



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

EDUCATION, LIFELONG LEARNING AND CULTURE COMMITTEE

Wednesday 10 March 2010

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EDUCATION, LIFELONG LEARNING AND CULTURE COMMITTEE
7th 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 GAVE EVIDENCE:

Michael Kellet (Scottish Government Learning Directorate)
Michael Russell (Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Eugene Windsor

LOCATION

Committee Room 6

Scottish Parliament

Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee

Wednesday 10 March 2010

[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:02]

Class Sizes (Government Policy)

The Convener (Karen Whitefield): Good morning. I open the seventh meeting in 2010 of the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee and remind all those present that mobile phones and BlackBerrys should be switched off for the duration of the meeting.

The only item on the agenda is our continued consideration of matters relating to class sizes. We have been joined today by Michael Russell, Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, and Michael Kellet, the deputy director for schools: people and places division at the Scottish Government.

Welcome to the meeting, cabinet secretary. I understand that you would like to make an opening statement before we move to questions.

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Michael Russell): Thank you for inviting me. I am grateful for the opportunity to reaffirm the Government's commitment to class size reductions in the early years, and of course to discuss any issues that the committee wishes to raise. I shall make a few brief opening remarks. I want to outline the argument for smaller class sizes based on research evidence, on best international practice and on the careful assessment of where we are and what remains to be achieved in Scotland.

I start with the research evidence. The committee received written evidence in advance of last week's meeting from some of the leading exponents in the field, namely Peter Tymms, Peter Blatchford, Maurice Galton and Jeremy Finn. I want to reflect on what they said. I am happy to acknowledge that not all of them are equally convinced of the merits of class size reduction but a fair analysis of their evidence would indicate that they agree that smaller class sizes lead to gains in pupil attainment. Their views may differ about the scale of class size reduction that is necessary, what the extent of the benefits might be, what the duration of the benefits might be, and whether all or only some of the pupils involved benefit, but their bottom line is that there are benefits associated with class size reduction.

The two strongest pieces of research—the Tennessee student teacher achievement ratio project and England's class size and pupil-adult ratios project—show the positive contributions that class size reductions can make. They are cited so often because they remain the most robust empirical evidence that we have on the subject. It is worth noting that the submissions from Blatchford and Finn really bring home the weight of the findings, especially from the STAR project, which can be all too easily forgotten among the mass of other, perhaps less robust, evidence.

What the evidence and the experts' submissions also tell us is that class size reduction on its own is not a magic bullet. We need to understand better why and how class size reduction works. This committee inquiry is a useful opportunity to do that.

Recent work that was published in Canada—the Canadian Education Association's report "Reducing Class Size: What Do We Know?"—finds positive effects on teachers, parents and pupils but recognises that

"the full gains of class size reduction cannot be achieved without ... attention to other factors"

such as the curriculum and teacher quality. A lot has been made of the fact that the benefits of class size reduction are sometimes missed because teachers do not adjust their teaching approaches accordingly when working with smaller classes. In Scotland, we have a number of things that enhance our approach. One is the difference to the curriculum that is coming because of curriculum for excellence, and the changing teaching methods that curriculum for excellence has brought us. I expect the Donaldson review, which will consider not only initial teacher education but induction and continuing professional development, to consider that matter. That will also help us to go forward.

Although opponents of class size reduction tend to point to Asian examples of countries with large class sizes and high success in international attainment comparisons, all the evidence tells us that places such as Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan and many regions of China are beginning to focus heavily on reducing class sizes. They recognise something that Scotland recognised slightly earlier: although exam results are very important, in the modern world, motivation to learn, creativity and critical thinking skills go alongside them. Class size reduction has a strong effect in those areas, too. Exam results are important, but so are those other things, especially if we want to equip future generations to think their way forward. Scotland's future success depends on that.

Finally, I want to recap on where we are and where we are heading. As the committee will know, the most recent pupil census records that 13.2 per cent of our primary 1 to P3 pupils are in classes of 18 or fewer. That is disappointing; in fact, I would be prepared to use words that are even stronger. We had hoped for better progress, but we are where we are. The important thing is that we do not stagnate at 13 per cent and that we stimulate further progress. That has been a major motivation in the work that I have done with our partners in the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities. Overall, however, it is important to note that in 2009—in this Government's first term of office—the average class size in primary schools fell to a record low of 23.1. That bears some weight in international comparisons and in effect.

We all recognise that the financial circumstances are difficult, which is why it is important that we are realistic about what is achievable over the coming months and years. As the committee knows, I am in the process of securing a deal with COSLA to ensure that, by August this year, 20 per cent of P1 to P3 pupils will be in classes of 18 or fewer. The vast majority of local authorities have offered to contribute to that significant step on the way to fulfilling our overall class size aspirations. I remind myself daily that it was never going to be an easy challenge. The financial circumstances have conspired to frustrate the progress that I would have liked to make, but the 20 per cent deal represents a new stimulus for further progress, which I am happy that we are making.

I hope that those introductory remarks were helpful and frank. I am happy to discuss them and elaborate on them.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Thank you.

A lot of what I was going to ask you was covered in your statement. I take note of your comment that class size reduction is not a “magic bullet”. You talked about how the curriculum will be significant in relation to maximising the benefits of smaller class sizes, as will teacher quality. However, there remain concerns about the impact of the class size policy on CPD, and that CPD will not keep pace with class size policy. Tymms said that

“effective teachers produce bigger gains than modest class size reductions.”

Last week, the committee heard from the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland that there was little specific CPD on class size policy, although general CPD would make a contribution. What additional resources, if any, will the Scottish Government make available to

encourage and enable teachers to make the most of class size reductions, including some of the issues that you have already touched on, such as training to deal specifically with smaller class sizes?

Michael Russell: The answer to that lies in the CPD that is being undertaken, particularly for curriculum for excellence. Curriculum for excellence is about supporting the personalisation of learning. By definition, that is about teachers getting the best return from investment in smaller numbers—essentially, it focuses down. The CPD for curriculum for excellence is at the heart of that.

We have made a big investment in CPD—it is sometimes easy to forget just how big. Every teacher has 35 hours of CPD per school year. That is an absolute and it must be observed. We have five regular in-service days, and the Government has now given four extra in-service days specifically for curriculum for excellence. That package represents substantial investment in making sure that the teaching method matches our aspirations.

The Donaldson review is also relevant. We have acknowledged that teacher education and development need to be taken further and the Donaldson review will comment on and look for the closest possible match between what we have seen in Scotland through reducing class sizes in primary schools and teaching methodology. We are heading in the right direction. The commitments that we have made are the right ones, and the in-service days are also right.

Just before the meeting, I looked at my e-mail, as every MSP does, and there was yet another e-mail from a parent with child care commitments saying, “Not another in-service day.” We have to be rational and strike a balance so that everyone's interests are taken care of.

Kenneth Gibson: There are some concerns that one of the main gains of small class sizes is not in education itself but in pupil behaviour. Of course, if pupil behaviour improves, teaching and learning are allowed to improve. What is your view on that issue? Do you agree with Blatchford that the effect of small class sizes is greatest on literacy for low attainers and young pupils, but that, in deprived communities, the evidence is mixed?

