

EDUCATION, LIFELONG LEARNING AND CULTURE COMMITTEE

Wednesday 27 June 2007

Session 3

£5.00

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EDUCATION, LIFELONG LEARNING AND CULTURE COMMITTEE 2nd Meeting 2007, Session 3

CONVENER

*Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Aileen Campbell (South of Scotland) (SNP)

*Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab)

*Christina McKelvie (Central Scotland) (SNP)

*Pauline McNeill (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab)

*Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)

*Elizabeth Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

Hugh O'Donnell (Central Scotland) (LD)

Stefan Tymkewycz (Lothians) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING GAVE EVIDENCE:

Mark Batho (Scottish Executive)

Greig Chalmers (Scottish Executive)

Linda Fabiani (Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Culture)

Fiona Hyslop (Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning)

Liz Lewis (Scottish Executive)

Colin MacLean (Scottish Executive)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Eugene Windsor

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Sarah Robertson

ASSISTANT CLERK

Nick Hawthorne

LOCATION

Committee Room 5

Scottish Parliament

Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee

Wednesday 27 June 2007

[THE CONVENER opened the meeting at 09:15]

Interests

The Convener (Karen Whitefield): Good morning. I open the second meeting in 2007 of the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee. The first item on the agenda is a declaration of interests. I invite Christina McKelvie to declare any interests relevant to the committee's remit.

Christina McKelvie (Central Scotland) (SNP): Until 8 May, I was a learning and development officer for social work services at Glasgow City Council and some of the issues in which I was involved will overlap with the committee's agenda. However, as I have resigned I see no conflict of interest.

Work Programme

09:16

The Convener: The second item on the agenda is the development of the committee's work programme. I am delighted to welcome to the committee Linda Fabiani, the Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Culture. I am grateful to the minister for making time in her busy schedule to accommodate the wishes of the committee. She is joined by Greig Chalmers, who heads the Scottish Executive's culture and Gaelic division. I understand that the minister has a very brief statement to make.

The Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Culture (Linda Fabiani): Was that a warning, madam convener?

The Convener: It was indeed a warning.

Linda Fabiani: Okay, I will rush through it. I am glad to be able to give the committee an idea of my first thoughts about our culture agenda, and I thank the committee for its invitation.

I am discovering daily that the culture part of my brief is enormous. It covers support for the arts; film, the creative industries and broadcasting; local culture and festivals; the national museums, libraries, galleries and the archives; the national performing companies; built heritage, the historic environment and architecture; and Scots and Gaelic. As the committee will understand, after a few weeks in the job I have been able to meet and discuss issues with only a few of the people that I wish to meet—I will do a lot more of that over the summer—but I welcome the chance to tell the committee about my first reflections and initial plans. No doubt we will have plenty of time to speak again, and I hope to be able to come to the committee's away day towards the end of August. As I develop and implement the programme, I will ensure that I keep the committee well informed of what we are doing.

In the discussions that I have had so far in the culture sector, I sense a thirst for action and that people are looking for practical progress. Our agenda is about letting Scotland's creativity flourish to achieve all that it can for artists and creators and, indeed, for the nation. Art brings a sense of well-being to people.

I feel strongly about art for art's—and indeed the artist's—sake. That needs said and there is no need to be defensive about it. To support artists, I intend to develop a new grants scheme to help individual practitioners. I also want to explore ways in which we can widen the types of finance available, for example with more loans and, potentially, venture capital. We want to simplify the

ways in which creative businesses get support. I have had a chance to talk to Richard Holloway about our thinking, and I intend to meet the joint board of the Scottish Arts Council and Scottish Screen tomorrow evening. That team, headed by Richard, has an exciting agenda for creative Scotland, and I want that work to continue.

That leads me to legislation, which will be of interest to the committee. The previous Administration published a draft culture bill late last year, and I have been considering the responses to the consultation on that. I have not quite formulated my plans for the bill, or finished discussing the issues with relevant people, but my general approach would be to propose legislation only when it is clearly necessary, and not to legislate for the sake of it. If we introduce a bill on culture this year, it is likely to be quite short—perhaps only a few sections—and focused on one or two issues. When we have decided our view on that, I will ensure that the committee is kept well informed, so that it can plan its work.

Over the longer term, once we have completed a review of heritage protection, I may introduce a bill on heritage. As I said, however, I want to discuss my first thoughts with those with an interest. I will pick up on that over the recess. It will take a while, given the range of interested people, and I expect that I will have much more to say to the committee in the autumn, when I will be more than happy to return.

The Convener: Thank you for your comments and that outline of your initial thinking, minister. Where does culture figure in the Government's agenda? Does the Scottish National Party Administration rank culture as one of its priorities?

Linda Fabiani: The set-up of the Cabinet and the Government is cross cutting: the flow of ideas about what we are trying to achieve should cut across all the portfolios. As you know, culture has been placed with Europe and external affairs, within the office of the First Minister. I am pleased that culture is in my portfolio, along with Europe and external affairs, because of the internationalism of culture. The benefits that we can derive from our culture—in terms of both heritage and the arts—and from sharing experiences nationally and internationally is huge. I am delighted that the portfolio is in the office of the First Minister. It is a mark of just how important the SNP believes culture to be to the well-being of our nation.

The Convener: That is a helpful continuation—the previous Administration felt that culture should be a cross-cutting issue. It has been suggested, however, that not having somebody sitting at the Cabinet table with direct day-to-day responsibility for culture might mean that cultural matters could be forgotten, that we will not deliver that cross-

cutting agenda and that culture will not feature in all aspects of the current Administration's work.

Linda Fabiani: I can say with absolute confidence that I would not allow that to happen. I can also say with absolute confidence that the fact that the First Minister has taken culture into his own office and ensured that it is given the importance and legitimacy that it deserves is a mark of the importance that he places on the cultural agenda.

The Convener: I appreciate that you would want that to happen, but if you are not sitting at the table, how can you ensure that it happens?

Linda Fabiani: The Government is being run in a very inclusive way. I have regular meetings with the First Minister, and there are regular ministerial meetings. Obviously, you would not expect me to go into great detail about that, but I assure the committee that culture is an extremely important part of the First Minister's portfolio. It is taken as seriously as everything else that we do in government.

The Convener: What cross-cutting initiatives will the Executive announce in relation to culture?

Linda Fabiani: I will give you more detail about that when I return to the committee. I am on a learning curve—I am very open about that—and I have many people to meet and to listen to. I want to understand the portfolio of culture and all the different forms of culture.

I will give you some examples of cross-cutting. Our built heritage is very much part of our culture and identity as a nation and ties in with other portfolios across the spectrum. I mentioned earlier that I have responsibility for festivals; such events tie in with the tourism portfolio, which ties in with the economy. There are also the creative industries. A major part of the Scottish economy lies within the culture brief, so obviously I would be cross cutting that with, for example, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth. That is how we are working across the board. Any proposals and initiatives that I bring to the committee will have been run past the Cabinet and will be announced when appropriate.

Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): I welcome the minister's stress on the importance of culture to the Government's approach, as a people that is confident about its culture will get much more out of it. Do you see a place for extending the interest in the Gaelic language that we have shown in the past to what could be described as the majority language in Scotland—Scots in its various forms. In your discussions, will you consider the possibility of commissioning an expert report on Scots, much like the Macpherson report for Gaelic, which kick-started the series of

moves that led to the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005?

Linda Fabiani: I have yet to meet formally those involved in either the Gaelic language sector or the Scots language sector. I want to discuss those matters in detail, because language is so much part of our culture and identity as a nation. I know about the Macpherson report and how it was produced. We are open to suggestions from individual parliamentarians, committees or cross-party groups. In the previous session there was a strong cross-party group on the Scots language, although I am unaware of whether it has been reconstituted. If the group would like us to consider commissioning an expert report on Scots, I would be more than happy to look at its submission.

Rob Gibson: I welcome that possibility, as the cross-party group on the Scots language is healthy and alive. Embedding the arts in education will be part of the cross-cutting nature of the work about which you have spoken. Do you have any thoughts about how that might work in relation to Scots?

Linda Fabiani: I will be honest and say that I have not had time to think the matter through properly. The convener mentioned the cross-cutting elements of culture, a huge part of which is education. That point is also reflected in the committee's remit. Recently I visited the Glasgow Gaelic school for the first time. I was fascinated, not just by the mainstream learning from primary right through to secondary level that takes place at the school and in which the language is embedded as a source of identity and culture, but by the way in which music, dance and storytelling was placed within the curriculum. It is important that culture becomes part of normal educational practice, so that it does not have to be referred to as culture, but becomes part of day-to-day education and what we do.

The previous Administration formed some good initiatives to take culture into schools—for example, the school music initiative about which the convener asked at question time a couple of weeks ago. I am currently looking into those matters. At the moment 13 pathfinder projects are under way in schools. I do not know the detail of those projects and want to visit some of the schools involved to see what is happening. I am not sure whether any of the projects relate to language.

Greig Chalmers (Scottish Executive): Not at the moment.

Linda Fabiani: I know that some time ago there was a Scots language project in some schools in South Lanarkshire. Matthew Fitt, the Scots writer, went into schools to help children to write stories

and poetry in Scots. I would be very happy to look at such initiatives, because they give children a sense of confidence, as well as a sense of identity.

09:30

Pauline McNeill (Glasgow Kelvin) (Lab): Good morning, minister. I want to raise with you the issue of Scottish contemporary music, which, when it comes to the creative industries, is probably the one that the highest percentage of Scottish people—young people, in particular—care about. Four members of the committee have joined the cross-party group in the Scottish Parliament on Scottish contemporary music.

Linda Fabiani: Are you going to form a band?

Pauline McNeill: Westminster has a band, so why not? That is an indication that there might be a strong interest in the issue.

When Nicol Stephen was the Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning, he made an announcement about the Scottish music futures fund, on which I know you have already answered some questions. I hope you agree that that was a significant announcement. Structures have already been put in place for deciding how the money will be dispersed. My understanding is that a year-on-year commitment was made. Can you confirm that, either today or at a later date?

