, just as every member of the committee can defend themselves. In the rough and tumble of politics, we are all up to co-operating and working together, and to asking and answering questions.

Elizabeth Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Good morning, Councillor Mackay. Can you confirm whether the change in policy from classes of 18 or fewer in primary 1 to 3 to the 20 per cent target has given you more flexibility?

Councillor Mackay: Absolutely. The package of issues in the concordat were reconsidered in order to move forward. The cabinet secretary and COSLA delegates—including the president, Pat Watters—met on a number of occasions to discuss how we should go forward. They considered a range of issues and came up with the current framework, which gives us the flexibility to choose what is right for each locality.

Elizabeth Smith: Is that flexibility more about the financial aspect, or do you feel that you have more scope educationally to deliver the policy that you think is the right one?

Councillor Mackay: It is both educationally and financially flexible—headteachers would agree. There is far more flexibility financially to move from the previous universal and more costly approach, and there is more flexibility educationally for local government in how we approach the policy, how we target the 20 per cent, how we choose the pupils and how we use the policy. The new flexibility was therefore worked up in partnership with local government, rather than being thrust upon us.

Elizabeth Smith: Who would you say is the best group to make a decision about class sizes: the national Government, local government or headteachers?

Councillor Mackay: The entire partnership should consider what is right for class sizes.

Elizabeth Smith: Can you explain how you think that that process should evolve?

Councillor Mackay: It should evolve in dialogue, as it does at the moment. I am sure that it will continue to do that, with people offering their professional view on what class size fits.

Elizabeth Smith: May I just tease this out a bit? Obviously, the initial policy of classes of 18 or fewer in P1 to 3 did not fit and is not workable—your colleagues in local government said that. We have moved to another policy, which is the 20 per cent target. Do you think that that decision was

forced on you because of financial constraints? Or is there educational merit in changing to that policy?

Councillor Mackay: The commonsense argument, which Leslie Manson touched on, is that the smaller the class size, the better, unless there is a reason to have a larger discussion on, for example, teamwork or joint teaching. Research in the USA and England showed that smaller class sizes, particularly in the early years, make a difference. There is no magic number, though. The amount of 18 was used in the research, but people can take a view on that. The number that one chooses from a policy position is quite organic. I think that all headteachers would agree that the smaller the class size, the better. Similarly, I am not sure what logic decided that there should be class sizes of 20 for mathematics and English in secondary 1 and S2. Why could it not be 19 or 21? Where is the science around that? There is no exact science on what a class size should be. However, the number was set at 18 to enable us to work towards a target.

Elizabeth Smith: That is very interesting. I agree entirely that there is no magic number or percentage. I argue that it is preferable for headteachers to make such decisions because they know what is best for their schools. Although I entirely accept that lower class sizes are far better educationally, I think that it is a decision for headteachers.

Tying in with your commitment to getting the best educational decision when there is no magic number, I draw your attention to the figures for primaries 4 to 7, which show a considerable increase in the number of pupils in each class. Given that, is it not better for headteachers to make the decision about the continuum from P1 to P7, or should that still be a matter for local and national Government?

Councillor Mackay: I am not sure that we should debate whether education should be run by, say, independent trusts or whatever. However, you are right about the influence of headteachers in such decisions—after all, the vast majority of departmental spend in education is in the hands of headteachers through devolved school budgets, on which Leslie Manson might want to comment. I do not think that anyone has the magic answer. This is all about partnership and working together, and certainly there has been more of that through the concordat than there was before.

Leslie Manson: On the question about headteachers and local government, what Elizabeth Smith suggested needs to be done in consultation and partnership. After all, the headteacher might be subject to various pressures from parents, colleagues in the school or others, whereas external professional advisers—

psychologists, quality improvement officers and so on—have to look at issues such as additional support needs that require targeted support, possibly at the expense of other things in the school. However, that is the nature of the inclusive society in which we all believe. Ultimately, the headteacher will deploy staff and construct classes in what one would hope is a collegial way in the school, but any such approach must be subject to external advice and local authority policies.

Elizabeth Smith: Are headteachers content with pressures from local and national Government to force classes into certain sizes?

John Stodter (Association of Directors of Education in Scotland): If you were to ask P1 teachers the question, they would universally say that it is good to have a smaller number of children in the class because that makes a big difference to pupils at that age. As we know, children who walk in the door have some skills and are, at the end of P1, beginning to read and write. In an ideal world, P1 teachers would want smaller classes.

Elizabeth Smith: Are you okay with specific numbers and percentages?

John Stodter: We believe that it is better for headteachers, in the context of local authority policy, to make decisions about the configuration of classes. It is probably wrong to think of a class as a single group, because the children are put into different groups for, say, reading or mathematics, a visiting specialist teacher might take a big group for music, or there might be a smaller group for physical education. As a result, we find the whole concept of focusing purely on class sizes quite difficult. Indeed, with regard to some of the most flexible management arrangements, we heard this morning of a school of 100 pupils that does not have any classes as such; instead, everyone gets together in the morning and, throughout the day, they are broken up into groups for various activities with teachers and other adults who try to support the youngsters' development.

We very much welcome the new approach, not only because of the financial and educational flexibility that it offers, but because of the acknowledgement that we need a more targeted approach to meeting children's needs. Indeed, that is what headteachers do. They look at the children who come into the school, assess which group they should be put in and target resources at meeting those needs. Some children might be in a group of 30, while others might be in a small reading group of five or six.

10:30

Mike Rumbles (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): Before I ask my question I want to make it clear that, from my many years of experience in education, I believe it is better to have smaller class sizes. I do not know of any teacher who would want a larger class rather than a smaller class. That is a given.

I entirely understand what John Stodter has said about flexibility in the classroom and team teaching—all sorts of exercises are going on—but I want to follow on from Elizabeth Smith's questions. We now have a 20 per cent target. I understand why there should be a target of 100 per cent, or as many pupils in smaller classes as can be achieved, but why was the figure of 20 per cent plucked out of the air? I would like Leslie Manson and John Stodter from the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland in particular to answer that question. I cannot see any educational reason why education authorities have been given a target of 20 per cent. I would like the witnesses to focus purely on educational reasons. What are the educational reasons for the 20 per cent target?

Leslie Manson: It is worth pointing out that ADES is not a political organisation; it is a professional organisation.

Mike Rumbles: I am not asking a political question; I am asking an educational question.

Leslie Manson: I wanted to clarify that in case any misinterpretation occurred.

Mike Rumbles: My question was about what you think entirely as a result of your educational professionalism and experience; I am not interested in politics.

Leslie Manson: It is difficult for me or John Stodter to establish from an educational point of view why a national Government target of 20 per cent was suggested. We could hazard a guess that it was suggested because it is more than 13 per cent, which is the level at which we find ourselves. I understand that the issue is progress. A class size of 20 is as arbitrary as a class size of 18, but a class size of 18 is perhaps perceived to be better than a class size of 19, for example. Similarly, a figure of 20 per cent is perceived to be better than a figure of 19 per cent, and 25 per cent is better still. Such figures are fairly arbitrary, but they represent steps.

Mike Rumbles: Does John Stodter agree with that?

John Stodter: It is a matter of progress. The approach marks a change to being more targeted and flexible, and it marks progress, which is what we are here for.

Mike Rumbles: I want to keep politics out of the matter; I am entirely focused on education. If I understand correctly what has been said, there are, from your perspective, no educational reasons why 20 per cent has been chosen. I do not want to misunderstand what you are saying. From an educational point of view, 20 per cent is quite an arbitrary figure and is not understandable.

Leslie Manson: That is self-evident. The only meaningful percentage is 100 per cent—that has been alluded to.

Councillor Mackay: I would like to make a wee point about the 20 per cent issue.

Mike Rumbles: It is a political point.

Councillor Mackay: It can be political if you want it to be. If this is a Scottish Parliament I am sure we can discuss politics in it.

If you do not believe that class sizes make a difference, that is fine. If you believe that smaller class sizes make a difference, it should be remembered that 11,000 pupils will be in smaller class sizes as a consequence of the arrangements. Those pupils are 11,000 reasons why 20 per cent matters.

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): I would like to pursue Mike Rumbles's line of questioning. Twenty per cent may be progress from 13 per cent, but there is a choice. It is being said that some pupils' class sizes will be improved, but many will not benefit from that. Surely that is an educational issue. What is the educational reason for prioritising some over others? Are you sure that the 7 per cent who may benefit will actually benefit and that 80 per cent will not really miss out and be worse off?

John Stodter: There is no evidence to suggest that reducing class sizes for some will have disbenefits for other children. On the educational rationale for targeting resources and what formal education systems tend to do, children who go into primary 1 have very different starting points. Let us put things crudely and imagine doing ability tests or projections of possible educational potentials, cognitive abilities or whatever. One child may have a score of 50 in a valid and reliable assessment and another may have a score of 100. If, over primary 1, everyone increased their score by 10 per cent, the gap between the most-attaining children and the least-attaining children would have increased. That is all that would have happened.

The rationale for targeting resources is that although we must make the improvements for all children, we need to focus on the least-attaining children. The correlation between social deprivation and educational attainment is very strong, so that provides an educational rationale

for targeting those areas. For us, the argument is about how to maximise children's potential and to close the gap, which has been an almost Herculean and impossible task throughout the world. How do we provide more support, more effort and more motivation to achieve more attainment? Various authorities—Glasgow City Council and North Lanarkshire Council are two examples—have tried to tackle that issue by putting intensive support into primary 1 and nursery classes. Evidence shows that the earlier support is given, the higher the chance of closing the gap.

Leslie Manson: Mr Macintosh asked who the 11,000 are and how they are chosen. That involves a series of decisions. The first decision is for class teachers; who will have more of their time—this or that child. That is based on professional judgment. At the school level, the decision is about whether this or that class will receive more additional support. Again, that is based on judgment. Education authorities exercise exactly the same judgment when deciding where to target additional teachers and make the difference. Such decisions are based on authorities' knowledge of schools in much the same way as teachers' decisions about how to spend their time are based on their knowledge of their children.

Ken Macintosh: We all start from the premise that reducing class sizes is good. The Parliament and Governments have engaged in that policy for years—it is not new. The difficulty is with the political issue of a target of 18, as opposed to the educational benefit of smaller classes. A target of 18 in 20 per cent of classes can be justified by saying that it is better than 13 per cent, but that is of course internal justification that one class size target is better than another. In reality, the choice is not about that—it is about the target of 20 per cent versus school meals, additional support for learning and nurture groups. The choice is not about the educational benefit of 20 per cent rather than 13 per cent but about the educational benefit of targeting resources and making the difference for some rather than using resources elsewhere.

The evidence that we have received suggests a clear knock-on effect. Shetland Islands Council, East Lothian Council, the City of Edinburgh Council, North Lanarkshire Council and South Ayrshire Council all suggested that the small class size policy would result in an increase in upper primary class sizes or more composite classes, so the policy has a disbenefit at later stages. We are all aware of the political reasons for the target, but I am trying to work out what the educational reasons for it are and whether they are sound—I have heard no evidence for that so far.

Leslie Manson: The aspiration to reduce class sizes is one of several ways in which it is hoped that achievement will be raised. ADES believes that the juxtaposition of the political imperative with the financial recession and what has felt, certainly in councils, like a pretty dire shortage of money—the collision between those two factors—has contributed to the unintended consequences that you just described. With a blank sheet of paper and a fresh planning approach, the process might not be planned as it has happened, but a balance must be struck between achieving national political imperatives and doing our best locally with the money that is available. That is what the 32 councils are grappling with.

Councillor Mackay: I want to make the fair point about political choices in a tougher financial environment. We could not just continue with what we had on the signing of the concordat—we had to change according to the circumstances, which means that we are facing tough choices in a range of areas. Where we are getting to is a deal done in partnership. There will continue to be nurture classes, early intervention work and so on. To follow your logic, it is not a bad thing that aspirations have been scaled back to address the financial climate that we are in.

Ken Macintosh: I agree that it is not wrong. It would have been wrong to continue with the pretence that we will have 100 per cent class sizes of 18 when it is clear that that will not happen, so what is happening is better than that. Is the agreement predicated on educational benefit or is it more a political agreement? Some councils have signed up, but it strikes me that a lot of them might have done so for political reasons rather than for educational reasons. In other words, education directors across the country are split about their priorities; some education directors think that the resources they have would be better used elsewhere, but others—politically more sensitive or otherwise—are saying that the class size policy is good and they will prioritise it. I am just trying to unpick that.

Councillor Mackay: Can the agreement not be both a political resolution and good for education? They are not mutually exclusive.

Leslie Manson: Scotland is a heterogeneous country. You said that different directors might have different priorities. Different directors work in different contexts. The politics of reducing class sizes in the early years was predicated on an expectation that rolls were falling across Scotland, but the opposite is the case in some councils. Directors make different choices and it is not surprising that they might end up with apparently different priorities. It is about striking a balance. You will find that there are 32 different sets of factors to balance in 32 different locations.

Ken Macintosh: The Government is going to legislate in this area to introduce a class size maximum of 25 in P1. What is the panel's view on the desirability of a class size policy of 25? Why not make it a class size policy of 18?