Michael Russell: No, I do not fully agree with that. The academic evidence on that issue is also mixed. Peter Blatchford has done tremendous work in progressing the issue, but a quantifiable benefit is seen in areas of most deprivation. That is why I have been happy to discuss with local authorities the prioritisation of class size reductions at this stage in the programme.

There is a behavioural effect, but there is something axiomatic about the behaviour issue. The smaller the number of pupils interacting with the teacher, the more it is likely that the quality of that relationship will improve, particularly in establishing, enhancing and maintaining patterns of better behaviour. Some of this is not rocket science: almost every classroom teacher would say that they would rather have a smaller class at certain stages, and that the outcomes for such classes are better.

There is a hint of angels dancing on the heads of pins here. Whether the figure is 18 pupils or 20 pupils, we need to set a benchmark to which we can aspire. The general point about reducing class sizes is one on which I hope everyone in the room can agree. We will then end up debating the merits of pursuing the policy, the way in which Governments have pursued it successfully or unsuccessfully, and the targets that they have set themselves. I think that that is what parents and teachers want most.

Kenneth Gibson: How do you feel about team teaching and class sizes? Would it be better to have two teachers in a class of 30, for example, than to have one teacher in a class of 18 or 20?

Michael Russell: When it comes to team teaching, some are resistant, such as the Educational Institute of Scotland, and others are enthusiastic. Where it is effective and produces results—many teachers, particularly younger teachers, find it very helpful—I am happy to see it happen. I do not think that we should see it as some sort of magic bullet that can achieve a certain set of numbers. We have to ask whether it provides an effective solution to some of the educational problems that exist in some educational settings, and I think that the answer to that is probably yes.

In recent months, we have been deliberately very flexible—I am sure that Michael Kellet's remarks will reflect this point—in discussing teacher pupil ratios, team teaching and all sorts of issues, including the relationship between class size reduction and nurture groups, which we will no doubt come on to discuss. I think that we need to value all contributions that have an effect, but whether they work must be judged on the basis of the quality of the outcome rather than on any ideological or other fixation.

I ask Michael Kellet to say a word or two about the issue.

10:15

Michael Kellet (Scottish Government Learning Directorate): The cabinet secretary is right that there is evidence that team teaching is already happening. At his invitation, I recently

visited Barnhill primary school in Dundee, which the vice president of the Association of Headteachers and Deputies in Scotland—who is the headteacher of that school—volunteered as an example. That school has two primary 1 classes. One is a small class of 20 pupils with one teacher and the other is a bigger class of 34 or 35 pupils with two teachers. She told me about the value of that arrangement, which she was quite clear brings its own challenges—it calls for a very close relationship between the two teachers in the bigger class—but it also brings a new dynamic that people might not have had to work with before in a one-teacher class. She and the teachers to whom I spoke were very positive about that experience, which works in their particular circumstances. Given the number of kids and the physical constraints of that school, team teaching was seen to provide good gains for those primary 1 pupils.

Kenneth Gibson: For some schools, team teaching might be the only way to reach the class size target of 18, especially in the case of a magnet school that attracts a high demand from parents who want to send their children there. I believe that many parents would rather send their kids to a school with large class sizes in a good area than to a school with small class sizes in an area that does not have such a good reputation for education. Given the difficulties and costs of extending schools, is team teaching perhaps almost a fallback position because it is better to put two teachers in one class than to try to build other classrooms? Incidentally, throughout his primary education, my son has been in a team-teaching class of 60 pupils and two teachers, so team teaching can be found not just in smaller classes but even in larger classes.

Michael Russell: I think that it is important not to be prescriptive about one solution fitting all. In the circumstances that have been mentioned, team teaching can be important. I want to be flexible, so I do not want to say that it is the solution in every place. Different solutions can arise. We are being flexible and we are listening. Where team teaching works and provides good outcomes, of course we will support it.

On the example from Dundee that Michael Kellet gave, during a meeting with the Association of Headteachers and Deputies in Scotland I was struck by how one individual felt that team teaching had worked for her. That was why I asked Michael Kellet to go and see that school. I know that the officials who work with me spend quite a lot of time looking at those good examples to ensure that we understand them and that we are flexible about them.

Kenneth Gibson: Where, for example, a year group can be split into three classes, would it not

be easier for the teachers if those three classes could be split into ability groups rather than numerical groups?

Michael Kellet: I asked that question when I visited Barnhill primary school. When I asked how, in that scenario, those 60 or so kids were split up, I was told that it was important to split them up into mixed ability groups, because the clear view was that that helped their education. Account was also taken of friendship groups so that, for example, kids who had been together in nursery were kept together in their P1 class. The very strong message was that a mix of ability in classes was the best way of ensuring that all the children in that cohort received the best education possible. That was the view of one teacher in one school. I am not saying that we would prescribe that approach, but that was what worked for them in Barnhill in Dundee.

Michael Russell: I should point out that Barnhill is a really energetic school with good outcomes.

The Convener: In your opening statement, you referred to your 20 per cent deal with COSLA. Can you give the committee a little bit more on the detail surrounding that deal? As I am sure you will be aware, the evidence that the committee received on the matter last week was conflicting at points. For example, Scottish Borders Council appeared to believe that it had already met the 20 per cent target but had been asked to reach a target of an additional 7 per cent of its pupils in class sizes of 20 in primaries 1 to 3, whereas ADES thought that the target was that 11,000 children should be in smaller class sizes. How will the deal actually work?

Michael Russell: If you had read not about what I have been doing but Pat Watters' letter to councils in December, you would see that what is being talked about is entirely clear. I, too, am interpreting the letter, and my understanding of where we are and how we got here is that each local authority was asked to provide 20 per cent, or more, of its primary 1, 2 and 3 children with class sizes of 18 or less in August this year—they were asked to provide a minimum of 20 per cent. How authorities do that—how they approach things—is up to them. For example, Argyll and Bute will do primary 1, after which it hopes to do primary 2 and then primary 3. That is an intelligent move. Other authorities are doing things differently. If an authority has not yet started, we have suggested that a good place to start is in the areas of most deprivation. Some local authorities have already gone well beyond 20 per cent, perhaps because it was possible for them to do so. I refer to places such as the Western Isles that have small school rolls. They still have difficulties in schools with larger rolls, but everything else has almost solved itself.

The flexibility was in relation to the other priority areas—early years and school meals—where, because of pressure on resources, we agreed very realistically that local authorities should have the opportunity to use their resources to invest in smaller class sizes. We said that authorities do not have to make as much progress as we wished them to make in the other two areas. That was a clear understanding. The approach was designed to reset the relationship, indicate that progress was possible and recognise reality.

When I was at COSLA's conference last Thursday, every single person to whom I spoke said that, by doing that, we had shown a welcome willingness to work with local authorities and had given them the opportunity to move forward. Of the 32 local authorities, three will not be part of the process. In one of those cases, there is good dialogue on the issue. I am happy to discuss that further.

I understand and am pleased with the progress that is being made. Some authorities had quite a road to travel. In case you think that I am being partisan, convener—something that I never am—I cite the example of a Scottish National Party authority. Renfrewshire Council had a road to travel; it has travelled it. Other local authorities have made substantial progress, but are keen, as I am, to see whether they can make more progress. Most are doing so.