Linda Fabiani: I have had an outline briefing on the scheme to which you refer. As far as I remember, it was not a year-on-year commitment that was announced, but I stand to be corrected on that. Perhaps Greig Chalmers can enlighten us.

Greig Chalmers: I think that that is correct. The announcement concerned a sum of £0.5 million for the present financial year, the distribution of which throughout Scotland was to be organised by Highlands and Islands Enterprise. My recollection is that the announcement was for one year, but we can confirm that.

Pauline McNeill: I beg to differ on that. I have checked with Nicol Stephen and he is clear that his intention was that the commitment should be year on year. If you are satisfied that it is a successful initiative, I hope that you will commit to it in future.

Further to that, given the importance of contemporary music to the Scottish economy, will you commit to engaging with the Minister for Enterprise, Energy and Tourism on how we can grow music in Scotland?

Linda Fabiani: It is often the case that intentions are not translated into commitments or action. I will check out the position and find out exactly what was said and done at the time.

I share your views on the need to support contemporary music as one of the creative industries. I am having discussions with members of the Scottish Arts Council, who will be on the new board of creative Scotland, about how we can formulate a loan and grants scheme to help artists. I imagine that emerging artists in the contemporary music field are just the kind of people we would consider helping in that way. There is a general view that such assistance should be provided.

Scotland has a great culture of festivals, which feed into the economy. Any proposals should always be talked over with the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth. The creative industries in Scotland are huge and I sometimes feel that they are not given the consideration that they deserve, given their importance to our economy. I am talking about music, film and all the other elements of those industries.

I am keeping an eye on developments at Westminster, where the live music forum, which is chaired by Feargal Sharkey, is examining how initiatives can be used to boost the contemporary music industry. There has been discussion of how that could be done on a United Kingdom basis, which would obviously affect Scotland. I am monitoring the situation, but any progress is on hold until we find out about the portfolios that the new Prime Minister puts in place. I am aware of the importance of contemporary music, I want to support it and I am looking at all the options.

Aileen Campbell (South of Scotland) (SNP): It would be helpful to have clarity on the music futures fund because I understand that there was some doubt about whether Nicol Stephen's announcement represented a year-on-year commitment or a one-off grant. I ask you to ensure that such funds are targeted properly, perhaps by engaging more closely with the cross-party group that has been set up. Would you value input from the cross-party group?

Linda Fabiani: I certainly would. I will check out the music futures fund and write to the committee if that is acceptable.

The Convener: That would be helpful.

Linda Fabiani: I take Aileen Campbell's point. Who are the four committee members who are on the cross-party group? I am fascinated.

Pauline McNeill: You have to guess.

Linda Fabiani: I see Pauline McNeill, Ken Macintosh, Aileen Campbell and Jeremy Purvis raising their hands.

I began by saying how keen I am to engage with committees. We think it is important that the Government and the Parliament, through its committees, agree on as much as possible and

discuss things openly. I am also happy to take soundings from cross-party groups. I would be more than happy to come along to your cross-party group, not to stand there and say what I think, but to listen to what is said. If you think that something particularly relevant will be discussed at a meeting, I would be happy to come along and listen or to meet up with the band or a delegation from the group.

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): I think that the group will take advantage of that offer.

You said that you think that the culture bill will be a short bill. Other than the establishment of creative Scotland, will it cover anything else, such as the role of local authorities?

Linda Fabiani: I am considering that and taking soundings. So far, I have met only Richard Holloway from the creative Scotland interim board. Tonight I will meet the joint board of Scottish Screen and the Scottish Arts Council. Under the proposed culture bill, those two bodies will be disbanded and a new agency, creative Scotland, will emerge, which I hope will revitalise the arts and culture in Scotland.

I strongly believe that we should legislate only when necessary. I am going through the bill at the moment and taking advice, in the legal sense as much as on the consultation responses, in which people are saying what they would like and what they think is necessary. I am looking forward to tonight's meeting because many of the people who will be there can give a lot of input as they have great experience in the field. I am reluctant to say how I envisage that the bill will progress until I have spoken to all the people who can give that important input.

Did you mention local authorities?

Ken Macintosh: Yes. Am I right to say that you are committed to the creation of creative Scotland and therefore to the merger of the Scottish Arts Council and Scottish Screen, but that the role of local authorities and other matters are still to be determined?

Linda Fabiani: First, I am going to give you a row, because I got a row from Richard Holloway for talking about the merger of Scottish Screen and the Scottish Arts Council. It is not a merger. A brand new body will come into being to revitalise the arts in Scotland, so consider yourself told. I did, and I will not use the word "merger" again.

Obviously, local authorities play a huge role in culture and the arts in Scotland. We have all seen great examples of that. I am open to discussions with people in the know about whether we need to put that in legislation and whether things can be done through community planning partnerships. I mentioned the pathfinder projects that are under

way. I want to visit some of those during the summer and take soundings from people who are involved to find out how the projects are coming together. I do not believe that we necessarily need legislation on what local authorities have to do in culture, because I believe that they should be considering that themselves.

Ken Macintosh: How will creative Scotland work? There is still confusion about whether its main focus will be on driving up the creative economy, given that the creative economy—particularly digital media and so on—is a key part of Scotland's economy. Will that be creative Scotland's key role or will it have another focus?

Linda Fabiani: Again, that is being discussed at the moment. In the previous session of Parliament it was agreed that an interim creative Scotland would come into being. All these things are being discussed just now. I am still looking at the consultation on the proposed culture bill, which will inform the thinking on what creative Scotland is there to achieve and where it is to be located. Until I have spoken to the people who have been directly involved—which I will begin to do tonight—I am loth to say more.

I hope that, when I come to the committee's away day in late August, I will have had a lot of those meetings. I will speak to those who can inform me and I will come back to the committee with more defined plans about how we wish to proceed.

Ken Macintosh: Do you have any thoughts about the relationship between the Executive and the national companies, such as Scottish Opera? That has been a thorny problem over the past few years. Whether there should be direct political accountability, or whether accountability for the arts should go through creative Scotland is a difficult relationship to manage. What are your general thoughts on whether you, as minister, should be directly accountable for that funding? How do you see that relationship developing?

Linda Fabiani: The previous Minister for Tourism, Culture and Sport, Patricia Ferguson, with the agreement of the Parliament, effectively brought the national companies into the Executive, because of the many issues—mainly governance issues—that arose. I had a chat with Patricia Ferguson about that. She felt that those arrangements had worked well. Since then, I have talked the situation through with some of the civil servants who are directly involved with the national companies. It seems that the arrangements have been a big success. However, that is a different thing from Government deciding what the national companies should do with respect to their output. One element of what the national companies do lies in schools and the education sphere. For example, Scottish Opera

has had a wonderful in-schools opera programme. There is a role for the national companies there.

I do not believe that there is a prescriptive role for Government when it comes to creative output and what the companies do. Our role should be at arm's length. We cannot stifle the arts and creativity and what people want to achieve. I would find that impossible, and it would be a bad move to impose any strictures on the ability of companies to produce what they want.

Ken Macintosh: I imagine that you have not made up your mind on this, but have you thought about where creative Scotland will be located? Can you reassure us that the National Theatre of Scotland will still be located in the east end of Glasgow?

Linda Fabiani: The location of creative Scotland is open for discussion while I meet all the players involved and we work through the plans. I cannot, therefore, give you an idea about that.

The National Theatre is committed to staying in Easterhouse.

Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): Are you committed to delivering what was in the SNP manifesto? Can we treat what is in the manifesto as the platform for your agenda?

Linda Fabiani: Is there something particular that you wish to ask about?

Jeremy Purvis: Yes, there is. You mentioned that broadcasting is part of your wide brief. Your manifesto states:

"We want BBC Scotland to retain more of the licence fee raised in Scotland."

How do you intend to bring that about?

Linda Fabiani: Of course we would like more of the licence fee that is raised in Scotland to stay in Scotland. According to the figures, there is a disproportionate distribution, to the disbenefit of Scotland. We will work towards rectifying that. It is a reserved matter, so, with our colleagues in Westminster, we will consider the possibilities and have discussions with the appropriate people.

Jeremy Purvis: Are you referring to colleagues in the United Kingdom Government? You said "our colleagues in Westminster".

Linda Fabiani: The UK Government and SNP colleagues at Westminster. They have an SNP agenda—that is how political parties work. Discussions are happening and, as MPs do, the SNP MPs will lobby the Government at Westminster.

We wish to have good relationships with our colleagues in the Government in Westminster. We

will discuss matters with the appropriate ministers at the appropriate times.

Jeremy Purvis: I wondered whether the Scottish Government intends to ask the BBC trust to reconfigure part of the expenditure so that Scotland retains more of the licence fee that is raised in Scotland. That is what is proposed in your manifesto.

Linda Fabiani: We will discuss those issues at the appropriate time with the appropriate people.

09:45

Jeremy Purvis: Your manifesto also says:

"As a very minimum we will demand the creation of a Scottish news service."

What are your plans to deliver that?

Linda Fabiani: That, too, will be open for discussion. We set out in our manifesto the measures that we think are the best for Scotland. Every political party does that. We will try to take action on those measures by discussing with the appropriate people how we can move forward. The most recent Office of Communications report on network television production in Scotland showed that the number of Scotland-produced programmes is reducing. As a first step, we have to reverse that trend. I will meet the BBC, Scottish Media Group, Ofcom and others in that regard.

I believe that Scotland has the talent to provide much more for the network. We should all be working towards that for the benefit of everyone. We will have discussions—about, for example, the Scottish Six—with the appropriate people.

Jeremy Purvis: I just wanted to clarify for the committee the type of discussions that will take place. The language in the manifesto is clear: it says that you will "demand" the creation of a Scottish news service. The situation now appears to be that you will open up discussions.

Linda Fabiani: Do you want to have a party-political discussion here, or do you want to talk about the way forward for culture in Scotland?