John Stodter: Our view is that local authorities probably already have the power to set class sizes, but that is muddled by an aggregating set of legislation. Ideally, local authorities should have the legislative power to set class sizes according to their needs. There are some difficulties with having a one-size-fits-all, blanket approach. We would prefer it if local authorities were given the explicit power—perhaps via an amendment to existing legislation—to set class sizes.

Councillor Mackay: You asked why not set the legal maximum at 18. That is because a majority of pupils will not be in a class size—or there will not be an aspiration for them to be in a class size—of 18. That will be for the 20 per cent, or whatever we get to, beyond that. We would not set a legal maximum of 18 if that was not going to be the national universal policy, because it is targeted. If the aspiration had not been changed, that would have been a good question. The aspiration has changed, so 18 is no longer relevant for the universal cap on P1 entries.

Ken Macintosh: So official policy is now that 25 is the universal approach. Is that what you are saying?

Councillor Mackay: That is what the Government proposes. You asked why we should not set a legal cap of 18—because 18 will not be the maximum in every primary school for all the reasons we have just discussed.

Ken Macintosh: On the class size of 25, do we have the balance right between parental choice and numbers? In some areas, there will be a clash.

10:45

Leslie Manson: Twenty-five is halfway between 18 and 33, which are the two figures that we have talked about so far, so in that regard the answer to your question is that there has been a fairly pragmatic stab at getting the balance right.

John Stodter: By law, education authorities must deliver education, in accordance with parents' wishes. If an education authority has a policy—it is legally constituted to manage education and needs policies to enable it to do so—and has consulted parents fully, a legal argument can be made that the authority can defend its approach in court and the sheriff cannot fairly grant an individual placing request and overturn the authority's obligation to deliver

education, in the context of a class size policy and in accordance with all the parents.

The difficulty is that not every child needs to be in the same size of class. Therefore, it makes more sense to devolve to authorities the responsibility for consulting parents and establishing a policy that people support. If a parent does not like the approach, they must take their chances in the context of the policy framework that is legally set out. If the authority has done its job right, it will have set a level that balances the wishes of individual or groups of parents and the needs of all the children.

Ken Macintosh: Recent figures show that although over many years there was a steady increase in the proportion of pupils in primary 1 who were in classes of fewer than 25 children, the trend is now in the opposite direction, which is interesting. In other words, the proportion of pupils in P1 classes of more than 25 has increased during the past couple of years. Why is that? Can you hazard a guess, or do you know the reason?

Leslie Manson: It is well known that the number of teachers in Scotland has reduced during the past two years, and in large part it is a case of teacher numbers following pupil numbers. As well as the natural fall in the number of teachers as a result of falling pupil rolls, there is likely to have been an additional factor, because as a result of the financial strictures on council budgets I would judge that most directors and colleagues have adopted much closer scrutiny of their staffing policies and adherence to those policies. I speak from experience, because my authority had to make savings, so we were much more robust and speedy in implementing staffing policies. By and large, I guess that prior to the past few years schools in Scotland were slightly overstaffed rather than understaffed. That would explain the blip in the data to which you referred.

Kenneth Gibson: I do not understand why you are talking about a blip. Figures that we have been given by the Scottish Parliament information centre suggest that after 2007 the proportion of pupils in classes of more than 25 reduced from 28 per cent to 23 per cent in P1 to P3, and from 34 per cent to 32 per cent in P4 to P7. I do not know where Mr Macintosh got his figures from, but there seems to be steady progress in the right direction, as far as I can tell from the SPICe briefing.

Ken Macintosh: Which chart are you looking at?

Kenneth Gibson: I am looking at chart 1, "Proportion of P1-3 pupils in classes of different sizes 1997-2009", in paper ELLC/S3/10/6/2.

Ken Macintosh: For the record, page 4 of the same briefing says:

"Chart 2 below shows the increase in the proportion of P1 pupils in classes under 25 from 38% in 2003 to 96% in 2007. This has declined slightly in the last two years to 91%."

Kenneth Gibson: That is not what it says in the previous chart—

Ken Macintosh: Chart 2 refers to P1 classes. We are talking about a P1 policy.

Elizabeth Smith: Indeed—the data are not comparable.

Councillor Mackay: I will try to be helpful. Even if you argue over the 0.1 or 0.2 per cent or whatever, if you assume that the number is stagnating—

Ken Macintosh: No, it is—

Councillor Mackay: The average is going down then. It depends which statistic we use. The big issue is that because of the framework that we now have, the averages will go down in P1 to P3 and the situation with the actual number of pupils and class sizes of 18 or fewer will also improve. Class averages will come down as a consequence of the policy, we believe.

Ken Macintosh: "We believe," you say, Councillor Mackay. For clarification, the question that I asked was about class sizes of 25 in P1. Just to be absolutely clear, following a substantial increase from 38 to 96 per cent between 2003 and 2007, the figure for P1 is now going in the other direction: it has now gone back down to 91 per cent. There is no dubiety about it: the figures are going the wrong way, and that is despite the Government supposedly being committed to decreasing class sizes in P1 to P3. It does not make much sense, and I am interested to know the explanation.

Perhaps Councillor Mackay can comment on Renfrewshire, as its figures for class sizes of 18 seem to be going the wrong way, too. The figure seems to be increasing. There was a specific promise on class sizes of 18. Perhaps Councillor Mackay can explain it.

Councillor Mackay: Absolutely. As regards the position going forward, you will see dramatic improvement. As for class sizes of 25 or over, it could be that placing requests tip some classes in some schools over the 25 mark. That might explain some of the pupils who get into classes. No matter what the council or Government policy is, the law as it stands says that if there is a challenge the pupil can get in. Any future legislation or regulation on that is in your hands.

As far as Renfrewshire is concerned, I am happy to report that performance will be dramatically improved. Following the framework, we will invest a significant sum in employing more teachers, which I am sure the committee will

welcome, so as to achieve the class size policy of P1 to P3 and not just to surpass the level of 20 per cent but to get more than 30 per cent of pupils in Renfrewshire in classes of 18 or fewer in August.

Ken Macintosh: My experience is that placing requests might account for the situation with class sizes of 25; that is why I was asking the question. Placing requests will account for some of it. I was trying to get an understanding from the witnesses about whether that accounts for the whole 5 per cent decrease in the proportion that we were discussing earlier, or whether it explains things only in some authorities. It does not quite make sense.

I am delighted to hear Councillor Mackay's commitment to reducing class sizes in Renfrewshire, but his administration has been in power there for three years, having been elected nominally on a policy of reducing class sizes to 18 in P1 to P3, yet the policy is going in the wrong direction. I do not understand how we can accept his assurances that there will be a substantive improvement when the record shows that, for three years, the figures have been going the wrong way.

Councillor Mackay: I am happy to defend the education record of Renfrewshire Council, with improving attainment and better outcomes, anywhere. Ask me back a year from now and see whether we get more than 30 per cent of P1 to P3 class sizes to be 18 pupils and fewer. We are putting in a substantial investment to make it so, and I am very confident that it will be delivered.

Ken Macintosh: Has it been Renfrewshire's policy for the past three years to decrease class sizes to 18 in P1 to P3—or not?

Councillor Mackay: Yes, it is the policy. We have managed to achieve improved averages of class size and to put in place a cap. We have clearly not been able to go as far as we would have liked, because of the various pressures that the council is under, but Renfrewshire Council will make the third-greatest contribution to pupils going into class sizes of 18 or fewer. That is the third-greatest contribution in Scotland from the ninth-largest authority. I think that there will be a dramatic improvement from my authority, which I am sure you would welcome.

Ken Macintosh: I would indeed welcome a dramatic improvement.

When you came into power, 7.9 or 7.6 per cent of classes had under 18 pupils, and the figure has now fallen to 4.9 per cent. I do not understand it. It has been your policy to get more small classes, so how come you have far fewer small classes?

Councillor Mackay: I am sure you understand that manifesto commitments are completed over a

full term. Our percentage of pupils in classes of 18 or fewer will be among the best in Scotland. You should judge us on our record after a full term in office. We will see dramatic improvement. If you like, I will come back in a year's time to explain that. We made a political decision to put the investment in place—I am sure it will interest you to hear that it was not supported by the Labour Party in Renfrewshire—and we will deliver on that.

Ken Macintosh: I just do not understand. What have you been doing for three years? We are talking about P1. It does not affect anybody higher up the school. You could have put the resources in. I thought that it was stated Scottish National Party policy, including in Renfrewshire, to have class sizes of 18 or fewer in P1 to P3, yet in the three years during which you have been in power the number of classes of 18 or fewer has reduced. You have fewer of those classes than when you came to power. I do not understand. What have you been doing, exactly?

Councillor Mackay: You want me to give a presentation on the range of education commitments that Renfrewshire Council has made. We have better educational outcomes, we have fewer exclusions—

Ken Macintosh: But we are not asking—

Councillor Mackay: You asked exactly what my authority has been doing. I can give you a response if you want.

Ken Macintosh: On class sizes.

Councillor Mackay: On class sizes, we have invested in the early years; we have reduced averages, I believe; and we have capped a maximum on the primaries to make way for better performance. I will admit that Renfrewshire Council's performance on class sizes was not as good as we would want it to be. This year, we will invest £1.5 million to improve that, in tough financial times, and we will be among the best in Scotland when it comes to delivering on class sizes of 18 or fewer in our term of office in the middle of the worst recession since the second world war. I do not think that that will be a bad record when we come to the end of our term in office. I will be able to give you more information in August when we have the enrolment. I think that it will be a positive record. You are right to suggest that progress was not in the right direction, but as a consequence of the arrangement with COSLA and the Government, it will be, and I think that it will be welcome.

The Convener: Before we move on, I have a question about the statutory limit. I fully accept Councillor Mackay's point that the political environment has changed. There is now no universal commitment for all primary 1 to primary 3 classes to have a maximum of 18 pupils, so the

statutory limit should be 25. That is a commonsense answer to the question that Mr Macintosh posed. However, I am also conscious that a number of local authorities face challenges, even where they have tried to keep their primary classes to 20 or 25, because when a parental request comes in the local authority usually has to concede to that request, even if doing so is not the council's stated policy or desire, because the parent has the right to go to the Court of Session.

If we set a statutory cap of 25 because that is appropriate to the political environment that we are in, we will still have parents who are able to exercise their discretion, so any local authority that aspires even to meet the 20 per cent target might well find itself in difficulties. If a parent comes along and their child is number 19, the proposed statutory cap will not offer local authorities any support or protection to allow them to meet their agreement with the Scottish Government. Do you have a view on that? Will the statutory cap offer you the right level of protection?

Councillor Mackay: It will offer the protection of class sizes of 25, clearly, but on the policy of 18, the scenario that you painted is correct. Local authorities will consider that when they draw up what they will do in relation to targeting class sizes. A number of councils have chosen to target the areas of deprivation by way of the Scottish index of multiple deprivation. In doing that, they find that many schools in such areas have smaller class sizes or have the potential for them. With a certain amount of investment in such schools, they can have classes of 18 or fewer and more room for manoeuvre—whereas in more affluent and, arguably, popular schools, there is not as much room for manoeuvre and, arguably, smaller class sizes would not make a big difference.

When they draw up their policies, local authorities should consider how challengeable they could be if parents choose to send their children to particular schools. That might alleviate some of the difficulties that you envisage, but you are basically right: until legislation or regulations give us greater legal protection on that issue it will remain a risk—but it is better that the Government consults and legislates than that it rushes to legislate. I am sure that that is a question that you will ask the cabinet secretary when he talks about the legislation or regulations that are required. We would rather get it right than rush to regulation; it is a risk, but I do not think that it will completely undermine the policy. The choice that parents have may affect a class here or there and it may mean that a target is missed here or there, but we are fairly relaxed about that. We would welcome regulation at some point in the future, but it has to go through due process.

11:00

Leslie Manson: ADES's line is that to be able to implement local policies on class sizes there has to be this sort of enforcement. You would hope that in time the whole landscape will be a bit clearer, but there are currently different means of regulating class sizes at different stages. As you know, it is quite a complex minefield, but the place to start would certainly be primary 1, because that is the first point of transition where youngsters move from the relatively high staff to pupil ratio in pre-school; it is the first stage in school and it is clearly the place to try to control size if you are going to choose one stage rather than all of them.

An anecdotal observation from colleagues is that the targeting of more deprived areas for the 20 per cent of smaller class sizes tends not to conflict with the areas into which there are placing requests, so they are reasonably confident that by targeting more deprived areas they will be able to implement the policy without being disrupted by a mass of placing requests.

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): Following on from that discussion, it is interesting that while we have put such an emphasis on class sizes, when it comes to parental choice, parents do not seem to rate that as highly as the school that they want their child to attend—class sizes become increasingly irrelevant to parents.

We have received evidence from the Educational Institute of Scotland, which has been one of the driving forces behind pushing for smaller class sizes, because the evidence on them indicates that there are clear, identifiable benefits for teachers in having smaller class sizes. There are also discussions about educational benefits.

The EIS's submission suggests that it is unclear how the 20 per cent target will be introduced and how it will be measured. Have we got the balance right between the flexibility that has been given to local authorities to meet the 20 per cent target and the educational benefit to pupils throughout Scotland, not just on a local authority basis? The EIS asked whether the target relates to all P1 to P3 pupils and how it will be measured. Will it be measured by the end of August or the end of the session? The EIS has many questions on the issue. Do you think that there is a problem with the EIS having so many questions about it, or is it down to local decision making and whether the balance is right?