The Convener: Why did you choose 20 per cent? Why not 25 per cent, 30 per cent or 50 per cent?

Michael Russell: Twenty per cent was achievable and realistic. The figure was the subject of considerable discussion between me and COSLA—particularly between me and Pat Watters—but also among education conveners. We wanted to see what was realistic and achievable overall. Last week, Derek Mackay said that there were “11,000 reasons” why 20 per cent was a good figure. It is not the end of the process. I hope that we can continue to make year-on-year progress. The 20 per cent figure is a recognition that a step forward has been taken. The figure had stuck at 13.2 per cent. A new impetus and the ability for us to work together were needed.

My strong view of the policy and its role in the concordat is that it equates exactly to what I heard the COSLA president's group say, which is that the difficulties in this area show the real strength of the concordat. The concordat enabled us to discuss and negotiate constructively about how to take forward what the Government wishes to see achieved, which is a policy that is supported by an increasing number of local authorities. It is testament to how the concordat is working.

The Convener: You said that one reason for choosing the 20 per cent figure was that it was achievable. Was it not more about the Government saving face? Was it not so that you could say that you had achieved that figure instead of your original class size pledge? The vast majority of children in primary 1 to 3 in Scotland will not be sitting in classes of 18 or under.

Michael Russell: As I said, Derek Mackay told the committee that 11,000 pupils is a good increase and a good improvement. Am I disappointed that we are not at 100 per cent? Of course. This has turned out to be more difficult than anybody anticipated. There have been political as well as practical difficulties. When I came into office, I thought it important to try to get some new momentum on the issue. Did I want to save face? No. I am sure that you will accept that I have believed that this is the right policy for longer than most.

I believe that the policy makes a difference and ties in extremely well with our early years agenda. It says that investment at the start of the educational process should pay dividends not just in the early years, but, we hope, for the rest of life. Some of the evidence from the STAR project tells us that.

It is quite hard for politicians to invest in something that will not produce an immediate result. However, it is the right thing to do and I thought that it was important for us to get the policy moving in the right direction again. I am grateful to my colleagues in COSLA who helped that to happen.

The Convener: Is it likely that we will get much progress beyond the 20 per cent in the next few years?

Michael Russell: We understand that 20 per cent is achievable this year. We have a verification system to put in place and I am talking to COSLA about that to ensure that we are all comfortable. I hope to enter into discussion with COSLA and the local authorities in the summer to work out what we will be able to do in August 2011. I want to do that.

The Convener: Do you have any concerns that agreeing to the deal with COSLA to get the progress that we all want—although we may disagree about the specific numbers, every party that is represented in the Parliament agrees on the value of smaller class sizes—might lead to other valuable educational inputs, such as free school meals for children from the most deprived backgrounds and nursery education, not being delivered? Is that a risk? Local authorities have a choice to make. Scottish Borders Council made it clear in evidence to the committee last week that,

as a result of its being asked to deliver smaller class sizes, it will be unable to deliver on its original school meals commitments and its pre-school commitments.

Michael Russell: I do not have those concerns. This is an aspect of progress that we place in an important position, but we have seen some good improvements in other aspects of progress. Two local authorities—Glasgow City Council and Stirling Council—have met the commitment to 570 hours in pre-school, which we are glad about. However, the number of hours involved in the early years commitments is astonishing—if my memory serves me correctly, around 8 million hours of additional provision have gone in. That is pretty commendable. We have also made substantial progress on kinship care, which was another priority.

When times get tough, decisions must be made about how priorities are organised, and we have made those decisions. The policy is also significant in terms of the outcomes in early years and fits perfectly with the ideas in our early years framework. I do not think that what you suggest is true at all. This is a win-win situation.

The Convener: You cite Glasgow City Council's commitment to pre-school provision. Glasgow City Council would have made that commitment whether or not the Scottish Government had highlighted that as a priority area. Early years provision was an area of policy to which the council was committed and which it wanted to prioritise, and it already spends far more on delivering that than it receives in grant from the Scottish Government. Are not all the Scottish Government's priorities in educational policy associated with the sole target of class-size reductions of 20 per cent at the expense of many other things?

Michael Russell: No, I do not think that that is true at all. I think that this is a win-win situation. The smaller class size priority, which is turning out to be effective and is moving forward, has also resulted in a reduction in class sizes overall in primary schools, which is a good thing. It has emphasised the early years policy. I do not in the slightest criticise Glasgow City Council's priorities. It has worked well with the Scottish Government on the 570 hours commitment; indeed, all local authorities have moved forward on that. The concordat contained a clear set of agreements, and councils have moved forward on all of them. The policy fits well within an overall strategy of improvement in education and I am happy to give credit where it is due, to Glasgow City Council. I am sure that you will want to give credit to the Government, too, for the progress that we have made.

10:30

The Convener: I am sure that we would all welcome any child ending up in a smaller class, but the reality is that it is not a win-win situation for everybody. Some 80 per cent of children will still not be in smaller classes. The previous census showed that 13.2 per cent of children were already in classes of 18 or fewer, so the scale of the change is pretty insubstantial. Surely that is a concern for the Scottish Government.

Michael Russell: The concern is that we have not made the progress that I wanted to make. However, I would find it difficult to tell the parents of 11,000 pupils that the change that we are trying to make is insubstantial. The figure of 11,000 is not insubstantial. It may not be sufficient, but it is not insubstantial.

The Convener: You have said about class sizes that we need an envelope to aspire to and that deciding whether that should be 18 or 20 pupils hints at dancing on the head of a pin. Was the class size commitment in your manifesto only ever an envelope to which parents could aspire, or were you truly committed to delivering class sizes of 18 for all P1 to P3 pupils?

Michael Russell: I am absolutely committed to the policy that we have set ourselves. I espoused that policy as long ago as 2002, when it entered our work, and I remain committed to it. It is right to be flexible and not to be dogmatic, but the policy has made a difference and will continue to do so long after I leave politics and, perhaps, long after all of us leave politics. I have a strong commitment to it that is by no means cosmetic.

Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD): I would like clarification. The convener has already asked about the matter that I want to ask about, but I am still unclear about it.

Scottish Borders Council has said that it has already attained the 20 per cent class size target, but COSLA instructed it that it should go further than that. In doing so, it will risk not making progress on other key issues, such as early years provision. If you were in Scottish Borders Council, would you not want to make progress on early years provision because the 20 per cent target had been hit? I think that Scottish Borders was one of the free school meals pilot areas, so it probably thinks that. What is the Government's message to councils that have already hit the 20 per cent class size target? Would not it be better if they were to put resources into other areas? You have said that the policy ties in with the early years agenda. On 19 February, *The Times Educational Supplement Scotland* reported that 19 local authorities are not putting resources into expanding pre-school hours. If you are talking

directly to those councils, what do you say to them?

Michael Russell: I will deal with that question before I ask Michael Kellet to talk about details of the situation in the Borders.

Councils have made progress—no council in Scotland has failed to do so. The question is where we go now and what is prioritised. There are 8 million extra hours of provision. That is progress by any definition.

I invite Michael Kellet to address the Borders issue. There have been differences in interpretation by Scottish Borders Council and COSLA.

Michael Kellet: That came out in the evidence that was given last week. The panels that were before the committee then gave evidence that was perhaps contradictory.