Jeremy Purvis: I am simply asking what the Government's intention is with regard to how it wishes to take forward the retention of more of the licence fee that is raised in Scotland and the creation of a Scottish news service. I am interested to know how you will bring about the situations that you want to bring about. It is quite fair to ask about that.

Linda Fabiani: Any Government that wishes to bring about its manifesto pledges and plans will have discussions with the appropriate people. That is what this Government intends to do.

Jeremy Purvis: You have also made a commitment to merge the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland into Historic Scotland. How will that be brought about? What is the intention behind reducing the duplication between the two bodies?

Linda Fabiani: You know that a general thrust of our Government is to reduce the duplication of functions where at all possible. I am currently considering that issue, but I have also decided to be open minded about whether the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland would find its natural home in Historic Scotland or whether it might sit better in another body. I have not yet had time to discuss these matters with the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland. I want to speak to it, ensure that I understand exactly what it does and take its views into account before I consider the other heritage agencies and decide on the best way forward.

Jeremy Purvis: That is helpful. Just to be clear, am I correct in understanding that it is not necessarily the case that you will merge the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland and Historic Scotland?

Linda Fabiani: I will be looking for the most streamlined way in which to deliver that part of my portfolio. The possibility of merging those two organisations will be considered seriously. However, I am open to the suggestions of those people who have experience of these matters and work in the area already, and I believe that there might be a better way of streamlining the portfolio.

Elizabeth Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The curriculum for excellence holds many exciting possibilities for schools and the teaching of the arts. Can you confirm that you will discuss with the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning and with Maureen Watt, the Minister for Schools and Skills, how it can be implemented in schools? If you can confirm that, can you give us an idea of the timescale?

Linda Fabiani: I am extremely happy to confirm that. It is part of the cross-cutting work that we are talking about. Discussions will take place over the summer recess, but I cannot give you a specific timescale.

The Convener: I have a general question about access.

Linda Fabiani: I know about your general questions, convener: you were the convener of a committee of which I was a member.

The Convener: How does the Government intend to increase access to the arts and culture in Scotland?

Linda Fabiani: That is a very general question.

The Convener: Very general.

Linda Fabiani: It is hard to know where to start with an answer.

The Convener: You may be specific about how you will do it. I do not need a general answer.

Linda Fabiani: It is an interesting question. The previous Government considered the matter and thought that giving people a cultural entitlement might be the way to do it. That is valid, but I am not convinced that that is the best way forward.

Some of the language we use can be off-putting. For example, we ask someone what they do in the arts or culture and they say, "Nothing," yet it turns out that they have been doing things that are cultural all their lives. Most things that people do have an element of culture in them.

Liz Smith talked about bringing the curriculum for excellence into schools. That is crucial, and everybody has a big part to play in it. Local authorities also have a big part to play in it. Some of the pathfinder projects that were given approval by local authorities were targeted at groups that they felt did not have access to the arts. It will be interesting to see the results of those projects and whether they have provided access that was never available before.

The national companies do a lot of travelling. Travelling theatre companies are really important in providing access to the arts. Drama in community halls and the national companies going into schools are different elements of that.

It also comes down to the fact that one person's idea of art is another person's idea of poison—there is such a wide range of culture. There is no easy answer to your question, and I do not think that anybody will come up with an answer to it. We intend to mainstream culture; that is the most important thing.

The Convener: As you say, minister, the previous Administration wanted to go ahead with plans for a cultural entitlement. You say that you have reservations about that, and your reservations are legitimate, but if a cultural entitlement is not the right way forward, what is your alternative?

Linda Fabiani: What I said is that I do not believe that a legislative cultural entitlement is the way forward. There are two different types of entitlement: a legislative entitlement, which comes from the Government down, and an entitlement that people have within their local authority areas through their community planning partnerships. The latter is something that can happen without legislation. That is why I want to look carefully at the results of the pathfinder projects and take advice from those who ran them and those who took part in them.

The other people I want to meet over the summer are the cultural co-ordinators who were employed directly to ensure that there was access to culture in local areas. They were appointed without legislation. I want to find out about their experience, too.

I am aware that I am currently unable to give you any absolutely firm plans of what I intend to do, and I know how frustrating that might be, but I ask the committee to bear in mind the fact that I have been in the portfolio for only a short time. I do not want to make any firm commitments to do this or that without a real understanding of the breadth of the portfolio and what we want to do. That said, I will build on the previous Administration's successes. If something is good, there is no point throwing out the baby with the bath water but, obviously, every fresh Government will have its own approach. There will be things that we do not agree with and that we will want to alter. I hope that when I come to the committee's away day or to a meeting early in the autumn, I can be much more specific about my plans.

Christina McKelvie: What plans are there for celebrating Scottish identity and culture on St Andrew's day?

Linda Fabiani: That takes us to another manifesto commitment, which Mr Purvis has not mentioned.

Jeremy Purvis: Yet.

Linda Fabiani: Indeed.

We intend to put in place plans for a winter festival. That is not to say that I will come up with plans for a festival that will last for the entire winter. I want to build on what there already is from St Andrew's day to Burns day—from the end of November to the end of January. A winter festival in Scotland will tie in with everything else that already happens. Part of the plan is, of course, to promote St Andrew's day. I have looked at what the previous Administration did about celebrating that day. The process was started, but the celebrations could be better. We could do more, and we will build towards having better celebrations. I am considering the matter.

Rob Gibson: I want to return to what you said about cultural entitlements. The youth music initiative has been on-going; indeed, it has been evaluated for a long time. Things have been delivered in many different ways throughout the country. Will you be able to tell us in the autumn how that initiative should develop, bearing in mind that there can be local input into it with the central support that it has received?

Linda Fabiani: There are members who feel strongly about the youth music initiative. I have considered it, and one thing that I have picked up

is that people have different experiences in different local authority areas. The convener would never forgive me if I did not mention North Lanarkshire Council, as she is the MSP for a constituency in the area that that council covers. In my experience as a regional MSP, I have been bowled over by the music initiative in North Lanarkshire schools, which is fabulous. Those schools have grabbed the initiative and run with it. There seems to be open access for all. However, I have heard reports, some of which are anecdotal—I will look into them—that accessibility is not as great as it should be in some areas. If, for example, letters are written home to parents, will all children have equal opportunities to learn to play musical instruments? We could discuss that matter. Are there other ways of encouraging access? There seems to be an accessibility issue in some places, which we are considering. Where the initiative works, it is great, but we should try to ensure that there is access for all.

There are other music initiatives. Members may have read about Richard Holloway going to Venezuela to see the orchestras that have been set up there for children in deprived areas, and bringing that initiative back to Scotland. There will be a pilot programme in Raploch in Stirling. That will give young people access to music and enable them to tap into it. I want to consider all such initiatives before I consider expanding the youth music initiative into secondary schools.

Rob Gibson: I will make a quick link. The fèis movement has an excellent approach to music, which leads me to think that stress should often be put on having locally based organisations in different parts of the country that can encourage developments, particularly in drama and the theatre. The idea of travelling theatres is fine, but theatres must be rooted in communities in which drama has a strong tradition. That idea must be developed; I did not see the previous Administration developing it. I can think of places in the Highlands—such as Caithness—that have a strong theatre tradition, but people need support and a policy that recognises local centres of excellence.

10:00

Linda Fabiani: The fèis movement has been hugely successful. Thank you for raising the point about the arts being embedded locally, which I discussed with Richard Holloway and hope to discuss tonight with the people who will be on the board of creative Scotland. Ken Macintosh asked how creative Scotland will be structured and where it will be located. That is up for discussion. We have to get the best model to feed into all the areas in which we are trying to make progress.

The Convener: I accept absolutely that we need to get the best model, but perhaps we need to ensure that all local authorities live up to the standard that Labour-led North Lanarkshire Council has set in delivering the youth music initiative, which it has embraced, rather than do anything to its detriment.

Linda Fabiani: I do not think that its success is necessarily party political; I am sure that I could find an example of a bad Labour-run council.

Pauline McNeill: On the youth music initiative, do you audit the number of children who get the opportunity to learn a musical instrument rather than voice coaching?

Linda Fabiani: I think that that work is on-going.

Greig Chalmers: A research report published in February or March—I cannot recall the date—assessed the overall success of the initiative. I do not recall whether it quantified which activity pupils did, but we can certainly check that for you.

Pauline McNeill: Can you confirm what percentage of children have access to learning a musical instrument? Is it low, medium or high?

Greig Chalmers: I do not have that figure with me, but we can find it for you.

Linda Fabiani: That information was part of the briefing I received. I seem to remember that it was one of the things that triggered my concern about the patchiness of accessibility. We will look out the figures for you. I cannot remember the detail in them, but there were percentages for different projects.

Jeremy Purvis: Christina McKelvie asked about the winter festival and St Andrew's day. There is a commitment to make St Andrew's day a full national holiday. How would that be different from what the legislation provides for at the moment? Would you seek to change the legislation, presumably on a UK-basis, to make St Andrew's day a full national holiday?

Linda Fabiani: We are developing plans for St Andrew's day as a national holiday. I think that John Swinney's secretariat is heading up that initiative; there are many details to consider and people to speak to. My involvement is more to do with the celebrations around St Andrew's day, which would be tied in with hogmanay, Burns day and the promotion of the winter festival.

Jeremy Purvis: I might follow that up with your colleagues.

I might have misheard you when you answered my questions about broadcasting, the commitment to retain more of the licence fee in Scotland and a Scottish news service. I heard you say that you will have discussions with colleagues at Westminster about lobbying the UK Government.

Linda Fabiani: I do not think I said that.

Jeremy Purvis: I am just seeking clarification. You did not say that SNP MPs would lobby the UK Government on behalf of the Scottish Government to work towards those things.

Linda Fabiani: I think I said that we will, obviously, have intra-party discussions: the SNP Government and MSPs obviously have discussions with SNP MPs and MEPs about things that are party policy. That will carry on.