Robert Nicol (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities): I will start and perhaps Leslie Manson can come in.

It is probably fair to say that we have not worked out with the Scottish Government all the detail on exactly how we progress on measurement, but we

are clear that we will have to do that. On how local authorities select the 20 per cent, they will make that choice based on good local information. We are clear that we will have to get to that point with the Scottish Government.

Leslie Manson might want to say a little bit more about when it is useful to get information on how well we are doing on achieving the 20 per cent target.

Leslie Manson: I must apologise, but I am not absolutely certain of the question that Claire Baker asked. Was it to do with the involvement of and communication with the EIS?

Claire Baker: The EIS has raised questions around how we identify whether the 20 per cent target has been achieved and whether there is to be a consistent approach throughout Scotland or it is down to individual local authorities. The EIS has also asked whether all local authorities must meet the 20 per cent target and whether there is consistency in where the target is focused. For example, is it focused on deprived communities or on schools with falling rolls? From your evidence, it seems that some schools are quite close to achieving the class size target of 18, not through a policy drive from the centre of the authority but because school rolls are falling. The target is therefore being achieved by chance more than anything else.

Leslie Manson: The cabinet secretary's offer was certainly welcomed by ADES. It represented a compromise, because part of the deal was that progress towards the 20 per cent target, which at the moment is based only on promises and expectations, should be verifiable. Normally, we get our statistics through the census that takes place in September, the results of which come out in November. Clearly, as part of the deal, it would be important to be able to verify progress in a more immediate way.

There are still shifting sands between the present time and when kids turn up in classes in August. First, there is school enrolment, which takes place around now across all councils. Once that is done it is up to schools to construct class sets and allocate staff. By the end of May or the beginning of June, schools have a fairly good idea of what their class make-up will be. Of course, things can change over the summer. Ultimately, class sizes will be determined by the number of youngsters who turn up in August. It is therefore reasonable that councils are asked to provide a progress check. It may be appropriate to indicate in June or July what the position looks like and perhaps indicate in September what the class make-up was in August.

One difficulty in the planning is that, if you are constructing a set of three classes of 18 in a

school and you get one more child, that removes 18 children from your data set. You are not going to have three classes of 19, where the removal of one child is going to add 18 children to your data set, because you will not construct 19s: you will construct 18s because that is the magic figure. The time between now and August is therefore a bit of a minefield for planning, because the best-laid plans might go astray.

You asked about 20 questions, but I am not sure how many of them I have answered.

Claire Baker: What you said is helpful. However, how will each local authority measure whether it has achieved the target? Will it measure whether 20 per cent of the pupils in P1 to P3 are in classes of 18, or will the measure be 20 per cent of the schools or the classes? Is the measurement just based on the straightforward school roll figure?

Leslie Manson: It is clear that it is a pupil count. The directors and their colleagues will simply set out all the classes that exist in August, and those who are in classes of 18 or less will be counted and those in classes of 19 or more will be counted—it is a simple head count.

Claire Baker: I have a question on early intervention. The driving force for 20 per cent seems to be to focus the policy on classes in high-deprivation areas. Most authorities seem prepared to use the policy to tackle deprivation and educational inequality. The Government's plans for tackling those issues focus on early intervention. However, the information on education budgets suggests that very few authorities plan to extend pre-school hours. If you were putting together an effective package to tackle educational inequality and deprivation, would that not be quite an important part of the package? Do you have concerns that there has been a reduced focus on increasing pre-school hours in order to achieve the class size target?

Leslie Manson: The three main policy directives make good sense, but other policies, such as the nurture groups policy, add other strategies to the mix. You will be aware that previous Administrations supported early intervention through the provision of early intervention nursery nurses, who were additional, well-trained support staff who could help with literacy, numeracy and so on.

The three main strategies are currently being debated, but they are part of a much wider issue. I have every confidence that all 32 directors and their staff will make judicious choices according to their local context to address the specific needs within their council areas, and that that will be replicated at school level and class level. I am

sure that we are all great believers in giving autonomy to those who deliver services.

I have every confidence that there will be a good balance between the pre-school years policy, the free meal entitlement policy and the class size policy.

Councillor Mackay: You are right to say that the issue is about choices. All local authorities are signed up to the early years intervention framework.

If there was a bottomless pot of money, we would provide universal free school meals, universal smaller class sizes and universal increases in pre-five nursery provision. However, we are prioritising initiatives on balance, as part of a package. We are increasing the number of primary 1 to 3 pupils who are eligible for free school meals, increasing the number of smaller classes and expanding access to pre-five nursery classes, although we would like to go further in that regard. However, if we targeted all the resources on one area, we would not be able to deliver the full package. For example, if we did not have a commitment on class sizes, and put all our resources into free school meals, you would be right to ask us whether it was right to put 100 per cent of our investment into free school meals and not into the other areas. We are trying to strike a balance.

Although the pre-five nursery provision that you mention is a credible policy, it would not be targeted; it would be available to all under-fives. What we are doing just now is targeted on those children to whom such provision would make the biggest difference.

John Stodter: It is important not to underestimate the financial context within which authorities will be working this year and in the future. There is a difficulty with having ambitious general national targets when authorities are making quite significant reductions and even questioning whether they can afford certain core services. There is a tension between hitting targets on which political commitments have been made and making choices to protect services on the ground.

Our latest survey of directors—half of whom were able to respond—showed that they are all having to consider their management time and their teaching staff formula, and that all of them will be reducing their teacher numbers due to a number of factors, including school roll downturn. Almost all budget areas—the devolved school budget, the support staff budget, the staffing budget, the budgets for transport, cleaning or heating and so on—are being significantly reduced.

The decisions are not purely educational or political. Directors are faced with tough decisions about what will cause the least damage or have the most positive impact. Our directors are concerned that the next five years will be as tough a time as any that we have ever had—certainly as tough as anything that we have experienced in the 30 years in which I have been involved in education.

11:15

Claire Baker: Councillor Mackay said that councils could do all those things if they had endless pots of money. When free school meals, smaller class sizes and increased provision of pre-school nursery places were first promised in 2007, did councils have endless pots of money? Were those policies ever achievable within the current parliamentary session, even if we look back to the period before the current economic recession? Were they ever deliverable even in that financial context?

Councillor Mackay: Thanks for the question, as the answer is yes. The money was in the concordat and the financial settlement to deliver on those policies, but the financial settlement had to be reopened as a consequence of Westminster's cut to Scotland. Local government had to take its one-third share of that cut, and some of the commitments were affected as a consequence. Otherwise, we would have been able to deliver on the concordat in its entirety, so the answer is yes.

Claire Baker: You will be aware that there is disagreement about that. Other organisations have argued that the policies were not deliverable even before we faced the recent economic challenges. I do not know whether ADES has a view on that.

Councillor Mackay: On the issue of there being different views, every political party in all 32 local authorities in Scotland signed up to the concordat. All parties thought that it was deliverable.

The Convener: However, the concordat never said that councils would deliver class sizes of 18 for primaries 1 to 3. As a matter of fact, councils only signed up to making progress on the policy. I suppose that we are exploring today what progress is being made. Councils did not sign up to class sizes of 18 for all pupils in P1 to P3.

Councillor Mackay: So we are meeting the commitment. That is a job well done.

Elizabeth Smith: I want to return to the question whether other things could be done to improve attainment in schools. Is there anything on the agenda, within the concordat or elsewhere, that could improve attainment?

Leslie Manson: Most of my colleagues would agree that the single most important factor in the quality of the educational experience is the quality of teaching. I say teaching rather than teacher because learners learn from a range of people, but the teacher is key. Councils are working all the time with the General Teaching Council for Scotland and initial teacher education establishments to try to improve things. As I said earlier, we have a highly talented workforce, but we must continue to strive to improve further. At local level, that is done through extensive continuing professional development.

The curriculum for excellence, which I also mentioned earlier, is a universally agreed approach to cutting the Gordian knot that can sometimes exist in education. It can be difficult to change from the old era to the new, but that has to happen. My colleagues are very comfortable that that ambitious programme contains further solutions to improve the educational experience for young people and therefore raise attainment and achievement.

Elizabeth Smith: Is that achievable, given the resources that are currently available to local councils?

Leslie Manson: There appear to be greater challenges as a result of the imminent financial predicament than there were previously.

Elizabeth Smith: This is perhaps a difficult question, but is there anything that could bring about an increase in attainment without extra financial resources? Are there things that we can do to improve the experience in the classroom without additional finance?

Leslie Manson: Yes. The successful implementation of the curriculum for excellence will, in due course, offer the opportunity for a relatively cost-neutral solution, because we will teach in the same schools and with the same staff, but we will do some things differently and a number of things better. John Stodter has just pointed out the fact that formative assessment—assessment is for learning and similar programmes—are well embedded in the primary sector and increasingly embedded in the secondary sector. Although resources are required in the short term to develop the new curriculum—it is almost a misnomer to call it “the curriculum” because we are talking about learning and teaching in its entirety—in due course it will be a cost-neutral and, touch wood, affordable way of achieving what you and I both aspire to.

Councillor Mackay: I will make a brief suggestion that does not involve huge sums of money: more parental involvement, particularly in primary schools. Parents may get involved in particular committees or help out in the classroom.

It is really good for peer work and role models as well as taking an active interest in education. It is not expensive, but it is rewarding. Greater parental involvement in primary and early years education has turned out to be really positive.

Elizabeth Smith: I agree with that as long as parents have extra choice as to where they can send their children to school, which is slightly constrained by the class size policy.

Christina McKelvie (Central Scotland) (SNP): I will tease out some of the specifics about additionality across local authorities. In particular, what are the witnesses' feelings about the use of nurture groups and smaller class sizes? Are nurture groups simply smaller classes with a specialist element?

John Stodter: That is why we find the debate about class size difficult. Some authorities have identified children who they know from the age of three or four will struggle with education—the social relationships, discipline and concentration—and are trying to develop an educational intervention package for them. The authorities take them off into small groups, work intensively with them and try to run that alongside the smallest possible class size so that, when they are in the class with all the other children, they can sustain their place in it.

The use of nurture groups is not contrary to smaller class sizes; it is a parallel support. The strength of that approach is that it is very targeted. It is not a policy about numbers, a target or an objective; it asks what the children need, how we can make them improve and how we can help them. That is the kind of educational policy that ADES advocates and supports.

Leslie Manson: The term “nurture group” has been used most recently in relation to Glasgow City Council and one or two other councils in Strathclyde. However, you will find the idea of a nurturing environment in every authority in Scotland, because it is the way in which schools and staff try to narrow the gap in experience, socialisation and language.

The flexibility that has been offered to councils recently has been welcomed in relation to the notion of a nurturing environment. Under the previous, rather dogmatic, approach, if we had 36 youngsters we would have to have 18 in one class with their teacher and the other 18 in another class with their teacher, and everybody would appear to be happy with that. However, to create a nurturing environment, a school might justifiably have classes of, perhaps, 12 and 24 or 10 and 26. That is happening throughout Scotland and is done with the best educational rationale. The fear was that such arrangements were in jeopardy because of the dogma about class sizes of 18, but the

flexibility releases us, making such asymmetrical arrangements politically acceptable and allowing nurturing environments to spring up throughout the land.

Christina McKelvie: You have anticipated my next question, which was about the merits of increased flexibility. I am interested in the views of COSLA and councils. Glasgow City Council has particular problems. It has the worst attainment levels and the lowest spend per pupil, and it is not making much difference. Would putting together classes of 18 and nurture groups have a bigger impact? What is your view on councils' flexibility to act in accordance with their perception of local need? If that is what Glasgow is doing, it should be commended for it.

Leslie Manson: Nurture groups and class sizes are both about a process. Both initiatives aspire to achieve the same desirable outcome, by supporting young people, perhaps particularly those who have not had the same life chances as others have had, to get the best possible education and life chances. It is difficult to see a theoretical difference between the aspirations of the two initiatives.

Councillor Mackay: COSLA's position is that councils prefer localism to a national, one-size-fits-all policy. That is what we have in relation to early years work, which is crucial. The flexibility that we have means that we can find the right solution for the local area, which is what has been happening. Glasgow City Council's policy will differ from that of Renfrewshire Council, Aberdeen City Council or any other council.

Early intervention is essential. If members asked me, as leader of a council, what we must protect most in the extremely turbulent financial years to come, I would say that we must protect the whole package of work on early intervention. NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde's director of public health, Linda De Caestecker, has produced an excellent report about the soaring number of children who need intervention and support and are not in an environment in which they are happy and cared for. That is why early intervention is so important. Not only is deprivation increasing in some areas, but social work budgets are under extreme pressure, because they must address the results of a lack of early intervention.

All the work to do with nurturing our youngest people is essential. It is scary that the number of children who are looked after by local authorities is increasing. If we do not get the early years right, we will reap the horrors for generations to come. During the current financial crisis we must continue to invest in a range of efforts to address early intervention and give young people the best possible start in life.

Christina McKelvie: Glasgow City Council has claimed that it does not want to adopt the class size policy because it delivers specialist input, including dyslexia input. Can you clarify a wee anomaly? My understanding is that all local authorities deliver such input, on top of entering into the agreement on lower class sizes. Can you give an overview of the position Scotland-wide?