The position is set out in Pat Watters's letter to authorities, which is quite clear from our perspective. The Government is looking for an increase from 13.2 per cent of P1 to P3 pupils in class sizes of 18 or fewer to 20 per cent across the country, and we are certainly seeking to encourage all the authorities to play their part in making progress on that. However, it is for each individual authority to determine how best to use its limited resources to reduce class sizes and to address the other priorities that have been talked about. From our point of view—this is set out in Pat Watters's letter—the imperative is to make that improvement at the national level, which we can record. The improvement will be evident in the pupil census that will be published in November this year.

Margaret Smith: For councils such as Scottish Borders Council and perhaps Western Isles Council which, with the greatest of respect to them, maybe find the situation easier because they already have, for whatever geographic reason, small classes and small schools, it is anticipated that they will have an attainment figure of 25 or 27 per cent, or whatever, in respect of the target, and that ultimately the percentage will balance up across Scotland to 20 per cent, which is why the push is on from COSLA in the Borders and elsewhere to go beyond the 20 per cent so that we get a national figure of 20 per cent, which will allow other places where it is much more difficult to attain 20 per cent to continue not to attain 20 per cent.

Michael Russell: No. There is a genuine difference of opinion with Scottish Borders Council about what it has and has not achieved. Three key points in the council's evidence relate to that, and I just want to reflect on them. Some headteachers have queried the concentration on early years and think that smaller class sizes in P5 to P7 would be

more welcome. I accept that that is a different opinion, but that is not where we are at the moment. The council also wants more flexibility in recognising team teaching, and has included in some of its figures things that we have not yet—I think—fully recognised as contributing to the target. Discussion on that needs to continue. The allocation that the council has made to meet the figure that COSLA thinks it should meet is 12 teachers—the council felt that it needed another 12 teachers.

At the end of the day, I have to say—I know that some people find this difficult—that it is up to Scottish Borders Council; there is no sanction that I can apply to the council. Of the 32 local authorities, I think that three have chosen to say that they do not want to do what is being asked. Borders accepted in debate with COSLA—not with us—that it needed to make more progress, and it has made more progress. I am glad about that; I think that it is important. The dividend will come not to me, but to the young people in the Borders and their families who will be affected by the policy. There is flexibility, which is where we are with the nature of the concordat. My discussions with COSLA were therefore about setting the framework in which progress could be made, but nobody had to buy in to the framework. It might be a measure of the understanding that this policy, coupled with other policies, can be successful that so many councils have bought in in that way.

Elizabeth Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Cabinet secretary, can I just pursue this point? I think that you are absolutely right that the decision is up to the Scottish Borders Council. Can you tell me, in that case, why the Scottish National Party manifesto was so hung up on 18 as a target?

Michael Russell: I do not think that it was “hung up”. The 18 figure came from a careful examination of the STAR project in particular. Where is the moment at which the 18 figure makes the biggest difference? That figure was set in 2003, and it was carried forward into the manifesto of 2007. Whatever criticisms you can make, the position has been consistent. I am indicating to you that I think that 18 is the right figure and that we need a figure to aim at. However, I am not going to die in a ditch for the figure of 18 in every set of circumstances. Progress is being made by nearly every local authority, which is very helpful. If we reach 18 as the key figure, that will make a big difference. However, I do not regard myself as being “hung up” on anything, apart from getting the real flexibility in smaller class sizes that makes differences in education.

Elizabeth Smith: That comment is consistent with what you said earlier, which is that you think

that a magic number is not necessarily the absolute. Do you accept that, by shifting from the policy of 18 or fewer to the policy of 20 per cent, you have moved away—very sensibly, in my opinion—from something that is extremely rigid and very much one size fits all, to allowing local authorities to have much more flexibility in how they deliver on the policy?

Michael Russell: That would be a very positive way of putting it, but there is another way of putting it, which is that the flexibility existed anyway and it was wise to recognise it. The 18 figure stays there, but the question of how we achieve it over the whole of Scotland becomes a matter of progression. It must be a matter of progression, and that is what we are trying to achieve.

Elizabeth Smith: Am I right in thinking that the move from the policy of 18 or fewer to a more flexible policy of 20 per cent was because insufficient numbers were going to be able to deliver on the policy of 18 or fewer?

Michael Russell: You are connecting two numbers that are not necessarily connected. The figure of 18 or fewer is essentially a component of the 20 per cent; we are trying to achieve 20 per cent being in classes of 18 or fewer, which amounts to 11,000 pupils, and 13.2 per cent is where we were this year.

You are opening up an interesting wider question that I am happy to debate. I know that you have argued for flexibility from headteachers. Within that envelope—I am sorry for using the envelope analogy—there is an interesting issue. Although 18 is important as the optimum point, there is an argument to be had—an argument that we should have—about the flexibility that headteachers have with the resources in their schools. That does not mean going to 30 or 40 or whatever, which is how it is being understood by some people when that is not how it should be understood. However, when it comes to flexibility in the school resource in order to get the best result, I am happy to have that debate. Where I want to be is 18, but there is a necessary flexibility in that.

Elizabeth Smith: How do you view comments from the Lanarkshire councils that pupil teacher ratios are more important in delivering better outcomes for youngsters than are the physical size of the class?

Michael Russell: There is something in that, but not as much as some people are making of it. Low pupil teacher ratios are good, but research that the committee has received points out a differentiation; indeed some of the academic research has been clouded by confusion over the issue. The class experience is very important—

that is how we teach. Some people might argue that it is a Victorian hangover, and that we should not teach in that way, but that is how we teach. The importance of the class exists. Pupil teacher ratios may be part of a complex equation; certainly, even if the optimum class size has not been reached, getting the pupil teacher ratio to be part of the equation is important. As we will see when we come on to nurture groups, there is a difference of approach that says that what we are trying to do will have the same outcomes. It is predicated by the same relationship between numbers of teachers and numbers of pupils, but it does something different, for different reasons. I am very interested in that.

Elizabeth Smith: Are you comfortable with councils' seeing pupil teacher ratios as being a more important priority, and believing that they can deliver better pupil teacher ratios rather than deliver on the class size policy?

Michael Russell: I would like to persuade them to deliver on the class size policy because it is important. However, I acknowledge that by improving pupil teacher ratios they are making an important step. The two are not exclusive. We teach in classes, so the class issue is important and we should not set it to one side. Willingness and ambition are very important: if they are there, we should work with people and with the grain of progress, rather than against it.

Elizabeth Smith: At the end of the day, do you believe that it is the central Government's duty to reflect upon what the right policy would be in terms of numbers in a class?

Michael Russell: Yes. It is the central Government's duty. The issue of education delivery is a live one, and we shall be talking about it again tomorrow. I am not unhappy to discuss that constructively. There is a place for central Government policy on a range of education matters. The relationship between policy and delivery is one that we need to understand and improve because we are seeing some difficulties in two areas. First, we must ensure delivery of national objectives. Secondly, and more important, the outcomes in education in some areas—not in all areas and not in all subjects—are not as good as we want. One of the barriers to getting that right may be inflexibility.