The Scottish Government will discuss many matters with the UK Government. That is one reason why we must have the joint ministerial committees, which have been in abeyance for years, up and running again, starting with the plenary committee, with the subject ones following. That will allow the Scottish Government to discuss in a formal forum matters that it believes are for the benefit of Scotland, instead of always having to rely on informal methods.

Aileen Campbell: Regarding Christina McKelvie's and Jeremy Purvis's points, I got a letter from the previous Administration that said that St Andrew's day was on the 31st. I hope that this Administration gets the date right.

Linda Fabiani: It is the 30th.

Rob Gibson: Which month?

Aileen Campbell: November.

Does the Government recognise the potential for using Scotland's national days to market Scotland abroad? Will the Government—and you, minister—explore that?

Linda Fabiani: That is one of my portfolio responsibilities. Part of my portfolio remit is to promote Scotland nationally and internationally through our wonderful Scottish heritage, culture and identity. As I said earlier, some plans are in place for celebrating St Andrew's day, but I want to expand them. I believe that the celebration should have an international flavour, because that would promote Scotland overseas and we could receive benefits that would help make Scotland vibrant, which is what we want.

The Convener: I thank you for your attendance—I know that you have to go to other meetings. This session gave us an interesting taste of what your portfolio is about. I am sure that we will have much dialogue with you over the coming months.

Linda Fabiani: I hope so.

The Convener: I look forward to seeing you at the committee's away day.

Linda Fabiani: Thank you, convener.

The Convener: I suspend the meeting briefly to allow the witnesses to change over.

10:06

Meeting suspended.

10:09

On resuming—

The Convener: I am delighted to welcome the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, Fiona Hyslop. She is joined by Liz Lewis, director of the schools directorate, Colin MacLean, director of the children, young people and social care directorate, and Mark Batho, director of the lifelong learning directorate.

I am grateful to you for accepting at short notice the committee's invitation to join us. I hope that that invitation demonstrates our great interest in the matters for which you are responsible. I understand that you wish to make a short statement.

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Fiona Hyslop): Thank you, convener, and congratulations on your appointment. I hope that I can have a constructive and productive relationship with the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee. I know that the previous Education Committee had such a relationship with the Minister for Education and Young People.

Thank you for the opportunity to set out my priorities and plans for education and lifelong learning. As your letter of invitation acknowledged, I have moved swiftly in my first few weeks in post to take action in a number of key areas. I want to outline what I think those measures will achieve and to discuss their detail with you.

As I said in my speech to Parliament last week during the smarter Scotland debate, I intend the Executive's focus on education and lifelong learning to centre on five key policy themes: early intervention; supporting vulnerable children and families; improving the learning experience in school; developing skills and lifelong learning; and promoting excellence and innovation. All that we do will fit within those parameters and themes. I intend to make tangible progress in those areas to enable people to fulfil their potential and to drive the Administration's overriding objective of sustainable economic growth.

On early intervention, my aspiration is for a system and culture in which children are nurtured through their early years by integrated, high-quality child care development and education. I have taken early steps towards meeting our commitment on nursery education. Last

Wednesday, I advised the Parliament that, from this autumn, the legal nursery education entitlement for all three and four-year-olds will be increased to 475 hours a year. That will create a solid platform for further expansion. Putting provision that covers the school year on a proper statutory and financial footing will create much more of a level playing field for children who attend private and voluntary sector centres that are partner providers for statutory nursery provision. I understand that partner providers form about a quarter of the total.

The hours of pre-school provision are set out in the Provision of School Education for Children under School Age (Prescribed Children) (Scotland) Order 2002 (SSI 2002/90). We intend to amend that order to make 475 hours the statutory minimum level of provision and to do that as soon as possible in September. Local authorities have the power to provide additional hours of pre-school education beyond the statutory minimum. As we will fund the extra hours from August 2007, we expect councils to secure delivery of the extra hours from the start of the new academic year.

We have had positive discussions on funding with local authorities and expect to write to them shortly to confirm details. The additional resource that will be required to implement our commitment is around £14.5 million this year. That includes an amount to increase the advisory floor, which sets a minimum recommended level of payment for partner providers, to £1,550 per annum. That represents around an 8 per cent increase in the rate of payment.

I do not need to argue the case to this committee of the importance of getting it right in the early years. We will want to discuss how we achieve that and I believe that we can achieve consensus on that. I will set out how the Government will maximise the benefits from our planned investment in the long-term early years strategy, which will be published in the summer or autumn of 2008. I want the strategy to be comprehensive, covering the wide range of influences on children's lives in the early years, and long term, setting the direction for 10 years.

Providing help to our vulnerable children and families when it is needed is the right thing to do and an investment in our future. Our approach will be distinctive, in putting all children and their rights at the heart of our policies. That means investing in children's health and well-being. I made early moves to underline that commitment by announcing that we will nurture children in their early years by trialling free school meals for all primary 1 to primary 3 children in selected schools. I am still in discussion with officials and delivery partners about where we will trial that

provision, but we want to focus on the most deprived areas first. It is my clear intention that the research will show us what difference universal free school meals in early primary makes to children. The trial will cost in the region of £5 million.

We will not duck difficult issues. I will seek early meetings with Whitehall ministers to raise with them the need to protect children better in the asylum system and this Government's belief that matters relating to child welfare should be determined in Scotland. In addition, I intend to examine how we can improve support for some of our most vulnerable, for example through improving the support that is available to foster families. I plan to continue the effective approach that was adopted during the previous session and to work closely with the committee on child protection.

10:15

We will continue to work with local authorities and others to ensure that children and young people who are at risk or who need to be looked after and protected by the state get the best possible support to enable them to achieve positive outcomes. We are committed to implementing the changing lives agenda, to ensure that social work has the capacity, quality and leadership that it needs to contribute to the delivery of outcomes in all portfolios.

Children deserve learning that engages and inspires them and which sets them up for a bright future. We need to improve the learning experience in schools. Reducing class sizes is one necessary step towards achieving that. We have ambitious commitments on providing access to a teacher in pre-school and on the reduction in size of P1 to P3 classes. That policy will give our children the best possible foundation for their education. We also need to ensure that the high quality of our teaching force is maintained, so that the full impact of our proposals can be delivered. That is why we will build up to our commitment, step by step, making a tangible improvement at every stage. It is also why I announced to Parliament last week that the Government will provide local authorities with funding to employ an additional 300 teachers from August 2007. We can target those 300 new posts first on pre-school and then on reducing class sizes in P1 to P3. The total cost of the initiative for 2007-08 will be £9 million each year. We want councils to focus the additional resources on deprived areas, where international research evidence indicates that the greatest benefits will come.

At the same time, I announced further measures—at a cost of £2.25 million—from our ambitious programme to increase radically the

number of people in teacher training. There will be an immediate increase of at least 250 places in postgraduate teacher training next session. I also announced an increase in this year's intakes to the bachelor of education degree, raising BEd intakes to their highest level in at least a decade. Of course, to deliver smaller class sizes we need not only more teachers but more space. Two weeks ago I released an extra £40 million of capital to enable councils to bring forward spending, creating space in later years for necessary changes to accommodation to meet class size reductions.

Class size reductions are not the only means of improving the child's learning experience in schools. Among other measures, I look forward to building on the improvements in quality and attitudinal work that the previous Administration made through the curriculum reform programme and the determined to succeed initiative. We will also continue the previous Government's school building forward programme.

Learning must be relevant to life and work and each age and stage of an individual's life. We want to expand opportunities for all to develop the skills that they need for fulfilling employment. As I informed the chamber on 7 June, I will produce a lifelong skills strategy for Scotland, covering early years provision, schools, further and higher education, work-related learning and informal learning opportunities. The strategy will outline our aims, ambitions and plans for making Scotland's skills base truly world class. We have already started work on it and intend to have a draft strategy available to take forward by the end of the first 100 days of our Administration.

In cultivating high skills, we will have to ensure that we maximise their potential to contribute to thriving communities and a prosperous Scotland. An excellent learning system is one that is founded on a genuine meritocracy. Engagement with such a system is based on the ability to learn, not the ability to pay. That is why I took early action to remove barriers that prevent individuals from accessing higher education, as signalled by our proposal—dependent on the agreement of the committee and of Parliament—to abolish the inefficient graduate endowment fee. That move will require primary legislation. It is intended that, with the support of Parliament, such legislation will be in place by 1 April 2008. The cost to the Executive of the measure will be net income foregone of £15 million per annum from 2008-09. I will continue actively to pursue the other student support measures that were outlined in our manifesto.

I want Scotland to be a magnet for learners, academics and business. We need to promote excellence and innovation in our higher education

system and to make a step change in translating our research ideas into economic output. We will maintain a competitive learning system that generates education, science and research ideas that make Scotland a magnet for economic growth—putting science to work to underpin our health, wealth and well-being as a nation. This afternoon I will speak to Bill Rammell, the United Kingdom minister with responsibility for higher education, about an agenda that covers English for speakers of other languages, the Leitch review and higher education issues. Tomorrow I will meet the European Commissioner for Education, Training, Culture and Youth, Ján Figel', to discuss issues relating to the proposed European institute of technology and European credit and qualifications framework.

I am determined to drive the agenda forward as I believe that it is the route to creating a smarter, safer, healthier, wealthier and greener Scotland. My officials and I are happy to elaborate further and to take any specific questions that the committee might have.

The Convener: Thank you for that extensive introduction. There is much that members will want to get their teeth into and ask questions on.

Pauline McNeill: Good morning, minister. I have a set of questions about early years education. I want first to ask about your commitment to extending free nursery provision. I welcome your announcement on that, but I want to press you further on the detail. You have said that all children will benefit from August, but you have also said that you will prioritise children from deprived areas. How will you establish that? Will you identify the areas in which you first want to implement the change and have it implemented by the end of the 38 weeks?