Councillor Mackay: Although I am the Scottish National Party group leader, I am here to give the COSLA position, so it would not be fair of me to pick off individual councils. Each council is answerable on its record and will be answerable for what it does during the next year or two. All councils signed up to the Government's early years framework, so we know what framework we are working in, but the solutions that we bring to the table are a matter of localism, which is welcome. However, your point about where progress has not been made is accurate.

Christina McKelvie: Can Mr Manson give specifics on specialist dyslexia teaching?

Leslie Manson: What was your specific question about dyslexia teaching?

Christina McKelvie: Glasgow City Council has the commendable aspiration to have specialist dyslexia teachers, and it says that maintaining that aspiration is a reason not to adopt the class size reduction policy. However, I understand that other local authorities that have adopted the class size reduction policy are delivering specialist dyslexia teaching.

11:30

Leslie Manson: I do not know the context in every council, but my understanding is that certain schools are known as dyslexia-friendly schools, in which awareness is raised among the staff about certain basic things such as the type of font and the colour of the paper that is used.

You probably need to ask Glasgow City Council that question. In my judgment, the existence of a concentration of youngsters with dyslexia-type problems would justify the need for specially trained teachers. Dyslexia is one of a number of barriers to learning with which all staff must become familiar. The role of the support teacher is usually to act as a consultant for all staff, so that they can try to address problems at source level.

Councillor Mackay: That raises the separate question of measurement, which some MSPs have raised. Should we focus on pupil teacher ratios as a measurement? That question also raises the issue of the other teachers in a school who contribute to a pupil's education. That may be completely discounted in the figures, but one may take the view that, over time, the pupil teacher

ratio is better than the current method at measuring how many pupils and teachers a school has.

If the current measurement was changed, we would be accused of moving the goal posts to fix the problem, so we have to stick with it. Professionals may well pursue the argument that the pupil teacher ratio is a better measurement in the long term, if we want to establish an accurate figure for how many pupils and teachers a school has.

Aileen Campbell: That leads on to my question. What are your thoughts on team teaching, which involves having more than one teacher in the classroom? Does that approach offer the same benefits and dynamics in the classroom that would be offered by reducing the class size?

Leslie Manson: There has been some misunderstanding about the concept of a teacher pupil ratio. It is certainly an option to have a larger number of youngsters in a class and two teachers working with them. That might be necessary where there are issues to do with space and accommodation—an insufficiency of classrooms.

Team teaching goes on all the time—teachers work with other staff and with other teachers. When I began my career, people liked to shut their doors and keep the rest of the staff well away, but nowadays there is a far more inclusive and collegiate atmosphere. There is nothing new or surprising in the concept of team teaching.

Research shows, as committee members will have read, that team teaching does not necessarily add value. There is no benefit to having 30 pupils with two teachers rather than two groups of 15 with one teacher each. For the most part, councils and schools would use team teaching in that way only if circumstances forced it on them.

The point about the benefit and flexibility of the teacher pupil ratio relates partly to the example that I gave earlier. Rather than two classes of 18, a school might wish to have a class of 12 and a class of 24, which still results in a teacher pupil ratio of 1:18. It also relates to the circumstances that Derek Mackay described, in which one is not creating additional staff groups but providing additional staff—such as learning support staff, nurture teachers or other specialists—who work collegially with class teachers to work towards and improve on the same outcomes. The ADES perspective is that, if you are working towards those outcomes in a way that suits your particular context, it is reasonable that you are given credit for that additional spend.

Aileen Campbell: We spoke earlier about giving teachers CPD support to teach differently in

smaller classes. Is that the same for having two teachers in a bigger class? Do they have to change their approach to the way in which they teach that class?

Leslie Manson: Enterprising headteachers will see that as an opportunity to develop a mentoring relationship between, for example, an experienced chartered teacher and a newly qualified teacher. The judicious pairing of staff would have more than one benefit—you would achieve the ratio that we all agree is a step forward and also be able to offer a model to the less-experienced teacher, who would be able to learn from the experienced teacher, rather like an apprentice. Your best headteachers and schools see such arrangements as opportunities and make good capital of them.

Councillor Mackay: There is a really good fundamental point here. Some of the areas that you represent have full schools. Would it not be better to buy another teacher rather than another building or classroom? Is there not some sense in accepting that another teacher in the classroom would be a good thing? There is certainly potential in team teaching and it might help where there is some pressure, particularly in East Renfrewshire where there is great demand for some schools. There is also a risk of knock-on consequences if the arrangement is not designed properly, but it certainly deserves some recognition. At the moment, the class size definition refers to how many pupils are in a physical room with a teacher; that is quite rigid.

Aileen Campbell: Is work being done with EIS and other teaching bodies that have raised concerns about team teaching to allay any fears? Are any discussions taking place with them?

Leslie Manson: We have to continue to discuss the matter reasonably with them and eventually persuade them that, under the circumstances, any dogmatic approach is less useful than a pragmatic one.

Robert Nicol: We are involved with EIS in a working group that looks at how to best set class size mechanisms. We speak to EIS regularly on a range of policy issues through the Scottish Negotiating Committee for Teachers and otherwise. We want to continue to have that kind of discussion with the unions and others.

Aileen Campbell: We are often asked about, and get evidence to the effect that national Government should make more use of a stick to get local authorities to achieve some of their shared objectives. That seems to go against the new philosophical approach of partnership working on a basis of mutual respect and parity of esteem. Such suggestions are not often helpful, but it is clear that there is renewed vigour in some local

authorities to achieve some of those shared objectives. Will you comment on that?

Councillor Mackay: There is no subtle or implied threat to local government. We have a genuine example of a framework within which we can work and all parties can come together to deliver those objectives. That is what we have done at a local level. I meant what I said about all parties being involved—all parties were represented at negotiations, they all accepted the principles and, as we understand it, they will all deliver on the 20 per cent target. There is no party bias between who will and who will not do it. That comes from a good healthy working relationship that is a consequence of the flexibility and freedoms given to local government through the concordat. I am sure that if any other group leader were here today they would say the same.

Mike Rumbles: I am surprised that you said that there was no threat or anything like that. It is my understanding of the concordat that the extra money available to local authorities would not be there if they did not freeze the council tax and accept the concordat. Is that a misunderstanding?

Councillor Mackay: I was answering the question about the framework, which was about whether there was a threat or some penalty if you did not comply. That was the context of my answer to that question.

Mike Rumbles: I understand the context, but what you said was incorrect—that is all.

Councillor Mackay: However hard some parliamentarians try to affect it, a good working relationship exists between all parties in COSLA and with the Scottish Government.

Kenneth Gibson: Councillor Mackay knows that I suggested team teaching way back in 2007. In Rockfield primary school yesterday, I spoke to a classroom teacher who prefers team teaching in that school, so some teachers like it. As for magnet schools, my children were taught in team-teaching classrooms throughout their primary education in East Renfrewshire Council schools.

I will focus on first principles and consider the academic arguments for lower class sizes and the limits of a class size reduction policy. We have received a couple of interesting papers from Professors Galton and Tymms. Professor Galton says:

“the main reason that pupils’ test scores improve”

in smaller classes

“is due to improved behaviour so that teachers spend less time exercising control of the class and more time teaching ... teachers find the atmosphere less stressful and report improved teacher-pupil relationships.”

However,

“the potential benefits of smaller classes are not often realised. There is a strong argument for stating that greater academic progress would result if teachers made greater use of teaching strategies which research has shown lead to improved performance”,

such as

“greater use of group and pair work, feedback which does more than merely correct pupils’ errors”

and improved class discussions. The convener touched on that at the start of the meeting. Professor Galton says that

“Any policy directed to reducing class size is not likely to be cost effective unless it is coupled with a major effort in teachers’ professional development designed to change current practice.”

I would like to hear the panel’s views on that extremely important point.

Professor Tymms says:

“Teacher quality is of vital importance and pupils are certainly better off in large classes with good teachers than small classes with poor teachers.”

He also makes the point that, of course,

“those who need most help derive most benefit from smaller classes.”

When all else is equal, small classes make a significant difference, particularly for those who need it most. The key issue in making the policy work is improving teacher strategies. What does the panel say about that?

Leslie Manson: The difficulty with research is that it can be cherry picked. We must agree that the research on class sizes offers some hope, but it is ultimately inconclusive. I agree entirely with the phrases that you have chosen from Galton and Tymms. I hope that, in the past hour and a half or so, my colleague and I have given sufficient examples of the ways in which we endorse those views.

I said that I do not know whether any CPD is targeted to the number of pupils that a teacher teaches but—almost without exception—the resource development in which teachers are involved for the new curriculum will lead ultimately to better engagement in large and small classes.

Kenneth Gibson: Given the comments that academics are making, surely more CPD should be focused on the issue. I will let you know the level of improvement that is involved. Professor Galton talks about

“an improvement of around 13.9% in the ‘on-task’ behaviour”

to a rate of more than 70 per cent in smaller classes. We are talking not about a wee bit round the edges but about significant differences in pupil behaviour and ultimately attainment, through less disruption and more pupil engagement in learning.

I understand that Renfrewshire Council’s spend per pupil on the policy is the highest of any local authority—it is more than double that of East Renfrewshire Council and is obviously more than that of Glasgow City Council, which appears to be spending zero additional money on the policy. If we are to spend significant sums of money on the policy and to get the best bang for our buck, surely CPD must be a major component.

11:45

Leslie Manson: I stick to my view. You will have read in the research that if you suddenly give a teacher a smaller class, it does not necessarily change their teaching style or effectiveness. Giving a small class to a teacher who is not very good will not make them a good teacher. Similarly, giving a really good teacher a bigger class will not make them a bad teacher.

Earlier in the discussion, it was identified that smaller classes can create a different context and climate in which teachers can perform better and develop more effectively. If a teacher is stressed because they are dealing with a large, disruptive class, their attention to learning and teaching will be constrained by the stress and energy that is being used to control the class. If some of those constraints are taken away, the balance between classroom management on the one hand and learning and teaching on the other is shifted. So I think that CPD has to continue to be generic. Reducing class sizes will create a different context in which the CPD can become more effective and, indeed, the teacher will become more effective.

Kenneth Gibson: I do not think that that is what the academics are saying. They seem to be saying that there needs to be a specific focus in CPD on class sizes, and that teaching style and methodology should change if the number of pupils in a class is reduced significantly.

Leslie Manson: But some teachers will have to change their style anyway.

Kenneth Gibson: Of course they will. We all realise that teachers can be good, bad, indifferent or excellent. Everyone realises that, but we want there to be as many excellent teachers as possible. That is why I quoted the point that, if all else is equal, class size is important, but it is better for a large class to have a good teacher than a small class to have a bad one. We all accept that, and training has to be flexible to achieve it.

At the beginning of the meeting, Councillor Mackay said that, in Renfrewshire, there was no financial displacement because of the implementation of the policy. According to the figures that we have for council spending plans for 2010-11, Renfrewshire is second only to Edinburgh in spending the most money—

£773,000—on class size reduction, and it has committed £384,000, which is more than any other local authority, to the delivery of free meals and breakfasts. How can the delivery of the policy not cause financial displacement? We are talking about almost £1.2 million. Is that additional money received from the Scottish Government specifically for the implementation of the policy, albeit that it does not have to be spent on that area because there is no ring fencing? Is that money coming from other areas of the education or, indeed, other budgets?

Councillor Mackay: The financial settlement covers the commitments in the concordat for the three-year spending period. When the budgets and the settlement were reopened, we had to look again at the finances.

Councils set their budgets in January and February. If they were planning to fully implement what they signed up to in the concordat, such as free school meals and efforts on class sizes, money was supplied in the financial settlement to do that. It is true that the money was not ring fenced, but we had commitments to deliver. When we looked at the new agreement, my local authority said that it would spend on the implementation of universal free school meals such that it would achieve the target of 20 per cent of pupils getting free school meals, and the remainder of the money would be used on class sizes. If councils are abiding by the concordat and the financial commitments that they have signed up to, money was provided in the settlement to deliver on those pledges. When those aspirations changed, we took a political decision to use that money for the class size policy, which gave us progress on class sizes without having to take money from other budgets. That is the process that we went through; I hope that it is clear.

Kenneth Gibson: It is certainly clear to me.

One thing that Mr Maxwell—I am sorry, I mean Mr Macintosh. That is the second time that I have called you Mr Maxwell in the past couple of years, Ken. My apologies; it must be a Freudian slip.

Mr Macintosh suggested that some local authorities will have signed up to the concordat for political reasons. Is it not the case that some might not have signed up to it for political reasons? Glasgow seems not to be on board. Is there a genuine view in COSLA that, regardless of party political differences, everyone supports the policy in its widest sense?

Councillor Mackay: I think that your analysis of the situation is correct. No one has spoken against the policy at COSLA.

The Convener: That concludes the committee's questions for today. Thank you for your

attendance. The committee will suspend for a five-minute comfort break.

11:50

Meeting suspended.