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): I want to ask about legislation, but before I do, I want to pick up on a couple of points that the convener raised earlier. You seem to be suggesting that introducing flexibility is a win-win situation for all councils. Do you recognise that in some situations, there are still invidious choices to be made? For example, if councils put resources into pursuing class sizes of 18 at P1 to P3, even for some of their pupils, it might have a knock-on effect on

other pupils in the same school. We have had reports of increased class sizes further up the school, including from Shetland Islands Council and East Lothian Council. The City of Edinburgh Council has said that class sizes could rise to 30. What do you think about those negative effects of your policy?

Michael Russell: If local authorities have concerns, I will, of course, listen to them. As far as we have seen, there is no evidence that class sizes further up the school are rising; there is no evidence that Peter is being robbed to pay Paul. I will, of course, listen to the concerns of local authorities if they feel that to be so. This is a win-win. We are evidencing that.

Ken Macintosh: You say that there is no evidence, but the committee has heard the evidence. Shetland Islands Council told us that it intends to increase the proportion of pupils in small classes from 42 per cent to 66 per cent. It says that that will increase class sizes further up the school. East Lothian Council said that it expects to meet the 20 per cent target. It is directing £240,000 to schools in deprived areas, although that will result in larger classes in upper primary. North Lanarkshire Council said that the policy has resulted in an increase in the number of composite classes and in increasing class sizes in upper primary. South Ayrshire Council told us that it will employ three extra teachers to meet the Government target and that the policy has resulted in an increase in the number of composite classes.

Michael Russell: We do not have any evidence of that. If, over the course of the year, councils come to us with actual figures, we will look at them. The policy needs to work within present class size maxima. The education experience of no children will be harmed by the policy. Indeed, the educational experience of more children—11,000 more this year—will be improved.

Ken Macintosh: I do not understand your remarks, cabinet secretary. I have just read out the evidence that the committee has received on the impact of the class size policy. It is clear that it is having a negative impact in some areas. I am not saying that that is happening across the board, but it is clear that there is such an impact. I read out evidence to the committee.

Michael Russell: We have no evidence that those class sizes are increasing. If, over time, councils come to us with that evidence, we will consider it. Of course we will; I always listen to councils. I repeat: at the present moment, I do not believe that the policy harms the education experience of any child. Indeed, it will improve the education experience of another 11,000 children this year.

Ken Macintosh: Are you suggesting that those councils are not telling the truth in their evidence?

Michael Russell: I am not suggesting that.

Ken Macintosh: Shetland Islands Council says that its intention to increase the proportion of pupils in small classes from 42 per cent to 66 per cent will increase class sizes further up the school. What does that say?

Michael Russell: I am happy to listen to Shetland Islands Council and every other authority when they come to us—if they come to us—and to look at the figures. I do not believe that the policy harms the education experience of any child. It improves the education experience of many children—most notably another 11,000 children this year.

Ken Macintosh: I am not sure what to make of what the cabinet secretary says, convener. It is clear that the policy will have a negative effect. The decision is one for authorities to take; it is a balancing act. It is clear that the policy will have a negative effect on some. I am surprised that the minister is totally denying it.

Michael Russell: I do not believe that the policy will have a negative effect on any child. It will improve the education experience of many children, including another 11,000 this year.

Ken Macintosh: We are not getting anywhere. I will turn to the other choices that can be made, one of which is on the free school meals policy. In introducing a policy of 20 per cent, the cabinet secretary is suggesting that authorities target resources at the most deprived areas. Does he accept that the trouble with that is that deprived areas are not evenly spread across Scotland but are concentrated in certain local authority areas? If so, does he further accept that the 20 per cent figure cannot apply nationally?

Michael Russell: Local authority funding is determined in part using the Scottish index of multiple deprivation. Local authority funding is therefore dependent in part on the social circumstances of the area that an authority serves. A redrawing of local authority boundaries would be required to make a difference to that. I hope that each local authority focuses on real need in its area. That is the intention.

Ken Macintosh: Does the cabinet secretary want the policy to apply to the 20 per cent most deprived areas across Scotland or just to the 20 per cent most deprived areas in a local authority area?

Michael Russell: Given that we presently fund and deliver through local authorities, I can ensure only that each local authority focuses on the policy, which is precisely what I have done.

Ken Macintosh: Does Margaret Smith want to come in on that point?

Margaret Smith: Sorry, I was trying to catch the convener's eye.

Ken Macintosh: I thought that you were catching my eye.

Margaret Smith: No, it was the convener's. However, can I just pick up on what you said earlier, cabinet secretary, about deprived areas? You said that you had suggested that deprived areas be targeted. Clearly, however, local authorities have already been working towards the class size target. Your suggestion can therefore only be a suggestion. For large tracts of the country where progress has already been made on class sizes, you might find that it will be some time before real progress is seen in deprived areas. You said that you had suggested that, if local authorities had not already started the process, deprived areas should be targeted. However, you then told us that quite a lot of progress has already been made. How do you think deprived areas across Scotland will therefore be affected in reality?

Michael Russell: I was trying to be helpful in this, and to say to local authorities—

Margaret Smith: I am always trying to be helpful, too.

Michael Russell: Indeed. You and I can agree on that.

It was a helpful suggestion to local authorities that those that perhaps had low achievement so far on the policy might say "The journey of 1,000 miles starts with one step. Where do we actually go with this?" I suggested that it might be interesting and important to go in the direction of deprived areas. That does not apply to some local authorities because, as you said, they have already done it in some schools automatically. An example of where my suggestion may have helped is some city areas, for which councils have said "Can we do this? Can we put our effort in here?" However, it was a helpful discussion that arose in talks with COSLA, as did progress on school meals. I think that those are important things at a time of financial difficulty.

Ken Macintosh: I want to clarify how the policy applies to each area. Scottish Borders Council suggested last week that it is trying to get 7 per cent more. In other words, if you take the national average of 13 per cent already in class sizes of 18 or under, and the target is 20 per cent, Borders interprets the policy as being that, whatever its bottom line, it should try to get 7 per cent more into smaller class sizes. However, it is not just 20 per cent, is it? It is 20 per cent of the most deprived areas. If Borders therefore felt that its

deprived areas were already benefiting from small class sizes, should it then try to get 7 per cent more, even though they might not be the most deprived? Which criteria do you apply in that situation?

Michael Russell: Margaret Smith correctly outlined what I was endeavouring to do.

Ken Macintosh: Which is?

Michael Russell: She outlined very carefully that I was trying to be helpful.

Ken Macintosh: Yes, but I am just trying to get some clarity here, cabinet secretary, about what criteria are applied. When we had a 100 per cent target for class sizes of 18 or under, that was very clear, as was the education argument. However, much as I agree that we should be realistic and that there should be flexibility, the difficulty is that you then bring in lots of different criteria to apply. I am just trying to work out the Government's strategy. Does it apply across Scotland? Does it apply in each local authority? If it does apply in each local authority, what weight do they give to whether schools are in deprived areas? I would just like the minister's comments on that.

Michael Russell: I can only repeat what I said to Margaret Smith, which is that I was trying to be helpful by suggesting where it might be possible for local authorities to move forward. However, a suggestion from a minister in these circumstances is of course by no means a criterion—I was trying to be helpful.

Ken Macintosh: I will ask one more question on the choices that have to be made. The original class size target was to be achieved by maintaining teacher numbers. Are you still trying to maintain teacher numbers?