Fiona Hyslop: There are two separate issues, one of which is the extension of hours. Our intention is to increase nursery entitlement for three and four-year-olds by 50 per cent as a main aim. To do so, we will have to ensure that we can raise the threshold for all children. I know from my experience in this city that many of the children who receive the statutory state nursery education provision do so through partner providers. Currently, there is no statutory entitlement for them to have the 475 hours per year. Some local authorities make that up, but many do not. To start increasing the entitlement for all three and four-year-olds, we must push up the barriers to ensure that the legal entitlement for all—regardless of whether it is in a council nursery or state provision through a partner provider—is on a level playing field.

Secondly, you commented that we are looking at deprived areas. That relates to the fact that we want to put nursery teachers into classrooms for

three and four-year-olds. As you probably know from the experience in Glasgow, youngsters' nursery teachers are in many cases being removed. Like the Educational Institute of Scotland and others, we believe that having a nursery teacher for three and four-year-olds is important, particularly for children in deprived areas. The Education Committee in the previous session reflected on that in its early years inquiry. That is why we are focusing attention on deprived areas. We can drive down class sizes and, more particularly, ensure that there is nursery teacher provision. Perhaps that explains what we are doing for all and what we are doing in deprived areas.

Pauline McNeill: Will local authorities that already supply 39 weeks of free provision, such as Glasgow City Council, benefit from your announcement?

Fiona Hyslop: They will benefit if they are ensuring that their partner providers receive the entitlement for the 38 weeks, which reflects the school year. I do not have information to hand about Glasgow in particular. Not many authorities do that, but the idea is to increase the legal entitlement. Glasgow City Council will benefit from our proposals in the provision of nursery teachers to areas of deprivation. We have seen from statistics that Glasgow has the most severe problems of deprivation, so the greatest benefit in Glasgow will not necessarily be the nursery hours but will definitely be the provision of nursery teachers for three and four-year-olds.

Pauline McNeill: But other than that, authorities such as Glasgow City Council may not benefit from your announcement.

Fiona Hyslop: They might not benefit in August, but they will certainly benefit in this session of Parliament. If we are increasing nursery entitlement by 50 per cent, there will be a considerable increase. We are talking about getting to a large amount. Glasgow City Council will get additional money as part of the proposals.

Pauline McNeill: Are you saying that, in this session of Parliament, you will fulfil your manifesto commitment on pre-provision?

Fiona Hyslop: An authority such as Glasgow, which is already meeting the obligations to its partner providers, will get resources that will enable it to start making further advances on nursery provision. It is up to those authorities. Across the portfolio, we obviously have to work with councils to meet their priorities and give them the latitude to carry out what in some areas is very creative work. They will get some benefit from the announcement that we have made.

Pauline McNeill: I have moved on a bit from Glasgow City Council; I am asking about your

manifesto commitment to increase pre-provision by 50 per cent. Are you saying that you will achieve that in this session of Parliament?

Fiona Hyslop: Our intention is to work with councils to do that. We can make a considerable difference to youngsters with that provision, so that is our intention. However, we are only four weeks into the job, and one of our jobs will be to talk to local authorities. In education, as you will find when you consider the budget, we have certain instruments through which we can achieve change but, at the end of the day, we have to work with local authorities.

Pauline McNeill: But surely you costed the policy when you put it in your manifesto as a pledge. You are now saying that you cannot fulfil the pledge because you need to talk to local authorities.

Fiona Hyslop: That is wishful thinking on your part. We have every intention of fulfilling the pledge. I am saying that, in delivering the measure, we must be conscious that we have to work with local authorities, which at the end of the day are the employers and provide the service. We must work with them in partnership. It is a signal of our Government that we will work proactively with councils in delivering our manifesto.

Pauline McNeill: I think that you are saying that you intend to implement your commitment fully by the end of this session of Parliament.

Fiona Hyslop: Yes.

Pauline McNeill: Will that be costed as part of your budget proposals after the comprehensive spending review?

Fiona Hyslop: Yes.

Pauline McNeill: Will we be able to identify those costings in the budget?

Fiona Hyslop: I hope so, but I know from my experience as a member of the Education Committee in the previous session of Parliament that that is extremely difficult. The vast majority of the education budget—we are talking about a spend of £4 billion—goes straight to local authorities and is not necessarily itemised separately, which is why negotiations and discussions between the Government and local authorities are important. We must ensure that the outcomes that we want, such as an increase in nursery provision, are delivered.

Pauline McNeill: My final question is one that I have asked you before, so you will not be surprised to hear it. On your commitment to free school meals, you have said previously that you will use the comprehensive spending review to determine whether you will lift the threshold so that

more children can receive free school meals immediately. Do you intend to do that?

Fiona Hyslop: Our manifesto talks about improving the entitlement to free school meals. During consideration of the emergency Education (School Meals) (Scotland) Bill in 2003, I pursued the issue and tried to enable an extension of entitlement. Unfortunately, the previous Government voted against that—

Pauline McNeill: With respect, that was not the question. You are the minister now, so will you raise the threshold?

Fiona Hyslop: From quantifying and considering the scale and cost of the proposals, we know that we are talking about between £25 million and £40 million, as you probably well know. Therefore, to deliver the measure, it will definitely have to be part of the comprehensive spending review discussions. However, ministers clearly can deliver it. My point was that we did not suddenly put the measure in our manifesto; we have called for it for several years and our intention is to deliver it. The issue is the point at which we can do that. We have taken decisions that need implementation that is based on the academic school year or the university year—many of our early decisions have been focused on that. The Minister for Education and Young People in the previous session of Parliament told us that we do not need to introduce primary legislation to change the provision on free school meals—it is a regulation issue. Therefore, far more flexibility is available in implementing the proposal than there is in implementing other ones.

Pauline McNeill: I understand that, but I need to press you on the issue. Are you committed to lifting the threshold to include, for example, all families on working tax credit, which would mean an extra 97,000 school-age children, and, if so, when?

Fiona Hyslop: Our manifesto made it clear that we want to increase the threshold for entitlement to free school meals. We were explicit about that and we have held the view for a long time. The issue is when we will do it. I have told you that the scale of the spend will have to be considered as part of the comprehensive spending review.

Christina McKelvie: Is there any early indication of what your plans are for the coming year for progress on the 21st century review of social work? Specifically, I would like to hear about the embedding of continuous professional development and the impact of that on the lifelong learning agenda.

Fiona Hyslop: I expect to receive a report in July on proposals that form part of the changing lives agenda and social work development. That is a big area and we must ensure that we get our

approach right. You are absolutely right to identify the lifelong learning issues. Many people in the social care setting do not have the appropriate qualifications to allow them to do more senior work, but they have willingness and an interest and may be at a stage in their family life and development at which they can take on more responsibilities.

We definitely need more people to come forward to help in the caring professions, whether health or social work, as we have more children in need and a growing elderly population. Now that I have the brief that covers education and lifelong learning, one of the key agenda items will be matching Scotland's needs with people's abilities and potential, and ensuring that training and access are delivered where those people are, which will not always be in the big cities. That is one of the big challenges that the Government faces.

10:30

Christina McKelvie: Are you aware that, because of pay and benefits being reviewed as part of the single status and equal pay issue, some local authorities have removed the link between salary progression and continuous professional development? Basically, staff will be paid their wages for as long as they are there whether or not they are developing themselves professionally. If salary progression is not linked to academic and professional progression, an imbalance could be caused within the services when people are not going forward because there is nothing in it for them. There may be members of staff who have been there for 20 years and who could take on a higher national certificate, Scottish vocational qualification or BA in social work, but who do not do so because there is no incentive.

Fiona Hyslop: You make interesting points; I do not pretend to know about the detail of that, so I will ask my officials to look into what we can do and the different practices in different authorities. We must ensure that everyone has continuous professional development and that it is recognised. It is more embedded in the employer-employee relationship in some professions than it is in others.

I am serious when I say that we will drive forward the lifelong learning agenda. I know that previous Administrations wanted to do so and took many steps in that direction, but it is one of the key things that I want to be able to do and, with our remit, it will be much easier to join up the thinking and operations.

Ken Macintosh: The reduction in class sizes in P1 to P3 will have an impact on the capacity of school buildings to cope. Have you been able to estimate how much it will cost local authorities to

adapt their buildings to meet the reduced class sizes by the end of this parliamentary session?

Fiona Hyslop: We are in discussions with councils about that. We will have to manage the need for increased capacity in areas of growing population and demand; East Renfrewshire Council and West Lothian Council are two classic examples of that. Some areas will be more difficult than others—for example, school rolls are falling in Glasgow and Edinburgh. School rolls are generally falling, but in some areas demand will mean that additional space will be needed; we will have to manage that situation. That is why we have moved early to release money from the capital fund so that we can bring forward capital spend issues sooner rather than later, and we can put as much resource as we can into new build or extensions. The project is manageable and it will be doable, but it is a challenge and we look forward to working with councils to deliver it.

Ken Macintosh: Perhaps the minister will not agree, but we accept that the capital programme will not be enough by itself to modernise the entire school estate and bring it up to what we agree is an acceptable standard. Many councils will look to the public-private partnership programme or the Scottish futures trust. If the trust needs to be in place to deliver some school buildings before the end of the session, when can we expect it to be up and running?

Fiona Hyslop: As you know, we will continue with the previous Administration's school building programme brick for brick. It is important that people are aware that we are enthusiastic about ensuring that school buildings are built for pupils when they need them.

Obviously, PPP was one source of funding but we will provide an alternative. As soon as the futures trust comes onstream, it will be an alternative choice for local authorities. There will also be an element within the school fund that local authorities can use, and there is prudential borrowing. There will be capacity in the system, but the comprehensive spending review will show us how much capital will be available and how much we can put into revenue for future projects.

Ken Macintosh: Approximately how many schools will the Scottish futures trust be able to rebuild?

Fiona Hyslop: As many as any other funding mechanism can achieve. It is no different. In fact, because the trust will achieve better rates, it will be able to generate more space and provision. It will be a cheaper option so, in the long run, it will achieve more than the current provision. However, members should remember that it is a funding mechanism.