11:57

On resuming—

The Convener: We move to our second panel of the morning. We have been joined by Andrew Sutherland, head of schools at East Ayrshire Council; Maureen McKenna, service director for education at Glasgow City Council; Councillor Catriona Bhatia, a member of Scottish Borders Council; Jim Gilhooly, the deputy director of education at South Lanarkshire Council; and Terry Lanagan, executive director of educational services at West Dunbartonshire Council. Thank you for joining us. All of you sat through the first session, so you have a rough idea of the questions that we will ask and have probably had an opportunity to prepare your answers. Unless you are going to say different things, you do not all need to respond to every question; if you do, the session may last for much longer than you anticipated or are able to be here. Such an approach would be appreciated.

I will start by asking you the same question that I put first to the previous panel; my colleague Kenneth Gibson picked up the same issue towards the end of the session. It concerns the academic research that has been submitted to the committee on taking full advantage of smaller class sizes where they are in place, so that teachers are sufficiently skilled to make the most of small classes, both for their benefit and to raise the attainment of the pupils they teach. The previous panel suggested that, currently, there is not a great deal of continuous professional development in the area, and it did not sound like much work was about to be done there. Do you have a view on the issue? Could we do more? If so, what kind of resources would you require to allow you to do it?

Andrew Sutherland (East Ayrshire Council): In my authority and many others, a marked change is taking place in relation to CPD. There is a move away from the old, traditional courses and programmes that teachers attended and listened to, from which they may or may not have learned—although they may have enjoyed the lunch.

Elizabeth Smith: Maybe.

12:00

Andrew Sutherland: Yes—maybe. What is significant is that we are developing CPD models that are based around teacher learning

communities in which groups of six or eight teachers work together either within an establishment or across establishments. They use research, share good practice, monitor each other's work and set each other targets and development work. The nature of that type of work is such that, whenever teachers are working in classes—the class size may be 18 or 25—another teacher can moderate and analyse the type of learning that is taking place in that particular environment. Teachers will certainly recognise from that type of CPD where there are more opportunities for active learning or group-work learning rather than for more didactic approaches. Certainly, in East Ayrshire, our CPD is very much focused on teachers working and learning together in small groups, and looking at how to make the best use of that in the environment in which they operate. The group work involves not only our classroom teachers but additional support teachers and all those who work with our young people.

I am not sure whether that information is helpful to you, but it illustrates that the form of CPD is developing. I am sure that that is the case in many other authorities, too.

Terry Lanagan (West Dunbartonshire Council): I agree with and echo what Andrew Sutherland has said. I would add that good teaching and training for good teaching are all about addressing the needs of the learner. There are many ways of doing that. Good CPD encourages teachers to adopt teaching and learning methods that are most suited to individual children and groups of children. That will apply whether there is a class of 20, 30 or 18. I struggle to see what CPD that focused on small classes would look like. What I think is implied by the research is that a smaller class size allows the teacher the freedom to employ a range of tactics and techniques more effectively than in a larger class, where some of the problems that were illustrated by John Stodter and Leslie Manson earlier can arise.

Jim Gilhooly (South Lanarkshire Council): I agree with the points that my colleagues have made. Research tends to focus on improving attainment, which is very important. Reduced class sizes in the early stages of education can make a contribution to the other three capacities that are part of the curriculum for excellence. It allows teachers to work with young people to make them more confident, more responsible, more effective and more successful learners. Attainment, particularly in the early stages, is not necessarily the only measure by which to judge the impact of reduced class sizes, because that can have other impacts that will in time increase young people's capacity to learn and therefore their capacity to attain later on in their careers.

The Convener: Perhaps we can move on to the slightly more controversial subject of class sizes and the Government's and COSLA's position of having class sizes of 18 for 20 per cent of P1s. Obviously, that means that 80 per cent of our P1s are not in smaller class sizes. How realistic do you think it is to expect growth in the 20 per cent figure, if it is achieved? What disadvantages might there be for those children who do not fall into the 20 per cent?

Councillor Catriona Bhatia (Scottish Borders Council): As can be seen from the committee's papers, our authority has already achieved class sizes of 18 or less in more than 20 per cent of our primary 1 to 3 classes.

I think that the target is also questionable because of how it is being implemented. We are putting additional resources into primaries 1 to 3 as COSLA has advised—obviously, we are happy to have even more of our children educated in smaller classes—but, even if we reached class sizes of 18 or less in 80 per cent of our P1 to P3 classes, councils elsewhere in Scotland might by default have class sizes of 18 or less in only 10 per cent of their P1 to P3 classes. Indeed, in the case of Glasgow City Council, I think that the figure is less than that. We do not seem to have a strategic approach across the whole of Scotland, so the policy will result in a postcode lottery. Rural authorities that already have small class sizes might achieve 100 per cent, whereas more urban authorities might be much further away from the target. Therefore, we could have a postcode lottery both within authorities and across authorities within Scotland. That point has not really been addressed by the agreement with COSLA.

In Scottish Borders Council's view, although we are happy to go down this road, it would be better if we were allowed, for example, to allocate the funding to each individual school, where teachers could decide what would be best. I think that Elizabeth Smith made that point. For example, a school might have a particularly problematic P5 class. Putting all the money by default into P1 to P3 will mean that the headteacher has less flexibility to address issues elsewhere in the school. That is a very real concern, as is the lack of a strategic approach.

Maureen McKenna (Glasgow City Council): Although it might appear as if Glasgow City Council has taken zero approach to reducing class sizes, that is not exactly true. Like Councillor Mackay, we would argue that the methodology that is used, which considers just the physical grouping of children within the classroom, is limited. The methodology does not take good cognisance of the range of approaches that we are taking and the range of staff who work with

children in schools, nor does it take into account that we are trying to target the areas that are most deprived.

Terry Lanagan: I echo what Maureen McKenna has said.

No one would argue that it is a bad thing to try to reduce class sizes, but it is not the only solution and, to be honest, it is a bit of a blunderbuss. Unfortunately, some people think that it is a blunderbuss that is loaded with a golden bullet. That is a bit of a mixed metaphor, for which I apologise.

Maureen McKenna makes an important point. Let me put the issue into a scenario: is it better that a child is taught in a class of 18 by one teacher with no additional help or in a class of 25 with a range of others coming in? For instance, West Dunbartonshire Council provides a generous allocation of learning assistants, who are very valued members of the educational team. We also have early intervention teachers, network support and a whole range of other people who come into the classroom. To say that reducing class sizes per se will increase attainment might seem logical but is very simplistic. It would be good to see a recognition that the total level of support that goes into supporting children, rather than simply the pupil teacher ratio within one classroom, is the important thing.

The Convener: I could not agree more with Mr Lanagan on that point. I believe that small class sizes are important, but they are only one part of a toolbox of measures that are available to local authorities to drive up attainment. I have reservations about whether focusing on smaller class sizes in primaries 1 to 3 will result in issues for children in primaries 4, 5, 6 and 7 and even in secondaries 1 and 2. We need a range of options for local authorities that take into account the judgment of headteachers about what is in the best interests of their pupils. Local authorities and headteachers know the needs of their pupils and their communities and how best to tackle those needs.

Kenneth Gibson: I agree with a lot of what the convener has said, but I have a query for Mr Lanagan about why, if the class size is reduced from 25 to 18, additional support would somehow go from that class. Councillor Mackay said that money was included in the settlement to achieve the policy without having to take money from other areas of the education budget, so why would you suddenly remove other support from classes because the number of pupils in them had reduced?

Terry Lanagan: I am not suggesting that you necessarily would; I am suggesting that, by measuring only class size, you are seeing only

part of the picture. We face extremely challenging years ahead. The most expensive resource is teachers and it is clear that, to achieve a reduction in class size, it is necessary to employ additional teachers. At a time of increasing financial constraint, the question that I am asking is: could you get the same results in respect of maintaining and improving attainment by adopting methods other than the class size method?

Kenneth Gibson: But West Dunbartonshire signed up to the concordat, so it must have believed that the target was deliverable when it signed up to the new position that the Scottish Government has taken of 20 per cent of pupils in P1 to P3 being in classes of 18 or fewer.

Terry Lanagan: Absolutely. We will deliver on the 20 per cent target next year and we will do so quite comfortably, but I am concerned that the whole debate appears to be on this one issue. That can be a distraction from the toolbox of measures, which Ms Whitefield mentioned, that we use to try to raise attainment.

Kenneth Gibson: Which local authorities will make class sizes the sole measure? I do not believe that the Scottish Government wants class sizes to be the sole measure. The Scottish Government's overarching view is that, ultimately, we want attainment to rise throughout Scotland, and that is certainly what parents want, so I do not think that we will look at the issue in a two-dimensional way.

Terry Lanagan: I certainly think—and I am sure that you would agree—that that is how the situation is often depicted in the media. There was discussion earlier about the politicisation of education; class sizes can become part of a political argument about whether people have met a specific commitment. Raising attainment is the key issue rather than getting kids into classes of 18.

The Convener: Obviously, all 32 local authorities have signed up to the agreement on the 20 per cent target. Is that because it is a target that they think they can meet? If the target had been 50 per cent or 60 per cent, would local authorities have been saying that they could not meet it, given the existing settlement and the lack of resources for school buildings and additional teachers? Is the 20 per cent target something that is deliverable, whereas going beyond that is something that, given where local authorities are right now, could not be delivered?

Andrew Sutherland: That will depend on the local authority. In East Ayrshire, 40 per cent of pupils are in classes of 18 or fewer. There is both a challenge and an opportunity. The challenge is falling rolls in East Ayrshire, but that has provided us with the opportunity to invest that money into

class size reduction, which is part of our early intervention policy. We are keen to further develop that approach and you will be aware that more resources are going in, but I agree that there will come a point when we need to consider accommodation issues. We have so far considered socioeconomic factors and where reductions in class sizes can be best managed, but for us to get beyond, for example, 50 per cent, would require accommodation issues to be carefully reviewed. That is the issue in East Ayrshire, but in Glasgow and West Dunbartonshire the situation will vary, so there is perhaps not one answer to your question.

Councillor Bhatia: The political choice that we were offered was to use some of the funding that was allocated for free school meals to employ additional teachers. When you weigh in the balance whether to give free school meals to people who—given that the eligibility criteria have been extended—can afford them or provide additional teachers, it is not difficult to square the circle. In Borders, if there is an opportunity to put in additional teachers, we would prefer to have the 12 additional teachers and to put them wherever we wish in the school system—either in primary or, indeed, in secondary, where there are pressures because of the tightening financial situation, related to offering the breadth of choices in some of our higher and standard grade classes. The more flexibility that we have to put the funding that we get into our local priorities and needs, the more beneficial. Weighing in the balance more teachers against free school meals, we were happy to take the money that we had allocated to free school meals and to give it to teachers. Even if it was not necessarily our first choice, I am sure that the pupils will benefit.

12:15

Jim Gilhooly: There is an element of exponential growth when we hit a certain point. Included in the 20 per cent figure are the naturally occurring classes. Beyond 20 per cent, every class that is created with 18 pupils or fewer must be manufactured. Therefore, there is always a cost. When we did the initial arithmetic for the original aspiration, we reckoned that the cost would be about £14 million or £15 million for teachers, and potentially £5 million or £6 million for accommodation.

This year, in order to achieve the figure of 20 per cent, South Lanarkshire Council will, in the equivalent of a full year, be putting in £820,000. At the moment, we are managing to meet the extension to 20 per cent for a relatively small amount of money, which has been taken from the flexibility that has been offered to us. To move

beyond that would require genuinely exponential growth in the amount of money required.

Elizabeth Smith: I will pick up on the points that Mr Sutherland and Mr Lanagan made about the quality of teaching, which is so important, and also on what Councillor Bhatia has just said about flexibility. The two gentlemen have made an extremely important point about what makes a good-quality learning experience, and that is the quality of teachers. I entirely concur with what Mr Sutherland said about the improvement in CPD training, both by the GTC and in most local councils.

Would you prefer to have more flexibility even than you have now and to be able to decide where you spend your money, including on teacher training, and to decide on the amount of activity that goes into classroom resources, as opposed to having so many national Government targets that you must try somehow to meet? Does it frustrate you to have those requirements, and would you like more flexibility?

Andrew Sutherland: I feel that we have a lot of flexibility regarding our priorities. There are indeed a number of objectives, but our authority works creatively as often as it can. I personally have never felt stultified by any of the national priorities, as they attempt to advance a particular development that is deemed to bring benefits. Intrinsically, everything that is being proposed will bring benefits—including small class sizes and better CPD. We have the flexibility to work within those parameters, while emphasising what we want to emphasise. I do not think that it is an either-or question; for us, it is about working within the parameters and making the best of it for our young people.

Elizabeth Smith: Were you more comfortable with the change in policy from 18 or fewer pupils in primaries 1 to 3 to a 20 per cent target?

Andrew Sutherland: It did not matter for us, as we were already sitting at 40 per cent, given the factors that I mentioned earlier. Therefore, it did not impact on us.

Elizabeth Smith: But are you comfortable with that move in policy?

Andrew Sutherland: I can see the logic of it, from a 32-authority perspective.

Elizabeth Smith: With regard to better educational flexibility?

Andrew Sutherland: I was thinking more about other factors. I do not think that the change impacts on educational provision in relation to CPD, if that is the point that you are making.