Michael Russell: It has been very obvious in every single local authority that there has been pressure on teacher numbers and that it has not been possible for local authorities, as the employers of teachers, to maintain the numbers. Nonetheless, I am pleased that progress has been made in reducing class sizes; the endeavour to reduce them will continue.

Ken Macintosh: So, does the Government still have a target to maintain teacher numbers?

Michael Russell: What we have seen is an inevitable pressure on teacher numbers, given the pressure on resources. What we now have is progress on class sizes, and I am pleased with that. There has been a reduction in teacher numbers and, as I have indicated, I think that it would be very difficult for local authorities to reverse that. Of course, were they to choose to do so, everybody would be pleased.

Ken Macintosh: I am sure they would be, but what is the Government's policy? Do you have a target?

Michael Russell: The Government would be pleased were they to reverse that decision, but that is a question for local authorities, as they are the ones who are facing the pressure and the ones who must make the decision.

Ken Macintosh: It was an SNP commitment and it was also in the regional concordat. Is it no longer a Government commitment?

Michael Russell: I would be very pleased if local authorities chose to use their resources in that way; however, they have strong pressures on them and I am pleased that they are also able to continue to reduce class sizes.

Ken Macintosh: Okay. If local authorities have to make those choices and the Government is not providing a clear policy direction—as you appear not to be—do you have a target for free school meals?

Michael Russell: I hope that we will continue to make progress on free school meals. That is our intention. The way in which we have gone about it is greatly superior to the way in which others went about it, so we will continue to make progress. Nevertheless, times are difficult and there are choices to be made and priorities to be set. I refer you to the letter from Pat Watters, which expresses the understanding that we all have about how we should take the matter forward.

Ken Macintosh: I am delighted that you are taking a "superior" approach. Your policy was to provide free school meals for every child in P1 to P3. Is that still your policy? If so, do you have a target? What progress do you expect to be made in the next year?

Michael Russell: That remains our target. The progress that is made towards it will depend on the progress that we make with COSLA on delivery in difficult times.

Ken Macintosh: Will you be disappointed if no one makes any improvement at all?

Michael Russell: I think that we will see improvements in a variety of places. I remain confident that we will keep moving towards our targets in difficult times—the difficult circumstances not being of our or the local authorities' making.

Ken Macintosh: You have set a target of 20 per cent for reductions in class sizes, which is down from your previous target of 100 per cent. Has your target for free school meals come down from 100 per cent to 20 per cent or to none at all?

Michael Russell: I am confident that we will continue to make progress. Many children in

Scotland will benefit from that, and we should all be pleased about that.

Ken Macintosh: I am delighted that you are confident, minister, but it was a specific question. It is of importance to the Government that you make progress on class sizes, and you have renegotiated a target of 20 per cent reductions, which is down from the original target of 100 per cent reductions. That is a realistic, achievable target. Why have you not set a similar target for the provision of free school meals?

Michael Russell: The letter from Pat Watters indicates the framework that was considered acceptable to COSLA and to us, which will ensure that we continue to make progress on all our joint ambitions. That is a constructive and mature way to go forward.

Ken Macintosh: Let us move on to the legislation that the Government intends to introduce to cap class sizes at 25 in P1. Is that still on target? When will it be introduced?

Michael Russell: I intend to issue the consultation document within the next fortnight.

Ken Macintosh: When do you expect the regulation to come into effect?

Michael Russell: There is a requirement to consult on the matter. On what date will the regulation come into effect?

Michael Kellet: That will depend on when it is introduced, but we imagine that it will be in the summer.

Michael Russell: It will be in the summer of this year, provided that the consultation is supportive. I would not want to ride roughshod over other views. It would be wrong to do so.

Ken Macintosh: Obviously, it was your intention to have the regulation in place for the autumn. I take it that you regret that that will not be the case.

Michael Russell: I felt that the priority was to move forward on resetting the relationship with COSLA on the issue of class sizes and on other commitments, so that is what I did. I am now bringing forward the consultation document, which I hope will be positively supported by every local authority. I hope that, if it is, we can make progress.

Ken Macintosh: Do you recognise a tension between the class-size policy and parental choice?

Michael Russell: In what way?

Ken Macintosh: The number of pupils in classes of more than 25 is increasing. The evidence that we heard last week suggested that

that is because of parents exercising their right to choose.

Michael Russell: That number is undoubtedly increasing in some places. However, if local authorities are supportive of the change to a maximum class size of 25 in P1, it will come about.

Ken Macintosh: The figures show that, across Scotland, the number of pupils in classes of more than 25 has increased in the past couple of years. We heard that point made last week.

Michael Russell: I would like to have a look at the figures.

Michael Kellet: That is the case. There has been a slight rise in that number in the past year. After considerable reductions year on year, there has been a slight rise from 2008-09 in the number of P1 pupils in classes of more than 25.

Michael Russell: When we publish the consultation document in the next fortnight, I hope that we will send the message that we intend the legislation to go ahead if it has the support of local authorities. I hope that that will be helpful to local authorities.

11:00

Ken Macintosh: I mentioned the figures because, as far as I can work out, the authorities that gave evidence last week thought that parental choice and placing requests in certain areas are the prime reason why the number of pupils in classes of more than 25 might be increasing. Does the minister recognise that there is a clash between parental choice and the placing request legislation, and the policy on class sizes?

Michael Russell: What I recognise is that the debate that has taken place has indicated that having a cap of 25 pupils would be useful to some local authorities for the reasons that you have outlined. I will bring forward a consultation document that will, I hope, lead to a statutory instrument that will deal with that issue.

Ken Macintosh: Do you agree that there should be parental choice?

Michael Russell: Of course I do.

Ken Macintosh: Do you recognise that limiting class sizes in popular schools limits parental choice?

Michael Russell: I recognise that there is a demand from local authorities for a statutory instrument to deal with that issue. I am pleased to be able to respond to that demand and hope that the local authorities will find that response helpful.

Ken Macintosh: I am worried that I am not speaking English today, minister. I am asking

straightforward questions; I am not trying to trip you up.

Michael Russell: I hope that I am giving you straightforward answers. I, too, hope that my English is well understood. I am sure that you and I are models of clarity.

Ken Macintosh: I am finding your answers evasive to the point of being ludicrous. I asked a simple question.

Aileen Campbell (South of Scotland) (SNP): That is unfair.

Ken Macintosh: Mr Russell does not need the support of members of the committee. He is quite capable of defending himself.

Michael Russell: I concur with Aileen Campbell's view. Ken Macintosh's criticism is unfair. I thank her for that help.

Ken Macintosh: Parental choice and class size limits are difficult things to balance.

Michael Russell: Indeed. I agree.

Ken Macintosh: Does the minister recognise that a balance will have to be struck in certain areas?

Michael Russell: Yes. That is why I am pleased that I will introduce a statutory instrument, which will, with the support of councils, help to strike a balance. I hope that you will support it when it comes to the committee.

Ken Macintosh: Is the minister considering giving powers to local authorities to set the limit locally, or will the limit be set using national criteria?

Michael Russell: When we publish the statutory instrument, I will be happy to have a debate about it with you. We can then consider what is possible. You, local authorities and others can comment if you want it to be improved in any way. I will introduce it within the next fortnight.