Ken Macintosh: Once the spending review is completed, do you expect to have a target for the number of schools that you hope to build?

Fiona Hyslop: Again, that is a question of working with local authorities. Many of them are working out their future programmes and what they want to have. We need to hear what their projections are. About 125 schools are in the pipeline, which is a considerable amount.

I alert the committee that the profile of the PPP revenue spend is considerable because, under previous Administrations, progress on a number of schools has been delayed. That has happened for a variety of reasons—for example, the contracts take some time to arrange. In the financial year 2006-07, £17 million of the Government's budget was put into PPP revenue expenditure. This year, that figure leaped to £48 million. By 2010-11, the figure will be £165 million. That is to pay not for new projects but for projects that are up and running. That considerable amount of money will go out of the system for expenditure on PPPs for schools that are already planned. I thought it important to share that with the committee.

The Convener: Did the minister say that various options would be open to local authorities and that they could choose to use prudential borrowing, the PPP route or the Scottish futures trust?

Fiona Hyslop: Yes. The capital fund could also be used—that would depend on the permutation. We have always said that the Scottish futures trust would squeeze out PPP, because PPP would be seen to be inefficient and costly and to provide excess profit to private financiers, whereas the Scottish futures trust should generate better rates and be a far better option for councils. However, prudential borrowing and traditional methods such as capital funding from the schools fund are other options.

The Convener: That shows exactly why I asked my question. If you believe that the Scottish futures trust will squeeze out PPP, why are you giving local authorities the option of PPP? If there are sound economic reasons why PPP is a bad investment for local authorities, surely you as a prudent Government would be wiser to say that councils can use traditional funding methods or the Scottish futures trust, but not PPP.

Fiona Hyslop: I think that we will provide a different flavour of government from what we had previously. Unfortunately, the previous Government gave councils no choices, although some local authorities tried to produce different models. A non-profit-distributing body was part of Falkirk Council's proposals and I think that Aberdeen City Council has taken that up. However, the previous Government did not allow flexibility and choice.

The Scottish futures trust is a market option. At the end of the day, we are considering what value can be achieved. We think that schools and pupils will obtain far better value from a futures-trust funded school than from a PPP-funded school. I have every confidence that the trust will squeeze out PPP.

The Convener: The last time that I checked, Falkirk Council had built no schools in the past four years, whereas North Lanarkshire Council has built 12 new primary schools in my constituency alone.

Fiona Hyslop: You might also find that Falkirk Council was part of the first tranche of PPP, so it is not fair trading to compare individual councils.

Ken Macintosh: It is clear that you will fulfil the commitment that the previous Executive made to local authorities that have started PPP programmes. Are you saying that, after the comprehensive spending review, you will offer a new round of PPP opportunities? Will you offer local authorities a new school building programme that they will have the choice of funding through PPP or the Scottish futures trust? Will you offer a new PPP fund to bid for?

Fiona Hyslop: No. We will give local authorities opportunities to have new-build schools. The funding mechanism is up to local authorities, and we trust them to choose their preferred funding mechanism. Many want to use prudential borrowing—at least some movement on that has taken place in recent years, which is to be welcomed. We can still use the schools fund. However, the futures trust will provide a very attractive option for local authorities and I think that many are waiting with great anticipation to use it.

Ken Macintosh: I agree, but if they are to have a genuine choice, the Executive will have to make that option open to them. Surely, as local authorities cannot bid into a PPP fund that does not exist, the Executive will have to say, "We will accept a bid to a new PPP fund."

Fiona Hyslop: No. We will have a school building fund to which local authorities can request access. However, they will have to decide which schools to go forward with and what the preferred funding mechanism might be.

Jeremy Purvis: I have to say that I am not clear about the answer to Mr Macintosh's question, but that might well be my fault. Is it correct to say that local authorities' PPP bids will be able to be serviced through part of the Scottish Government's overall school building fund as well as through the Scottish futures trust and support from prudential borrowing?

Fiona Hyslop: Yes, but I suspect that, when they consider the options, councils will much prefer a more competitive route that provides value for money and allows local communities to have access to school playing fields at weekends or whenever possible. The Scottish futures trust has the benefit of providing councils with a market-priced and competitive opportunity. I believe that very few councils will choose the discredited PPP option.

Jeremy Purvis: There is a huge difference between what you think local authorities might want to do and what Government policy will be, which is the introduction of a new programme to fund PPP schemes that local authorities might wish to develop. In other words, the Scottish Government would provide funding to service new PPP schemes if a local authority preferred to take that route. Is that correct?

Fiona Hyslop: I think that this is a case of people seeing simply what they want to see. If you have read our manifesto, you will know that we have always said that the Scottish futures trust will squeeze out PPP because councils will not want to choose that option if a better alternative is available. I know that, in the heat of an election campaign, people might not want to read what a manifesto actually says, but the position that I have outlined is set out in our manifesto, in black and white, and has been consistently stated over the past few months.

Jeremy Purvis: It will therefore be possible under this Government for councils to put forward new PPP schemes.

Fiona Hyslop: Yes, but I do not think that it is a big issue. As we have been saying for some time now, Jeremy, PPP will be squeezed out because a better option will be available.

Jeremy Purvis: Well, the committee will have an opportunity to look back over your previous comments, but it is helpful to know that new PPP projects will be possible under this Government.

Ken Macintosh: Given the current anxiety over probationary teachers, the announcement of 300 new posts is very welcome indeed. How did you calculate that figure? The worry is, of course, that 300 might not be enough.

Fiona Hyslop: When we came into government we inherited a situation in which there were not as many post-probationer vacancies as might have been expected. In the recent smarter Scotland debate, Hugh Henry expressed concern that, to meet the target of 53,000 teachers, certain councils had counted probationer teachers as front-line classroom teachers and had in fact released no extra places. Of course, Hugh Henry might be in a better position to know that, given that he was the minister in charge at the time.

I asked my officials to find out from local authorities how many vacancies there are. We understand that roughly 2,400 posts are available. We have added another 300 to that figure. We think that 3,300 new teachers will be coming in. That leaves a gap of about 700. Members will have noted the February vacancy figures, but the fact is that we must always ensure that there are enough teachers to cover movements into and out of the system during the year, and about 700 is standard to meet in-year vacancy requirements. We are reasonably comfortable that that can be done.

However, the situation is not good for professionals who have gone through their teaching practice and expect positions to be available. We have moved early and quickly to provide jobs and meet demand. Concerns mostly centre on primary education. We want to address that by targeting the 300 places that have been released on reducing class sizes and—in response to Pauline McNeill—putting nursery teachers into the teaching of three and four-year-olds.

As I have said, those individuals are not in a comfortable position, and I really feel for people who thought they would get a job and have not yet done so. We have moved as early as we can, but we think that, as in previous years, people should be able to get employment during the year. They might not be able to get a job immediately in August, but they might do so in the course of the year.

10:45

Ken Macintosh: As I said, the 300 new posts are very welcome, but the figures released yesterday—to which you referred—show a fall in the number of long-term vacancies in the teaching profession, which implies that there is a general squeeze and that the job market is tighter.

Fiona Hyslop: Yes, marginally.

Ken Macintosh: Given the anxieties that have been expressed, are you able to reassure probationers in particular that if many of them are still seeking employment when the new term begins in August there are mechanisms either in the General Teaching Council for Scotland or elsewhere to keep an eye on the situation? Are you able to take any further steps or give those teachers any guarantees?

Fiona Hyslop: I am dealing with the position that I inherited from the previous Labour and Liberal Executive. We have already made a considerable impact by creating 300 new posts.

I understand from my officials' discussions with councils that more vacancies are emerging every

week. Moreover, if someone is promoted to a principal teacher post, there is a knock-on effect and another position can be freed, although it might not necessarily be advertised immediately. We think that, at the end of August, we will be in the same position as we have been in previous years.

The geographic spread of vacancies probably poses a bigger challenge. In the past, new teachers were much younger: now, new teachers are, on average, in their early 30s. Many of them have families and find it more difficult to move. That emphasises my point that we need to think about where teachers are trained, to ensure that they can meet local demand, which varies throughout the country.

Ken Macintosh: Indeed. I just wonder whether there is anything more that you will be able to do come August.

Fiona Hyslop: I do not expect to have to do anything more, but I will explore any options if we need to help. We have to work within the budget we inherited. If we can find some room to manoeuvre and if we can be creative in our policy making, we will see what we can do.

Elizabeth Smith: I want to focus on higher education, particularly in relation to your fifth declared aim: the pursuit of excellence in teaching. You have made a very clear statement about the abolition of the graduate endowment. Funding is the most important element of higher education, especially if we assume that access will be widened and given that, in any case, a large proportion of our young people already go into higher education. The sector has sent a very strong message that the present funding set-up is not adequate for the pursuit of excellence in teaching, particularly university research. Will your Scottish Executive consider setting up an inquiry similar to that chaired by Mr Cubie, to examine how we can ensure that funding allows the pursuit of excellence to take place? As I have said, the sector—and students—are deeply concerned about where the money will come from.

Fiona Hyslop: We have to approach this issue by looking at where we are now, where we need to get to and the timeframe for reaching that point. According to you, universities are saying that they are not adequately funded, but I dispute that. From my discussions with the universities, I feel that they are currently well funded—and the previous Labour and Liberal Democrat Government agreed. As a result of pressure, not least from this Parliament, the Government made investment available to ensure that our universities can compete with those down south, where universities have been allowed to introduce top-up fees.

The question is whether universities in England receive that much money from top-up fees. To win the vote on the issue, the minister at the time, Alan Johnston, had to make a lot of compromises, including ensuring that a considerable amount of the fees was used to fund bursaries and grants.