Elizabeth Smith: I am trying to ascertain whether you think that pursuing better-quality

CPD—teacher training—is more important than meeting what are fairly artificial targets, whether they are set by number or percentage, and whether you would like far greater flexibility in making decisions about how to prioritise your education spending.

Andrew Sutherland: It is not an issue for me. We have flexibility, and we prioritise our CPD. One has never interfered with the other, certainly in my council.

Elizabeth Smith: Is there any point to the targets at all?

Andrew Sutherland: I would not put it like that. It is important that national Government, of whatever complexion, sets targets, because we have to ensure that we are benchmarking and pursuing national development. That is important. As officers, it is for us to work with national and local authority targets and to make them work as best we can. I do not have an issue with that.

Elizabeth Smith: So the change in policy from 18 or fewer pupils in P1 to P3 to a 20 per cent target made absolutely no difference. It did not bother you at all.

Andrew Sutherland: It was not a major issue for East Ayrshire Council.

Terry Lanagan: The 20 per cent target is obviously much easier to achieve. I agree with Andrew Sutherland when he says that, generally speaking, we have freedom. Issues have occurred where specific targets have been set. That is not a political point because it applies to both the previous and current Administrations. If we think back, the class size target of 20 in S1 and S2 for English and maths, two hours of physical education a week and now, the class size target of 18 pupils or fewer, have all caused strains in the system because they seemed to be immutable. If we had greater freedom over such easily measurable issues, I would be happier. However, we have a great deal of freedom in the current system as to how we deliver CPD.

Maureen McKenna: I offer Ms Smith an example. We took the five additional teachers we were grateful to receive as part of the curriculum for excellence and augmented them with a team of literacy and numeracy coaching-in-context teachers to create a team of between 15 and 20 teachers. We took them out of schools and used a wide range of funding sources to do so. Those teachers go out and do some of the active learning work that Andrew Sutherland described to promote those learning communities. A lot of the CPD is delivered in classrooms because it is very much a coaching-in-context model. The feedback that we are getting from the heads is very positive. Glasgow has run that model for a long time and we find it to be the most effective method of

delivering CPD. It is a trade-off—I suppose that those extra 15 to 20 teachers could be in classrooms delivering to small groups of children. However, from the debates that I have had with head teachers, I know that they want flexibility and to be given options so that they can match their needs.

Jim Gilhooly: I have another quick example. In South Lanarkshire, we now have an open-doors approach to CPD in the East Kilbride area whereby each school is encouraged to showcase the work that they are doing on the curriculum for excellence—or indeed on anything else—for all the other schools in the area. The events are held post-school and the host establishment makes available its school and all its teachers. Teachers from neighbouring schools come in, have discussions and try to take on board and learn from what is being offered in that environment. The way in which CPD is delivered has changed dramatically over the past year or two. The two policies do not necessarily get mixed up—if we had back the money that we are putting into the class size reduction policy, I do not know that we would use it to develop CPD.

Ken Macintosh: I have a question about the new legal maximum of 25 pupils in a class, but first I want to clarify an issue about free school meals. It is possible that I should know this, but I want to be clear. You all have flexibility over implementing the free school meals policy, which has two parts. The first part is that there should be free school meals for everyone in P1 to P3 and the other part is to extend the eligibility of all pupils across the board from P1 to P7 whose families receive maximum child tax credit. What are the different authorities doing on each part of the policy—is it just the P1 to P3 free school meals part that is flexible or are both parts?

Terry Lanagan: West Dunbartonshire was the first authority to implement the policy and we are already implementing it in P1 to P3. We have no current plans to extend beyond that.

Ken Macintosh: So those in upper primary whose families are on maximum child tax benefit will not now benefit from that policy.

Terry Lanagan: No, they are entitled to benefit; authorities have no choice.

Ken Macintosh: That is fine. So the flexibility is just around the P1 to P3 part of the policy. I should have known that, but I just wanted to check that it was the case.

The Government is legislating to introduce a maximum class size of 25 in P1. Will that have implications for parental choice and, if so, should the legislation affecting parental choice also be modified?

Jim Gilhooly: South Lanarkshire has been particularly affected by the legislation on parental choice. We were in the sheriff court 19 times last year—and lost on every occasion, I might say. You might ask why we did that; one sheriff asked us, but he was a Glasgow sheriff.

We chose to go to court because we were keen to defend a class size of 25 for everybody. The result of going to court was that the extra children were placed in classes as excepted pupils, so we were, in effect, able to hold a class size of 25 for all pupils in South Lanarkshire, although we moved to classes of 30 in about six or seven schools.

We are significantly disappointed that the Government has not been able to introduce legislation to defend the class size maximum of 25 in time for the current session. In fact, we are having to consider how we will—I choose my words carefully—circumvent what is likely to happen.

We will have to make a distinction between the class size policy that we operate as a council, and what we do for parents who make placing requests for particular establishments. We will end up with class sizes of 25 for the majority of pupils, but where we are faced with a placing request, we will allow children in up to a maximum of 30. The two policies do not square with one another. The pledge for class sizes of 18 also will not stand up to challenges given the current legislative position, which is a class size limit of 30—that point was made in the previous session. We can set up classes of 18, but if somebody wants in, we will have to move to a class of 19. It has been difficult for us, and there is a clash between the policies.

It is for politicians to decide which way the policy moves. As officers, we will administer what the law says, whether it places a greater emphasis on parental choice or on the ability of the local authority to determine its own policy that reflects the aspirations of the people of the area. There is no doubt that the vast majority of people in South Lanarkshire would support a class size limit of 25, because they are happy for their children to go to schools in their catchment area and be taught in classes of 25.

Maureen McKenna: Glasgow has had a policy of class sizes of 25 in P1 for the past three years, and this year we worked very hard to ensure that the limit stayed at 25. When the census results came out, I was devastated by the proportion of schools that appeared to have classes in the 30-plus category, and I went back to a number of schools to explore that.

The problem is that although we have put in additional teachers where the limit of 25 has been breached and we have moved to 30 because of

parental choice—which, as Jim Gilhooly pointed out, we cannot refuse—the additional teachers are not included in the statistical measurements.

Ken Macintosh: To return to Mr Gilhooly's point, the cabinet secretary originally intended to introduce regulations in time for this year's intake. Have you heard officially that that will not be the case? Is it now past the time when you can do anything about it?

Maureen McKenna: Yes—the decisions on placing requests are being made now and have to be given to parents by 22 April, so it is impossible to bring in regulations for August.

Ken Macintosh: I am aware of that from my own experience; I was just wondering whether you had heard an official announcement.

In a letter of last year, the cabinet secretary stated:

“Consultation on these regulations will take place shortly with the intention of having the regulations in place for the start of the autumn term in 2010.”

Are you all working on the basis that there will be no protection, and that you will therefore want to stop the confrontation with parents, and save the legal costs? Is anybody implementing a class size limit of 25 at P1? Is anybody maintaining or trying to maintain the P1 maximum?

Terry Lanagan: We have managed during recent years to maintain class sizes of 25, but that has been by good fortune; we have not been pushed beyond that. We have had one or two cases similar to those that Maureen McKenna described, in which we have put in an additional teacher to maintain the ratio.

12:30

Ken Macintosh: That is expensive. Does anyone feel that it would be helpful for local authorities if parental choice and the placing request legislation were revisited?

Terry Lanagan: The situation varies from authority to authority; the placing request legislation is not an issue in West Dunbartonshire.

Ken Macintosh: I asked the previous panel about the fact that the number of P1 classes of less than 25 has declined for the past two years, which goes against Government policy and everything else. Do you know why there has been a decline? Is it because of placing requests, or is there another explanation?

Andrew Sutherland: I can speak for East Ayrshire. It is largely down to placing requests in certain schools.

Terry Lanagan: Placing requests are certainly a major factor. There have always been placing

requests, so you might wonder why there has been a change in the past two years. I think that the legislation has been tested more over recent years, so some councils are now playing it more cautiously and, rather than refusing to allow pupils in when that would raise the class size to over 25—which they may have done before, with a degree of risk—they now accede to requests when they previously would not have.

Councillor Bhatia: It may also go back to how the statistics are collated. A number of our P1 classes have, say, 30 pupils, but there are two teachers. If such a class is counted as a class of 30 rather than an average of 15, that will obviously affect the figures. It is the usual thing: statistics can be made to say anything, depending on how you collate them.

Ken Macintosh: Yes, but there is also a trend. The situation that you mention would account for one or two instances, but there is a trend.

Jim Gilhooly: There is also an accommodation issue. In South Lanarkshire, we are now 40 schools out of 124 schools into a rebuild programme; we are building them on the basis that we will have classes of a particular size. I would also like to pick up Maureen McKenna's point that we are not being allowed to count towards the target classes in which two class teachers are operating, even in a class of 26.

Ken Macintosh: Does anybody have a particular problem with a magnet school that attracts a high number of applications? I am aware of other authorities where that is a real problem: every time they build a new classroom, it fills. If there is no legislative backstop, you cannot impose any guidance—be it for a class size of 18 or 25.

Councillor Bhatia: We do not have that problem in our authority.

Terry Lanagan: In West Dunbartonshire we have significant spare capacity, so it is not a particular issue with us, but I am aware that in some local authorities—especially in areas such as West Lothian, where the population is growing—it is a significant issue.

Claire Baker: My first question relates to questions that I asked previously, but it might be more appropriate for the cabinet secretary. I am looking for clarification of how the 20 per cent is measured. I appreciate that it is measured by school roll and that the target is that 20 per cent of pupils are in classes of 18 or fewer, but is the target not measured across the whole of Scotland rather than by local authority; it is whether 20 per cent of all the pupils in Scotland are in classes of 18 or fewer, so there will be variations between what is achieved by local authorities?

Councillor Bhatia: Yes.

Claire Baker: The 2009 figures for the percentage of pupils that each authority has in class sizes of fewer than 18 indicate that, among the councils that are represented here, East Ayrshire has a very high percentage and Scottish Borders a high percentage. West Dunbartonshire Council has said that it thinks it will comfortably get to 20 per cent. In Glasgow, only 7.1 per cent of children are in classes of 18 or fewer and in South Lanarkshire the figure is only 11 per cent. The figure for Dundee is only 5 per cent.

Local authorities differ in size, but will not authorities that are further away from the target, such as those that are below 10 per cent, have to put much more of their educational resources into trying to achieve the target, whereas councils such as Scottish Borders can use the money to do other stuff because it is well over the 20 per cent target? What kind of burden does that put on authorities that have a low percentage of pupils in classes of 18 or fewer? I suppose that it is up to the authority to decide how it wants to target the money, but the concern is that because it has to spend the money on class sizes, it might take the money away from other things. Glasgow City Council's submission was clear—it wants to spend the money on nurture groups and so on, and it gave reasons why it cannot spend the money on class sizes.

I am sorry that this is a long question. Earlier evidence seemed to suggest that the money is in place and that no money is being taken from elsewhere to fund the policy at authority level. What is your experience or understanding? Glasgow's submission was clear: it says that it is having to take money from other areas of education, which it would rather fund than the class size policy. Is it the responsibility of authorities to deliver on the policy? Is that responsibility balanced between authorities? Some of them are under greater pressure to deliver it.

Councillor Bhatia: You are correct to say that Scottish Borders is already over the 20 per cent mark. It was interesting to hear the COSLA representatives. The information that we got back from our leader and through COSLA was that we had to show a 7 per cent increase. I asked why we are putting money into the policy if we are already above the target that the cabinet secretary wants to be achieved. My understanding was that every local authority had to improve by 7 per cent, regardless of their starting point, but that seems to contradict the evidence that COSLA gave.

We had provided in our budgets fully to fund primary 1 to 3 school meals, as had been required, and to extend nursery hours, neither of which we are now going to do—although we are doing a bit of each. Rather than doing one thing or

choosing two out of the three options under the concordat, we are now doing a bit of everything. It is a matter of spreading the jam a bit thinner. There were additional resources and there was provision in the concordat, as far as we understood. No funding was ever ring fenced by Scottish Borders with regard to class sizes, as no funding for it came from the Government under the settlement. Isabel Hutton, who is the normal COSLA spokesperson on education, children and young people, has confirmed that by letter.

Scottish Borders is one of the few local authorities that has had rising school rolls. We were not covered by the original concordat as it related to authorities with falling school rolls. We had made no provision in that regard. We are a rural authority and we have quite low class sizes already. We were advised that we had to achieve a 7 per cent increase, so we moved funding from school meals and nursery hours into class sizes. That is how it has worked.

Terry Lanagan: My understanding is slightly different. I understood that the aim was to increase by 11,000 the number of pupils being taught in classes of 18 or fewer and that the measurement would be taken across the country, although there would be local reporting of progress. It was specifically said that it would not be a target for each and every authority and that there would be local variations. It is my understanding that it is a national target and that the figures will be reported on a council-by-council basis. However, if there are 11,000 additional pupils—the 20 per cent who are to be taught in classes of the size that we are discussing—that will be viewed as achieving the target.

Claire Baker: We have heard that Scottish Borders Council intends to achieve the 7 per cent target by taking the money from the free school meals policy and from pre-school hours, and that Glasgow City Council is having to take money from nurture groups and other areas. What is the experience of other councils? How are they funding the drive towards the 20 per cent target? Are there areas that authorities are currently delivering on that they are having to cut, or is the money coming from existing resources?