Ken Macintosh: Is the minister looking at the placing request legislation?

Michael Russell: I am considering only introducing a statutory instrument to address an issue that you have raised today and which has been raised in the long term by a range of councils.

Ken Macintosh: Okay. Thanks very much, cabinet secretary.

Aileen Campbell: I would like to ask a brief question that follows on from points that Ken Macintosh has made. Is it fair to say that many parents would choose to have their kids in smaller classes, and that that is why local authorities and

the Government have the shared objective of achieving smaller classes?

Michael Russell: I have never met a parent who does not think that smaller class sizes are useful and helpful. Of course, some parents have been passionate in seeking smaller class sizes, as have some teachers and trade unions. There is a great thirst for ensuring that class sizes are reduced, and, of course, that is precisely what the Government has done overall. It is continuing to reduce class sizes and is focusing in particular on the early years, when the maximum investment produces the maximum outcome.

The Convener: Obviously, you will consult on the statutory instrument that you will bring to the committee. Last week, local authorities that gave evidence to the committee and the City of Edinburgh Council expressed publicly on the record their great disappointment that the Government had not acted sooner to introduce a cap, because they are setting class sizes for the new academic year right now. Did the Government make a mistake in not acting when many local authorities were consistently raising the issue? I think that South Lanarkshire Council said that it was at court 18 times last year defending something that it could not defend.

Michael Russell: Let me scotch that. I do not think that there was a mistake. I am pleased that we will be able to introduce a statutory instrument within the next fortnight. The issue is complex. If the local authorities support the instrument, we can make progress on the issue. Perhaps it would have been more helpful if, for example, the City of Edinburgh Council education leader had written to me and given me a chance to respond before she issued a letter to the press, but that is politics. I think that we are taking the right approach. We are introducing a statutory instrument, and I look forward to the committee—perhaps unanimously—supporting it.

Margaret Smith: Before I ask some questions, I feel duty bound to defend my City of Edinburgh Council colleague. Marilyne MacLaren's comments are born of frustration because the legal advice that the council has been given is that it is not able to restrict P1 classes to 25, so class sizes will rise to 30 in many schools, including many in the area that I represent, where you know there is a great deal of pressure on very good schools. The council has also made it clear that there are significant issues to do with progression to classes in upper primary. Do you not accept that Marilyne MacLaren's comments are born of frustration that, although classes in certain Edinburgh schools might make progress towards the target of 18, classes in other parts of Edinburgh—some of which I represent—are going in the opposite direction?

Michael Russell: I am happy to meet Marilyne MacLaren to ensure that we are both working in the same direction to solve the problem. I acknowledge that it is a problem. I have known Marilyne MacLaren for longer than I can remember and I am happy to have that discussion with her so that we can get the best out of the situation. As I said to you, I am committed to taking the matter forward with urgency.

Margaret Smith: I return to the point that I made to you earlier about early years. You acknowledged in your comments this morning the importance of the early years agenda, about which all committee members agree. I said earlier that *TESS* reported that 19 local authorities are not putting resources into expanding pre-school hours. You said that no council in Scotland had failed to make progress and that is fair enough. Nevertheless, the evidence that the committee has heard has contained mixed views about whether cutting class sizes would happen at the expense of other educational provision. One area that is clearly not being progressed as much as you would like is further increases in the number of pre-school hours. Do you believe that not increasing pre-school hours runs counter to the general ethos of the early years framework and if so, what are we going to do about it?

Michael Russell: I accept that we need to continue to increase the early years commitment and pre-school hours. The question is how we do that. We have seen some positive suggestions in the framework. The commitment was to go from 475 to 570 hours by August 2010. The representations made to me by councils of all political hues were that we needed to reset the relationship in terms of the resources available and the priorities set, and that is a realistic thing to do. As you know, we discussed with councils whether the substantial campaigning from MSPs and others as part of the free at three campaign would help us to make a difference. That is what Pat Watters's letter refers to when he writes about how we can take things forward. Free at three would increase pre-school provision reasonably and help us to make continued progress, and we agreed in the letter that that would be a useful next step. That does not mean that we are not committed to 570 hours—we are. We are going to see continued progress, but we are not going to get there as quickly as we would have liked. That is a recognition of reality, not just by me but by the local authorities. It is not that we will see no progress but that the progress that we do see will not be as fast as we would like.

Margaret Smith: Do you also accept that the committee has heard that there are some logistical difficulties in achieving the increase in hours—running three-hour sessions rather than two-and-a-half-hour sessions? The background is that the

intention was to increase the number of nursery teachers but, in reality, we have seen a backward step in those numbers. You look puzzled, cabinet secretary. I think that the decrease across Scotland was 13 rather than 2,300, which is the top-line teachers number about which we hear so much. That is a relatively small decrease in nursery teachers but, at a time when you were hoping to expand nursery provision, it is clear that it is a move in the wrong direction. How much of the problem is logistical and what can you do to try to deal with it?

Michael Russell: We are going in the right direction, but more slowly than you or I would like. As with all these issues, there are logistical problems that we need to solve. We are discussing with COSLA and individual authorities how we can ensure that the commitment is honoured. I am happy to get together the information from each local authority and to look at it with the committee, to see whether we can do more.

Margaret Smith: I return to the more general point that has been made about central Government's duty. We are talking through a range of promises that were made in a manifesto and trying to tease out from you why those promises have not been realised. You are a reasonable man. With the benefit of hindsight, do you think that it is reasonable for us to accept that you cannot tell us what the Government's policy on teacher numbers now is? I think that you said that in response to questions from Ken Macintosh; I may be putting words in your mouth, but that was my interpretation of what you did not say, if not of what you said. What can we expect from you as a cabinet secretary if the central policies that were set out clearly in your 2007 election manifesto will not come forward in the future?

Michael Russell: You can expect from me what you would expect—robust advocacy of the proposals that I think will make a difference. I hope that, when responding to Mr Macintosh's questions, I was clear on the issue of teacher numbers; I want to be as clear as I can. Whether we return to the teacher numbers that we had is a matter for local authorities but, given the financial difficulties that we face, it will be difficult for them to achieve that. That is simply where we are. We are not within the same financial parameters as in 2007; every local authority will tell you that things have changed profoundly. However, we want to get the best that we can against the objectives that we have set. Outcomes will be of most importance.

When things get tough, we need to decide how to achieve our core objectives with the resource that we have, working with others whose resources are also under strain. That is what we

are trying to do through a range of policies that we have agreed with COSLA. Outcomes are of utmost importance. I was impressed, as you will understand I would be, to hear Nick Clegg underline his commitment to smaller classes both in Scotland, when he was here, and in England. All of us have that commitment. The question is, how do we continue to drive it forward in times of difficulty? That is what I am trying to do. There is a strong, clear policy, and I have been able to reset how we are trying to achieve it. I want to take forward the policy in collaboration with others, if possible.

Margaret Smith: You say that you have reset the policy; others might say that you have watered it down, as we no longer have the figures or timeframes that we had originally. No one in the room disputes that there has been progress towards many of the targets or, more important, does anything other than welcome the progress that has been made. Central Government's position on these matters is clearer going forward, but there is more wriggle room for councils if they do not quite come up to the mark on class sizes and so on, because the position for them is less clear. That point was borne out in the conversations that took place and the evidence we received last week, and, dare I say it, in the interchange between you and Mr Macintosh.