Only yesterday, at the public sector event that the First Minister held, I spoke to Tim O'Shea of Universities Scotland. The real issue is the timing of any review down south and the implications of that. The review is not due to start until 2009, which means that the first year when any lifting of the cap can take place is 2010-11. Even then, there will not necessarily be a free-market free-for-all under which universities can decide what they each want.

Because the funding for universities will have to come from the Government in the first place—and the Government will thereafter receive payment back on loans to students in England, a bit like with the graduate endowment—the tap or the cap on that will be determined by what the Treasury can bear. But those issues are not immediate.

We must agree that the context should be one of having well-funded universities. The question is when we need to ensure the necessary funding is in place to compete with down south. I also think that we should be looking wider than that, anyway—globally.

A case for a second Cubie inquiry, or similar review of higher education funding, can be made, but we are just weeks away from a comprehensive spending review, and the lead-up to a spending review would not be the right or opportune time to do that—when we have to argue the case for 2007 to 2011. I will come back to the committee on the matter, and we can have a dialogue on it. Does that give you a sense of our perspective as I see it?

Elizabeth Smith: You are confirming that you would not rule out a second independent inquiry.

Fiona Hyslop: I will want to discuss the matter with the committee and with others in the sector. My focus has to be on delivering a good deal for universities for this spending review.

Rob Gibson: We have heard about specific issues relating to densely populated areas. As a representative of the Highlands and Islands, I am thinking about what deprivation means in relation to an extension of free school meals in deprived areas. There is also the issue of the number of staff who are available to work in schools. We have much smaller schools in the Highlands and Islands. There are questions about whether the McCrone settlement provided us with enough people to meet our needs, whether there is proper funding, and whether there are proper formulae in

place to determine whether there are enough staff in the Highlands and other areas.

Similarly, the cost of building schools is far higher in some communities in the Highlands and Islands, as a result of high transport costs and issues with the Scottish Environment Protection Agency, Scottish Water and so on. Can the minister give us a flavour of how she thinks those issues might be factored into her considerations about future spending?

Fiona Hyslop: People have different experiences in different areas, and populations in some regions are more dispersed. There are issues around rural poverty, just as there are issues around poverty in urban centres. The predecessor committee tried to impress that point on the previous minister. It is not just a case of urban deprivation on the one hand and rurality on the other; there is deprivation in rural areas, too. That is a key factor in many sectors, not least child care. It is extremely difficult for women who wish to participate in the workplace in rural areas to access the traditional forms of child care. We must be flexible, and sensitive to that.

In many ways, my budget is determined by some of the formulae that are used for grant-aided expenditure. My understanding is that rurality and deprivation are factored in. I could try to identify the elements in our budget streams that we can attempt to manipulate from the centre. John Swinney will have to discuss with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities what we can do to meet particular needs. I hear the concerns that are being expressed. It is part of my job in the Cabinet to argue the case for children in particular, and I would wish to do that with respect to rural deprivation.

Rob Gibson: Earlier in the meeting, we made the point to the Minister for Europe, External Affairs and Culture that there are some good examples of schooling, learning and related experiences in smaller schools in more remote areas. Embedding the arts in education and giving children a valuable learning experience in those areas requires extra provision.

Will you consider how we can ensure that arts practitioners who are not teachers can be funded on a longer-term basis? I can think of excellent examples from Dumfries and Galloway in particular. I am referring to artists, poets, writers in residence and so on. Will the Administration create the potential for sustained funding of such work? Funding is often given on a year-to-year basis, which does not allow the creation of a strategy for the work, which is a high-quality addition to the learning experience in schools.

Fiona Hyslop: I agree with the sentiment behind the question. The arts should not be

regarded as a fill-in to be funded because a budget is available for one year. The arts are fundamental to young people and their experience. It is interesting that there is a move to ensure that we have confident and creative children, because in many ways it is through the arts that we encourage that.

One of the schools of ambition in Kenneth Macintosh's area of East Renfrewshire is based on using the arts, including drama, to ensure that young people gain the skills they need, but the issue is about more than that: it is about embracing the culture, heritage and history of our country. The Administration will make sure that, whichever part of the country a child lives in, they get the opportunity to experience that. If we want confident and creative Scots, one way to achieve that is to embrace the arts and culture—not only the historic and the traditional, but the modern and the contemporary.

Rob Gibson has a keen interest in the fèis movement. When I was in Ullapool, I found that the energy of the young people who participate in the schools week in October is fantastic. If anybody gets a chance to see them in action, I recommend that they do so.

Rob Gibson: The curriculum for excellence suggests that we need to revisit issues of our history, language and general experience. Children should be able to tap into that, as you said, from their part of the country. Do you intend to firm up the content of the curriculum so that those matters are covered explicitly?

Fiona Hyslop: We do not have a centrally controlled curriculum, but the curriculum for excellence learning tools will provide a platform to drive things forward. I understand that the science ones are due out soon. I will take a keen interest in the history element of the curriculum for excellence and consider how to embed within it the sense of who we are and where we came from; our history, heritage and culture; and the vibrancy of Scottish life.

The committee might want to reflect on the issues as well. In the previous session, the Education Committee had to spend so much time on child protection that school and curriculum issues were not at the forefront of its deliberations. I want to work constructively with the committee and I would welcome your opinions on schooling issues, because this is a critical time for the curriculum for excellence. The committee might want to think about that when it considers its work programme.

The Convener: I have a couple of questions on the announcement that you made last week on class sizes. What is the timescale for ensuring that every child in P1 to P3 is taught in a class of 20?

Fiona Hyslop: We want to make considerable progress year on year, and I am determined that we will have that. As I have said before, I cannot deliver it; it is local authorities that will deliver it. We are also constrained to an extent by the number of teachers we can get into the system. We have already had a question on the idea that probationers have difficulty finding jobs. We have to work hard to stand still, because we are losing so many teachers due to retirement and other reasons. We need to cope with that while ensuring that we maintain quality—I do not want to compromise that. The previous Administration recruited a significant number of teachers and everyone said that the quality of probationers was extremely good. I do not want to lose that. I could go for a big bang solution and vastly increase the number of students in initial teacher training, but that might require colleges to lower the threshold for entry to courses. I do not want that to happen.

Those are some of the constraints. I intend to move significantly during the life of the Executive to deliver the pledge of class sizes of 18. We deliberately never state timeframes and say, "This will be delivered by a certain date," because we learned from the experience of the previous Government. One reason we have a problem this year is that there was a dash to try and reduce class sizes in the final year of the previous Executive. That caused difficulties in schools and it explains the problems that we have at present. I do not want to give an end date or say that nothing will happen for four years and that class sizes will then suddenly be reduced to 18. I want year-on-year progress. The educationists and the unions agree that that is the most sensible approach.

11:00

The Convener: I appreciate and welcome your desire for year-on-year progress, but if you do not set an overall target for when you would like the policy to be implemented, directors of education in local authorities will use that fact not to implement it. I am not saying that you should set a date in stone; I am saying that there needs to be some timescale.

Fiona Hyslop: You could be right, but I have a bit more confidence in local authorities than you do. The issue is the relationship that the Government will have with local authorities, part of which is about outcome agreements. It will not necessarily be a case of setting specific targets on specific issues. Many local authorities are telling us that they want outcome agreements; they do not want the centre to tell them what to do by such-and-such a date. We have an ambitious target of reducing class sizes to 18, but we in central Government cannot meet it on our own. Rather than abolish local authorities and have

everything in education controlled centrally, we want to work in partnership with local authorities. That is the temperature of our relationship, and it is how we intend to progress.

The Convener: I certainly have plenty of faith in local authorities.

Fiona Hyslop: I am sure you do—especially in North Lanarkshire Council.

The Convener: My authority is one of the best in Scotland on education. The record of North Lanarkshire Council speaks for itself, and I wish there were more councils like it.

Will there be any flexibility for headteachers to choose not to have a class size of 18, if they believe that a class size of 20 or 21 is more appropriate?

Fiona Hyslop: The international research shows that children from deprived areas benefit most from smaller class sizes, so that is where the initial emphasis will be. I spoke about making progress on class size reduction year on year; I expect more progress to be made in areas of deprivation earlier in the programme.

I am conscious of the need to have flexibility in the system—that is common sense. When the previous Government reduced class sizes from 33 to 30 during the Parliament's first session, it was taking a relief measure that was designed to address a situation in England, where classes were far bigger. Many classes in Scotland were already of minimal size. Under that measure, a school that had a class of 31 would have had to become a composite school simply because of that one extra pupil. That is not a commonsense way of doing things. I said to the relevant minister at the time—who I think was Nicol Stephen—that there had to be some flexibility and common sense.

The issue of what class size would be acceptable and what a school should do when it has a class of 20 or 21 pupils is creeping up on us, but that is something that can be resolved through dialogue with educators. I will not insist that a school in a rural area with a class of 19 will have to have a class of 18 when it is quite clear that it will not be possible for it to be flexible. Common sense has to be the order of the day.

The Convener: A number of schools in deprived areas in my constituency already have class sizes of 18 or 19. The headteachers of those schools tell me that having smaller class sizes does not do much to drive up standards. Indeed, over the past few days, following my appointment to the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee, a number of them have approached me to say that they would much rather have as an

additional classroom assistant an early years worker in their primary 1, 2 and 3 classes.

Headteachers have also raised concerns about the socialisation of children in much smaller classes. Judith Gillespie made a point about that on the radio last week, when she said that there was academic evidence of some children in smaller classes being highly excluded from social groups. When there are one or two dominant personalities in small classes, most of the children focus on those personalities, with the result that some children are left with no friends and do not develop the necessary socialisation skills.

Fiona Hyslop: That is an interesting perspective. All over Scotland, mostly in remote and rural areas, there are whole schools, never mind classes, of 18 pupils. Those children benefit from an extremely effective socialisation experience because they mix with children of different ages. One can always make generalisations, but I would not want to do so in this case.

It is clear that not only class size makes a difference; teacher quality is also important. Karen Whitefield mentioned the quality of teachers in North Lanarkshire. Continuous professional development is as important as some of the other elements that we are pursuing. However, class size can make the biggest difference in particular areas of deprivation.