Jim Gilhooly: We are providing the money by not implementing the free meals policy for primary 1 to 3 in all cases; we will implement the policy for the 20 per cent of pupils. We will not implement the increase in hours in early years. The funding package that we are putting together takes full advantage of the flexibility that was offered under the revised arrangements.

Maureen McKenna: I have concerns about the agreement on free school meals. The wording was quite clear in the COSLA letter:

“Councils will provide a nutritious free meal ... in those schools that are in the 20 per cent most deprived communities in a council area.”

If that is the route that is suggested, we will widen the gap rather than close it: 10 per cent of Aberdeen City's pupils are in the most deprived decile, Glasgow City has 45 per cent in that decile and Inverclyde has 24 per cent. Is it really the intention that the third decile must be gone up to in Aberdeen in order to reach the 20 per cent target? I am not entirely convinced that the wording of the letter is as accurate as it could be and I have big concerns that what it says is being sold off as an option.

Claire Baker: There has been a lot of talk this morning about councils' flexibility in deciding how to allocate resources, but the charts in the Scottish Parliament information centre briefing on how councils are spending show that the vast majority of them are not increasing pre-school hours. Has that been driven by educational decisions in authorities or by beliefs about what the political priority is?

Terry Lanagan: It is important to quantify what the increase in pre-school provision means. At the moment, the statutory requirement is 12.5 pre-school hours a week. We are talking about an increase to 15 hours, which represents half an hour a day averaged over the week. We would have logistical problems implementing that increase because of the way in which our pre-five provision is structured. Basically, youngsters come in at lunch time or leave half way through it, when staff are involved in other activities. There are considerable cost and logistical difficulties in implementing that increase, and my personal judgment is that it would result in limited additional benefit because quite a few youngsters get additional child care and other provision beyond the statutory provision that they currently receive.

Andrew Sutherland: I support the point that Terry Lanagan makes about logistical issues. We face such issues in East Ayrshire with the extra two and a half hours a week, so we have welcomed the flexibility in the cabinet secretary's pronouncements. For us, the balance of funding for class size reduction comes from a combination of that flexibility and the continuing falling rolls in East Ayrshire.

Claire Baker: It has been said in evidence this morning that delivery of the expansion of pre-school hours was part of the 2007 concordat and that all the policies in the concordat would be being delivered if it were not for the economic recession, but the evidence that we have received is that it is logistically quite difficult to live with that pre-school policy and that there is a problem delivering it even if it is funded; there are barriers

to implementing some of the policies other than funding.

Terry Lanagan: If the increase had remained a requirement we would have had to deliver it, but difficulties and costs are involved in that delivery that we are grateful we do not have to address.

Jim Gilhooly: There is also the argument about research that shows that it is high-quality teaching that improves learning. The same argument applies in the early years. There is a lot of high-quality learning in the current early years timeframe. I am not convinced that increasing pre-school provision from two and a half hours to three hours a day will increase outcomes for young people. Opportunities to achieve active learning, pre-literacy, pre-numeracy and development of social skills outcomes already exist within the two and a half hours that are available. I am not sure that outcomes for children would necessarily be improved simply by increasing pre-school hours.

Maureen McKenna: I am sorry, but I disagree with my colleagues. Early intervention is about quality time and quality learning for children in the early years. If we are serious about early intervention and addressing the impact of deprivation on children, we need to work longer with them. The evidence shows that, for our most deprived and vulnerable children, that has an impact on their lives outwith the early years setting. That is why Glasgow City Council has always had more time and has not stuck to the minimum statutory requirement.

12:45

Terry Lanagan: I do not disagree with Maureen McKenna. In West Dunbartonshire, we target the most vulnerable youngsters for additional provision. The problem we had was with the universal requirement for 15 hours a week. I entirely agree that, for the most vulnerable youngsters, early intervention with as many hours as possible and by as many agencies as possible is crucial.

Claire Baker: May I ask another question, convener?

The Convener: You did say that that was your last one. [*Laughter.*]

Claire Baker: We are in a situation of limited resources and the class size policy is focused on the 20 per cent of schools in the most deprived areas. The drive behind the policy is to tackle inequalities and improve educational attainment in a certain group of young people. Is the policy the best way in which to achieve those outcomes or would it be better to focus on nursery provision and reach out to vulnerable two-year-olds?

Councillor Bhatia: The 20 per cent is not targeted at the most deprived areas per se; local authorities can decide where to implement teachers. There is no directive on that. The directive that mentions 20 per cent relates to the provision of free school meals. The idea is to provide free school meals in the most deprived 20 per cent of schools according to the deprivation indexes.

The point was made that it is important to take all the approaches together. Class sizes of 18 is an input, not an outcome. We have moved to an ethos of having single outcome agreements, and most local authorities do not have class sizes of 18 in their agreements for the very reason that it is not an outcome. The issues that you raise—the targeted extension of nursery hours and early intervention for two-year-olds or even younger children—are important, but most local authorities already do that work through a multi-agency approach rather than just through the education service.

Christina McKelvie: Good afternoon, panel. I had to check the time there.

I will focus on the questions that I asked earlier. Many were directed at Glasgow, but I am also interested in the work that other local authorities are doing on what are nurture groups by any other name. What is the value of nurture classes as opposed to lower class sizes? Will you give me a general overview of their impact?

Andrew Sutherland: In East Ayrshire, we started a pilot last year and we run nurture programmes in four of our schools. That first-class, targeted provision has an almost immediate impact and we are looking to develop it and roll it out. By the same token, we regard it as part of the package of measures that comprise our early intervention programme. We want to use the opportunities that our council has, for the reasons that I rehearsed earlier, to reduce class sizes along with that. As I said, we are fortunate—because of falling rolls, ironically—in being able to deliver both packages. Other local authorities are not in that position. Both packages have an impact by generating improved outcomes for young people.

Terry Lanagan: We have nurture groups in some of our schools, although not in all of them, and they are impressive. Their advantage is that they are targeted at the most vulnerable and needy youngsters. They comprise a focused, expensive package of targeted help for some of our young people who come into primary 1 without a basic level of social skills or the ability to interact with other young people and adults. They deliver a specific agenda for a focused group of youngsters.

Reducing class sizes is a good thing, but it delivers more general, non-targeted benefits. We can target the most deprived 20 per cent of schools, but some youngsters in those schools will still be in a relatively privileged position. It is therefore a less focused approach. It still delivers benefits, but different ones.

Jim Gilhooly: The nurture groups that we run are not seen as permanent places for young people. They tend to be places where young people are brought for a period of time, but we try hard to ensure that they retain contact with their social group—their class group. We do not see it as an either/or; we see it as additional. The main policy is that someone remains within the class group of their peers—their cohort—and they return to it. Reintegration is central to our policy.

Councillor Bhatia: Rather than having individual nurture groups, we have an integrated children's service. We have 65 primary schools spread across a small population, so we tend to individualise support for the children and use different agencies and mechanisms to support them within their school environment where possible, and within their own classes. We operate a system that is slightly different from those in the other local authorities here.

Christina McKelvie: I will move on and ask a more specific question, directed at Glasgow. I hope you will be able to help me out here. In paragraph 16 of your submission, you say:

"It would be possible to redirect the additional teachers that Glasgow currently employs to run nurture classes, EAL provision and our specialist dyslexia service to reduce class sizes and we would be able to meet the 20% target given in the letter from COSLA. But we have no intention of doing this as we would not be meeting the needs of children in Glasgow."

How do you square that with other authorities, which are saying that the additionality of nurture groups and smaller class sizes brings a holistic package for a child? In Glasgow, it seems to be an either/or.

Maureen McKenna: I do not think so. The political spin is that it is an either/or. As I said, in the past three years we have maintained a cap of 25 in our P1 classes, and a number of them are smaller than that. I tried, in the submission, to give the committee a flavour of the range of classes that we have. We are not going to aim for 18; instead, we are going to target need by providing head teachers with the staff they need to meet the varying needs of the children in their school. That is not just about P1 to P3; we have some children who still experience levels of vulnerability when they are in P4 and P5. Indeed, the cabinet secretary met one young boy, Jason in primary 6, who still needs little bits of time out and additional

support because of the extreme chaos in his life. We would not say that it is an either/or.

We have an incredibly high population of children with English as an additional language, which brings its own challenges. Not only is that population increasing, it is changing, and we are now trying to be much more flexible in how we allocate our EAL teachers. In the first year, we did it matched on the five language levels. This year, we introduced a churn factor. We identified schools that have the biggest turnover of children, such as schools in the Govanhill community, where families are staying for less than a year. We just get their English skills up and then they are off again and the next batch comes in. We are trying to target the EAL resource too.

It is because of the diversity in Glasgow, in every sense of the word, that we are trying to match to needs. I am trying to give you a bit of a flavour of the kind of range of options—we have a kind of menu approach for head teachers. I have debated long and hard with heads about the options, and every time they come back and say, "We want to be able to deploy people to work with our children on a weekly basis, to match the needs of our children."

Christina McKelvie: Can you explain why you chose the nurture group model? I am trying to explore which is the best model. I do not think that it is a case of one-size-fits all in every authority and for every social demographic, but I am interested in how you came about the theory and the science behind the nurture group model.

Maureen McKenna: The nurture group model is very well researched, for example by Marjorie Boxall. There is oodles of research about the impact it makes. "Dispatches" on Channel 4 illustrated that very well; so well, in fact, that it has produced another film that follows the same children, from Royston and Wellshot, who appeared in the first programme. The nurture group model is individually matched to the needs of Glasgow. I would not by any stretch of the imagination suggest that nurture groups are definitely a solution for Scottish Borders, the Western Isles or areas of the Highlands, but we are trying to take the nurture groups and principles and apply the same logic and methodology.

Annette Street primary school in Govanhill uses its EAL additionality to create the equivalent of language rooms—a nurture/language class, if you like. The children are selected not using the Boxall profile, their readiness to learn or their ability to cope within a classroom; the school looks at their language, which is their main barrier. That class uses the nurture principles. As Jim Gilhooly said, it is not a question of moving the children out of class and segregating them; it is about integrating

them into the life of the school, and the flexibility that nurture groups bring does that.

We have a nurture group in a secondary school, and we will try to explore that. In my view, we would need our secondary schools to be more nurturing in their outlook before I was prepared to invest in nurture groups in secondary schools as a whole-hearted package. My concern is that they would become time-out rooms.

Nurture groups are not panaceas; they need to be run properly and in a focused way. However, the evidence that we have from research—I have psychologists out at the moment to update it—is that we are getting very good outcomes of children remaining in education, which for us is crucial.

Christina McKelvie: Children who choose not to go to school are, for all sorts of reasons, a huge challenge for us, not just in Glasgow but across Scotland.

Scottish Borders Council says that it has an integrated children's service. I know from my long career in social work in Glasgow that we tried hard to have something that resembled an integrated service, but it always seemed to be difficult to achieve. I am really interested, three to four years away from my social work career, in how successful you have been in pulling that together.

Maureen McKenna: It is a challenge for us. You know first hand of the challenges that social work services colleagues experience in Glasgow, and we are trying to join up much more—we even share the same building for our headquarters.

We have tried to go with the five community health and care partnership areas in order to build better partnerships. We are also employing social workers as part of the learning centres to link with children and families teams, because we recognise the challenges that those teams face with their huge workloads. Our child protection inspection showed that, although we care very well for children, there are still concerns about the workload and the vulnerability of the children who are just below the threshold of intervention. That is our biggest area of need.

The situation is not perfect, but we are all focused on working together towards that. The parenting framework is a good example of joined-up work with the national health service. It is very much a joint approach between Linda de Caestecker and me: we front that initiative to show that it is joined up. It is not about one service; it is about two of us working together.

Christina McKelvie: Dyslexia is a particular interest of mine. We have done some work on offender learning, and we have found that a huge proportion of people in young offenders institutions—young men in particular—have

dyslexia. I want to return to the question of early assessment and intervention. I know that Glasgow has specialist dyslexia teachers, but will you give me a flavour of what other local authorities are doing? Also, what is the incidence of dyslexia assessment? People do not get access to appropriate teaching unless they have had an assessment, and it is difficult to get an assessment—anecdotal evidence from my constituents is that they sometimes cannot get one for love nor money. Can you give me a wee flavour of what you do across dyslexia services and a specific response on how difficult it is to access the assessments?

Terry Lanagan: We do not have specialist teachers in West Dunbartonshire, but some of our network support teachers happen to have a dyslexia specialism. We try to create dyslexia-friendly schools, which were mentioned earlier, and we have a comprehensive policy on dyslexia. We try to raise the awareness among teachers and other staff of the issues that are raised by dyslexia. The issue has a high profile in West Dunbartonshire because of our association with Sir Jackie Stewart, whom I am due to meet at 3 o'clock today in Dumbarton library.

The Convener: You hope.

Terry Lanagan: I will probably not make it.

Jim Gilhooly: You'll need to drive quickly.

Terry Lanagan: That's right.

Those are the principles of our approach.

13:00

Andrew Sutherland: The situation in East Ayrshire is similar to that in West Dunbartonshire, which Terry Lanagan described. We have a network support team—a dedicated team of learning support staff and specialists, some of whom specialise in dyslexia. Our psychologists work closely with that team to identify young people with dyslexia.