Michael Russell: Let me put an alternative thesis to you. The policy has not been watered down, but we have recognised the realities for local authorities, as represented to me, and have made sure that we are very clear—even clearer, one might argue—about what we will achieve and when we will achieve it. I do not think that extra wriggle room has been found; we have identified a clear staging post, given the difficulties that we face, and how we will get there. That was the subject of the discussions that I had with local authorities and COSLA over the winter. That is where we are now, and we know what we want to achieve by August. I hope that I have indicated to you that I am also open to discussion on other issues—more open than we have been, perhaps—and other means of achieving the objectives. I want to achieve the objective of better educational outcomes for each young person in Scotland, and class sizes are an important component of that. They are not the only component, but they are an important one.

11:15

Ken Macintosh: The minister says that it is unrealistic to get teacher numbers back up to the levels that he inherited. What is the central policy direction on that? Surely the worry is that teacher numbers will fall still further. Does he agree that it is important that the Government prevents that?

Michael Russell: It is important that we ensure that we have the right number of teachers for the jobs that exist in Scotland and the tasks that we have. I said earlier this year that I hoped that we would be able to maintain the right number of teachers in Scotland to do the job, and I knew that local authorities shared that hope with me. That is what I am trying to do at a time of great financial pressure. We must remember that, between now and the next council budget setting, there will be a general election and, according to both Labour and Tory spokespeople, there is a prospect of another emergency budget if either party wins at Westminster. My ambition is to maintain the quality and outcomes in Scotland and the right number of teachers to do the job. If the Westminster Government is sympathetic to that, I hope that it will ensure that the resources are available for it.

Ken Macintosh: Despite the difficulties that the minister faces, he has given a specific policy commitment on class sizes. Despite all the circumstances, he has made that a priority and he has set the new parameters at 20 per cent. Why will—

Michael Russell: Jointly with COSLA.

Ken Macintosh: Why will the minister not set a similar target for teacher numbers? Surely it is—

Michael Russell: Because we agreed in a series of discussions in December, as part of the concordat, that we would reset the framework in the way that I described. That agreement between me and COSLA tackled the issues that we both felt needed to be tackled.

Ken Macintosh: But not teacher numbers.

Michael Russell: We tackled the issues that we both felt needed to be tackled.

Christina McKelvie (Central Scotland) (SNP): Good morning, cabinet secretary. Can I move you on to some of the alternative approaches? Last week, we heard some interesting evidence from local authorities on the different approaches that they have taken. Some have taken the approach of reducing class sizes and using nurture classes. Glasgow is using nurture classes and not reducing class sizes. My opinion is that it is not just class sizes that will make a difference to attainment and that we need an holistic approach. What other measures do you believe will be effective in increasing attainment?

Michael Russell: That is an important and good question. We would be utterly wrong to take an either/or view. The academic evidence, which has moved on substantially in the past five or six years, tells us that there is a range of things that will make a difference. I have looked carefully at the nurture group approach in Glasgow. I was

happy to visit the city and talk to a variety of people who believe strongly in the approach that they are taking in Glasgow. I am immensely impressed by the work that is being done. However, it is not a question of accepting either one approach or another. Different approaches will produce good outcomes in different circumstances and some of the other approaches in Scotland might also improve attainment.

I believe that what we are trying to do on class sizes is a bedrock activity that will produce results in attainment in the long term. I point to the STAR project among others. However, I do not dispute the validity of the other work that is being done in addition to that, which will also help. I do not dispute that some local authorities—such as Glasgow with its nurture priorities—are following other routes that might produce some of the same outcomes. That is the beauty of diversity in Scotland. Scotland is not a monolithic delivery vehicle in which one central view is delivered religiously in each school. That has never been the case. What we see in Glasgow is some very important work. I believe that there is room to follow the class size policy more rigorously in some parts of Glasgow, and I have said that to the local authority, but Scotland is big enough and generous enough in every sense to allow that approach to flourish.

Christina McKelvie: I turn now to some of the specific challenges that teachers and pupils face with regard to learning styles and needs. I have an interest in the impact of dyslexia and of its early diagnosis—the whole early years issue comes into play here. I wish to explore what your portfolio is doing to increase access to proper assessments at an appropriate age. Sometimes, if diagnosis is done too early, it does not bring good results. What are we doing in relation to dyslexia, dyspraxia and other learning challenges?

Michael Russell: Sometimes, we in Scotland beat ourselves up about some things before realising that we are in fact doing a number of things well. I had a conversation some months ago with an American expert who said that he thought that our additional support for learning legislation was world beating, giving opportunities to parents and recognising certain things in a way that simply does not happen in some jurisdictions.

That is not to say that our legislation is perfect. There are still cases from time to time—regrettably—of children whose difficulties in school arise out of genuine problems that have not been properly recognised early enough. The additional support for learning framework is very good, however.

Under the Donaldson review, we need to ensure that every teacher is sensitised to the issues. We need to do that as part of CPD, too. I recently met

Sir Jackie Stewart, who has been a fantastic ambassador on some of these matters. He will be working with us to make progress on some of the CPD issues. We are working with a range of organisations and individuals. We are trying to sensitise the entire system to the issues and to pick them up in such a way that no child is disadvantaged. That is a very strong commitment on my part.

Smaller class sizes help with that progress. The quality of the interaction between teachers and a smaller number of pupils gives a better opportunity—that is axiomatic. The one issue plays into the other.

The Convener: You are right to raise the importance of the framework of additional support for learning legislation, but, on Saturday, at the demonstration organised by the EIS about education cuts, Helen Connor, the president of the EIS, raised some serious concerns specifically about additional support for learning. The expectations of children and parents regarding the legislation are rightly being raised, but there are insufficient resources to allow needs to be met in our schools. How do you respond to that serious charge that has been laid by the EIS?

Michael Russell: There is an absolute legal entitlement for parents to follow a process. It is a statutory obligation on local authorities. I hope that Helen Connor is not suggesting that any local authority would renege on its statutory obligation. They cannot do that—the obligation is clear.

I stand absolutely as one with Helen Connor in my concern about what might be coming down the track in the way of cuts to public services in Scotland. I also stand as one with Pat Watters and COSLA in saying to Westminster parties that they must avoid the type of slash-and-burn approach to public spending that they appear to be discussing for after the Westminster general election. You will not find me disagreeing with Helen Connor on that. We are all concerned to ensure that a squeeze from Westminster on Scottish expenditure does not take place.

The Convener: Would you be willing to have discussions with the EIS and COSLA to ensure that the legal obligations, which I believe all local authorities would wish to comply with, can be met within the existing financial settlement, so that they can meet the needs of children?

Michael Russell: If anybody were to approach me suggesting that that was not possible in a local authority, I would wish to remind that local authority of its legal obligations, but I cannot believe that any local authority is not mindful of those obligations. To put your mind at rest, I regularly meet representatives of COSLA, the EIS and every union, and I will go on meeting them.

They may raise with me—as they do—any issue of concern, and I will endeavour to treat it seriously.

Meeting closed at 11:24.

The Convener: That concludes the committee's questions today. Thank you for your attendance at the committee. I am sure that we will return to the issue.

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