Jim Gilhooly: South Lanarkshire Council has support staff who work with individuals, and our psychologists are tuned into assessments of dyslexia. We also approach the issue from the other end—with adult learners. Our adult literacy services try to pick up on dyslexia and support adults. We have a youth learning service for young people from 16 onwards, which tries to identify literacy problems; problems that relate to dyslexia are part of that.

Aileen Campbell: Before I talk about team teaching, about which I asked the previous panel, I have a question for Glasgow City Council. Maureen McKenna said that the choice was not an either/or choice between small classes and

nurture groups. Given that, why has the proportion of children in P1 to P3 in classes of fewer than 18 reduced? That seems to bear out the idea that an either/or approach has been taken and that nurture classes have taken precedence over the striving towards smaller classes.

Maureen McKenna: There are two reasons for that situation. As you know, we have rationalised the education estate. As the end of the phase 4 strategy, we closed a significant number of schools that were to be replaced by new builds—not the one that had all the controversy between January and June, but the new schools such as Cleeves and Ashpark. They were all formed from small schools that it was recognised many years ago would need to become part of bigger schools. That had an impact on the statistics. The small schools had smaller classes and they had many composites, which went into straight classes.

Aileen Campbell: Was the class size policy taken into account when the children were moved into bigger schools?

Maureen McKenna: When the children were moved into bigger schools, we applied the limit of 25, but we did not apply that further up in school.

My other contention is that the statistical measures do not provide the true picture of all the additional initiatives that we undertake.

Aileen Campbell: So you moved children from smaller to bigger classes without thinking about whether to put in place additional teachers to try at least to move some way towards—

Maureen McKenna: No—we have put in additional teachers.

Aileen Campbell: You said that the children went from smaller schools with smaller classes to a bigger school with larger classes.

Maureen McKenna: Yes, but we have additional teachers. However, none of them is counted. My submission contains an example of two primary 1 classes whose numbers are each in the 30s but which share three teachers. The teacher pupil ratio is 1:20, but that is recorded in the ScotXed census as two primary 1 classes of 30.

Aileen Campbell: If I remember correctly, evidence has said that the number of teachers in Glasgow has reduced.

Maureen McKenna: That matches falling school rolls.

Aileen Campbell: In relation to nurture groups and the aim of targeting the very early years, why was the move made from nursery teachers to nursery nurses?

Maureen McKenna: That happened before my time.

Aileen Campbell: Has that situation been rectified or considered?

Maureen McKenna: I am considering the position. In the early years teams, we have a peripatetic team. We are trying to move more towards an extended day. I have a personal view about teachers in nursery classes and we are looking at the issue. The decision to take out nursery teachers was not mine—that was a previous policy.

Aileen Campbell: Will the number of nursery teachers in Glasgow increase?

Maureen McKenna: I do not think that you can expect that. We are reviewing the situation and we will consider what we can provide in our existing budget. My focus is on the quality of the learning experience and of teaching—not on figures that appear on pages.

Aileen Campbell: On team teaching, South Lanarkshire Council's submission mentions a number of pressures in relation to the physical size of classes. We have touched on that briefly. Do other local authorities face similar restrictions in getting another teacher into a classroom when the move to a smaller class is not an option?

Andrew Sutherland: East Ayrshire Council is almost at the stage of having to review our accommodation if the process continues. In one school, we have two teachers in one class, or team teaching. The anecdotal evidence is that the approach works well—teachers like it, the youngsters seem to like it and the parents like it, too. However, that is not our preferred model, for the reasons that were rehearsed earlier with the previous panel. We have tried out the approach. If we are to continue with the class size policy without large accommodation costs, we will have to reconsider the issue carefully.

Councillor Bhatia: In the Scottish Borders, we have one class that has 60 pupils and three teachers, so we have taken the approach beyond having two teachers to a class. There are two very experienced teachers and a newly qualified teacher. We take a slightly different view on the issue. We welcome being able to address class sizes by having additional teachers in larger classes. Cross-fertilisation takes place between teachers, who have varying expertise, and because of mixing up the year groups. The class size policy means that, if we do not do that, we continually have to break up and reset classes all the way up the school, which is disruptive to pupils' friendships. That might not be an issue educationally, but it is an issue socially. Therefore, we certainly welcome the ability to do that.

The approach also helps in relation to building costs. Many of our school estate buildings are fairly old and do not have the capacity to expand. If we did not use team teaching, we would have to allocate extra teachers arbitrarily, because they would go only where we had room to put them. If we did not have that flexibility, we would not be able to target teachers where they are most needed; we would just have to give them to whichever school had a spare classroom to accommodate the pupils.

Aileen Campbell: We have had evidence from teaching bodies that they do not necessarily like team teaching. However, Andrew Sutherland said that his experience is that teachers who work in that environment like it. Is the experience similar in other local authorities?

Andrew Sutherland: I must point out that that was anecdotal evidence and not research based. It was just from the teachers who are involved.

Jim Gilhooly: The notion of team or co-operative teaching has been with us for a long time, although it is being forced on us in the current situation because ratios must be achieved. The whole is definitely potentially greater than the sum of the parts. We would not want to use two teachers simply to divide a class of 28 in two and run it as two classes of 14. The approach works best when it allows people to take a lead role on aspects of the curriculum in which they have an interest or expertise. They can take the lead in the preparation for class work on that. Team teaching allows a lower ratio at particular times, for example, when work is done on literacy or numeracy. It also allows a class to be divided flexibly on occasion. We can envisage a situation in which a group of 20 children are doing PE while a group of seven or eight get additional help with an aspect of literacy or numeracy. I see the approach as having real benefit.

I am of a similar vintage to Leslie Manson. As he said, the day of teachers closing their doors and not wanting fellow professionals to come in is long gone. Teachers are more than happy to work in partnership with colleagues, support assistants or whoever to deliver positive outcomes for young people.

Terry Lanagan: In my experience, some exciting work is going on in the area. The school that John Stodter referred to earlier was, I think, Dalreoch primary school in West Dunbartonshire, which featured heavily in *The Times Educational Supplement Scotland* the week before last. That is a school of 100 pupils in an area of high deprivation. The headteacher has taken a radical approach to the organisation of her school. It is divided into two houses—P1 to P3 and P4 to P7—but the pupils are then divided in all sorts of other ways throughout the week to deliver particular

aspects of the curriculum. It is very dynamic and exciting and it involves groups of teachers working together to develop the curriculum and deliver learning and teaching. It gives a huge amount of responsibility to the young people, who are involved in committees that help to run the school. They are supported by teachers and every other member of staff in the school including the janitor, office staff, learning assistants and so on. If you went into that school, you would have difficulty in defining the class sizes because the situation is so fluid. That is the sort of imaginative solution that curriculum for excellence lends itself to.

Kenneth Gibson: That is certainly the kind of thing that I would like to hear more about. Some excellent work is being done out there, and we do not always hear about it. Perhaps it is not shared across local authorities that could benefit from it.

I am quite interested in Glasgow's position on class sizes. I understand that Glasgow officials and elected members have made pronouncements that they do not believe that smaller class sizes are beneficial. We all agree that the quality of teaching is the most important thing but, all else being equal, I understand that class size makes a significant difference. What is Glasgow's view?

Maureen McKenna: I will clarify that, and say that I have shared this with the elected members. We are not saying that smaller class sizes are not a good thing—I concur with the views of everyone who has spoken here—but we do not want to be restricted to a number.

Kenneth Gibson: Like every other local authority, Glasgow signed up to the concordat and made a gentleman's agreement to make progress towards that aim. Councillor Mackay suggested that money has been made available to implement the policy. Has Glasgow just decided that it will take the money but make no effort whatsoever to implement the policy that it signed up to?

Maureen McKenna: That is a political point and you should direct it to the politicians.

Kenneth Gibson: Unfortunately, the politicians are not here to ask or I certainly would do that.

Your submission states that if the policy was implemented, you would not be meeting the needs of children in Glasgow. Clearly, the needs of children in Glasgow are not being met at present. Glasgow has frankly shocking levels of attainment relative to other local authorities, even when we compare socioeconomic groups. Parents are tripping over themselves to get their children placed in East Renfrewshire, and we are well aware of the legal dispute going on between parents and East Renfrewshire Council. Obviously, replacing 64 nursery teachers with nursery nurses between 2004 and 2007 also had

an adverse effect. If other local authorities are implementing the class size policy and Glasgow is not, surely the situation in Glasgow relative to other local authorities will only continue to deteriorate, and your levels of attainment will continue to be the worst in Scotland.

Maureen McKenna: I ask for your evidence that Glasgow is performing more poorly in socioeconomic group comparisons.

Kenneth Gibson: There has been plenty of evidence on that.

Maureen McKenna: No, I have evidence to suggest that a number of schools in the city are punching well above their weight. I am more than happy to share that with you. Reading and writing standards are shown to be increasing in the five to 14 national assessments, and they compare favourably with the socioeconomic groups that are shared among the authorities.

Kenneth Gibson: I understand that the education share of Glasgow's budget is the smallest proportion of any local authority in Scotland, whereas in East Renfrewshire it is the highest. I am not making a party-political point, because the same party is in control of both authorities. Perhaps there has not been as much emphasis on or prioritisation of education as there has been in other local authorities. Presumably the money that the Scottish Government has offered to implement class size reductions would help to mitigate some of Glasgow's difficulties.

Maureen McKenna: I have been in Glasgow for two years and there is a strong emphasis on investing in education across all parties. We take the strong view that education is crucial to the future of children and young people, and there is a lot of evidence to show that Glasgow is succeeding with its children and young people. I invite you to come and see some of it.

13:15

Kenneth Gibson: I was educated in Glasgow and I was a councillor on Glasgow City Council for seven years—I was on the education committee—so I know quite a bit about it. As you know, my mother and my wife are councillors on Glasgow City Council.

Clearly there are issues in Glasgow. Even if you do not look at other local authorities, it is clear that Glasgow is perhaps not doing as well as one would hope. Do you really believe that not going down the road of reducing class sizes will in the long run allow Glasgow to catch up? You said that you are concerned that the gap in relation to the 20 per cent of deprived pupils going to smaller classes would increase. Surely, if you do not

implement the class size policy, the gap will increase. That is my concern.

Maureen McKenna: We are focused on matching our resources to need. The council has been very helpful in granting us an additional 11 teachers plus an additional 11 pupil support assistants, who we will train in order to be able to invest further in nurture groups. Each year, we look to be flexible to ensure that we have 25 as an absolute maximum in P1. In the past two years, we have put in up to an additional 20 teachers—those statistics do not show up in the ScotXed methodology. The work that I have been doing with the Scottish Government looks at that. Indeed, I have had discussions with the cabinet secretary about the methodology and matching resources to need. I was pleased that the cabinet secretary said publicly that he felt that Glasgow was doing well for the children in its care.

Kenneth Gibson: Do you think that you will be able to persuade parents not to make the large number of placing requests that they currently make in Arden, Carnwadric and Southpark Village to get their children into St Ninian's or Williamwood? A similar thing happens on the north side of the river. Given the positive comments that you have made, how will you be able to persuade parents that their children will get the best possible education by attending Glasgow schools, as opposed to making placing requests outside the Glasgow boundary?

Maureen McKenna: We are working very hard on that. In Arden and Carnwadric, a number of the places that are given are not because of placing requests—that is the catchment area for St Ninian's. There are some placing requests around the edge there, but it is the catchment area. That is the local association. It is the same out in the east with St Ambrose and in the west with St Peter the Apostle. We have relationships with St Joachim's and Trinity. We are about to work with South Lanarkshire Council, because the pupils of Carmunnock have traditionally been associated with South Lanarkshire Council. I am meeting the parents of Carmunnock next week, because they have asked us to undertake a consultation to address that, because they would like to be associated with a Glasgow school.

Kenneth Gibson: But East Renfrewshire Council is saying that St Ninian's is full.

Many of the parents who are in the catchment area want to remain in it, but there is a possibility that that might not happen. Surely if Glasgow schools were performing optimally, the parents who bought houses in that area so that they could send their children to St Ninian's would feel confident about sending their children to St Paul's or other local schools.

Maureen McKenna: I agree with you entirely. I have explained that to parents. I want their first port of call to be a Glasgow school but, geographically, St Paul's is much further away. If I, as a parent, live in the catchment area, is it not my right to send my children to that school, regardless of whether it happens to be in the city where I pay my taxes? That was the result of disaggregation. Some of those families have lived in that area for 19 or 20 years and have always been associated with St Ninian's high school. Indeed, they were part of the group that came together to get that school built. It just happens to be on the other side of the border. I think that you are making an issue out of nothing.

Kenneth Gibson: I am sure that parents there do not agree. A lot of them bought houses in that area in the past five years to get their children into St Ninian's because they cannot afford to buy houses in East Renfrewshire.

Maureen McKenna: It is in the area for that school.

Kenneth Gibson: At the moment.

Maureen McKenna: They can have a consultation and we will participate in it.

The Convener: That concludes the committee's questions. Thank you very much for your attendance. Mr Lanagan, I hope that you are able to make it to your meeting with Sir Jackie Stewart without speeding too much. If not, please give him the committee's apologies for delaying you.

13:19

Meeting continued in private until 13:23.

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