I agree with what Karen Whitefield said about early years workers and some of the issues about the transition from nursery to primary. I am keen to explore that area with the committee. I know that the Liberal Democrats are keen on examining the school age. There is a suggestion that it is not when people start school but what they do when they start school that is important. In that regard, issues that have been raised by Pauline McNeill and others, such as the play agenda in primary 1, are to be welcomed.

It is no longer the case that there are only teachers in schools; there are many classroom assistants and other people who work in schools. These days, we are talking about a school community. Parent helpers are not the least important part of that community; actively involving parents in the schooling and education of their children, particularly in deprived areas, will be enormously helpful.

If you want to make a difference to a child's education, the most important issue is not necessarily the teachers, the school or the class size, but the enthusiasm of parents for the education of their children. That is, perhaps, one of the great opportunities that we have.

Jeremy Purvis: I listened carefully to what you said about flexibility and the fact that the

Government will not be setting targets in education. That might be the case, but I notice that your manifesto says:

"We will also set a target to expand the number of children in Gaelic medium education within our first term."

It seems as if, in some areas, you want to set targets.

You have said clearly—and parents across Scotland have understood clearly—that you will reduce class sizes in primaries 1, 2 and 3 to 18 pupils or fewer. Your manifesto says:

"Headteachers will have the power to decide on the most appropriate class sizes in later years, within national guidelines."

In answer to a parliamentary question that I asked on 22 June, you said that headteachers will have flexibility in primaries 1, 2 and 3 as well. That is different from what your manifesto says clearly.

Fiona Hyslop: I would have to see the evidence of the parliamentary question that you are talking about, but I am happy to have a look at it.

The manifesto is quite clear about the reduction in class size to 18 in primaries 1, 2 and 3. There will be a degree of flexibility, but that is what we want. The line in the manifesto about the flexibility that is available to headteachers in later years raises the issue of how the transition from primary 3 to primary 4 can be managed most effectively. However, primarily, that sentence deals with the situation in secondary schools, where there will be variations. In some areas, it will be quite easy to have reductions in class sizes. We have to reflect the professionalism of headteachers, which is what that sentence relates to.

I have never said that we do not want to have flexibility in primaries 1 to 3. Common sense tells you that a flexible approach will be appropriate in a rural school with only 19 pupils. I think that you might be being a bit pedantic about flexibility.

If you are relying on local authorities to deliver your policies, particularly when you have an approach that reflects their desire for outcome agreements, it is likely that specific targets will have to be ditched. In the first session of the Parliament, Wendy Alexander produced several detailed booklets outlining targets, but they had to be withdrawn because they were not being met or because monitoring them was interfering with delivery.

Targets have to be meaningful. In relation to Gaelic, which I feel strongly about, the perilous state of the language means that it is essential that we monitor carefully what we are delivering. There will be times when specific targets will be necessary but, generally, when we rely on 32 local authorities, we must have a grown-up and mature relationship that recognises their provision and

say, "Okay, we'll go down the outcome agreements route, but that means we want increased nursery education provision and class sizes of 18." We will give them some flexibility in how they deliver that.

Jeremy Purvis: People might or might not agree with that approach. I do not think that it is pedantic to quote from the manifesto that you now seek to implement. It stated clearly:

"Headteachers will have the power to decide on the most appropriate class sizes in later years, within national guidelines."

That is not in the context of primaries 1, 2 and 3.

On the subject of outcome agreements, moving towards having class sizes of 18 pupils or fewer would involve considerable on-going revenue costs for local authorities, given the proposed expansion in the number of teachers and indeed, the possible requirement to extend schools. Local authorities might decide that they are quite happy, on an educational ground, with a class size of 25, and you will not set a target or have any restrictions on keeping class sizes at 25. You said that you have faith in directors of education to make applications. What happens if local authority education directors look at what would be required in their area to provide class sizes of 18 and find that they cannot meet the demand? Will it be at that stage that you define deprivation, which is the area for which you will release funds?

Fiona Hyslop: Jeremy Purvis's negative tone is not reflected by the education directors to whom I have spoken. They are enthusiastic about the fact that the Government wants to pursue the early years education agenda and reduce class sizes. We have secondary teachers who are enthusiastic about reducing class sizes in the early years because they know that their task will be made much easier if there is a better educational foundation in the early years.

In my role, I have to be absolutely straight with the committee. The parliamentary question that Jeremy Purvis asked me was whether primary 1, 2 and 3 classes will be permitted to have more than 18 pupils in 2011. I interpreted that as "legally permitted". The previous Executive, of which Jeremy Purvis's party was part—I think that the Deputy Minister for Education and Young People was a Liberal Democrat—introduced the policy of having 25 to a class in P1, but the Education (Lower Primary Class Sizes) (Scotland) Regulations 1999 (SI 1999/1080) allow a number of exceptions to the class-size maximum of 30. That puts the current situation in some question in that a parent might ask for their child to join a class that already has 25 pupils—I think that there has been a recent court case to that effect. The current regulations, which came to us from the

previous Administration, cause difficulties about what is permitted.

My answer to Jeremy Purvis is specific because I am trying to be straight with the committee: we might need to address issues with the regulations, not least if we have class sizes of 18 but even if we retain the current policy of having 25 to a class in P1, in order to protect the objective of letting pupils benefit from smaller class sizes. Nobody says that it will be easy; there are legal difficulties and there might be difficulties with local authorities that do not want to pursue the agenda.

My experience to date is that local authorities are very engaged. We are only four weeks into the Administration—or perhaps we are in week 5—but we have already had constructive discussions with authorities about how to implement the agenda. I hope that we go forward in a spirit of wanting to make it happen, rather than looking at it from a negative perspective and trying to pick holes in it. Although we will find holes and we will pick them, the vast majority of people in Scotland want there to be smaller class sizes.

I will make sure that class sizes in P1 to P3 are reduced to 18. Although I will allow some common sense and flexibility, I alert members to the fact that we might have to look at the regulations because, even under the previous Administration, cutting P1 class sizes to 25 proved problematic in those areas where the proposal was challenged.

Jeremy Purvis: I think that you said that you wish to see substantial year-on-year progress. It is fair for Parliament to ask how you define substantial progress because you have not done that so far. It is correct for Parliament to ask for that definition because although reducing 5 per cent of P1 class sizes to 18 might be substantial progress, you might say that 20 per cent is. We simply do not know how you define success for this policy. We will come back to the matter. Parents will realise that from the *Official Report* of this meeting and make up their own minds.

Convener, could I move on to ask about higher education?

11:15

Fiona Hyslop: Before you do, could I reply to that point? We are in the last week of term for many schools. After four years of the previous Government, whose initial manifesto target was to reduce class sizes to 25, 40 per cent of primary 1 pupils are still in classes bigger than 25. If the current Executive makes progress faster year on year towards reduction of class sizes to 18, we will beat the record of the previous Executive.

Jeremy Purvis: That is helpful. In light of the illustration that the cabinet secretary has just given, what should the percentage be next year?

Fiona Hyslop: It is common sense. Teachers are already providing for class sizes of 25; in North Lanarkshire, there are some classes of 18 or 19. We will make a close examination of class sizes on a regular basis, but we will not do what the previous Executive did—imply that there has been a reduction in class sizes by looking only at the average class size across the country. We will look at specific classes of real children in real schools.

Ken Macintosh: It is unfair of Fiona Hyslop to call the questions from Jeremy Purvis and others negative. All members of the committee have welcomed the direction of travel, but there is a need for greater clarity. Either the figure that the cabinet secretary has given is a target or it is not. The trouble with saying that it is all common sense is that, unfortunately, common sense varies from one individual to another. Will the minister come back to the committee at some point with a more exact definition of what she means by flexibility, in terms of the power of headteachers to vary the class-size target? That is important for the committee's scrutiny of the Government's actions.

So far, the cabinet secretary has given us a target that is no longer a target, because it is flexible, and has said that the policy is totally uncoded. That is quite unsatisfactory, although I am willing to await the comprehensive spending review. In areas such as West Lothian and the one that I represent, many parents would rather be able to get their children into a school, even if class sizes are larger, than have class sizes of 18 and not be able to. That is a fair demand. Will such a commonsense approach be allowed? That is what parents in some areas would like, but I am not sure whether that is what the cabinet secretary regards as common sense.

Fiona Hyslop: I said repeatedly that I must work with councils on delivering the policy, because local authorities administer schools and employ the teachers whom we need in order to cut class sizes.

Ken Macintosh: The previous Executive also had to work with local authorities, but you seem to be saying that it was at fault for not meeting the target of 25, for which the deadline was August this year.

Fiona Hyslop: The target has not yet been met.

Ken Macintosh: It was to be met by August.

Fiona Hyslop: No, it is for next year. Sixty per cent of pupils in P1 are in classes that are way above 25.

The Convener: Is the figure 40 per cent or 60 per cent? Earlier, you said that it was 40 per cent.

Fiona Hyslop: Forty per cent of P1 pupils are in classes bigger than 25, so 60 per cent are in classes of 25.

Members have asked me to appear before the committee within five weeks of our coming to power. The Minister for Education and Young People in the previous Administration made his first visit to the Parliament at the invitation of the Education Committee in October 2003. He appeared before the committee not to set out the programme for government, the Executive's proposals, how it intended to implement its policies or what discussions had taken place with local authorities, but to talk about the budget process. I welcome the early opportunity that I have been given to speak to the committee, but I cannot give members the roll-out dates for particular measures until I have had the necessary discussions with local authorities.

Five weeks in, we have managed to inject 300 new teachers and 250 new probationers into the system. We have also injected £40 million into the capital programme, to start the process of ensuring that there is investment in the space that will be needed to accommodate smaller class sizes. I understand that members are impatient to have targets, details and so on, but it might be helpful for them to wait until discussions with all 32 local authorities have taken place, so that we can give them a better indication of the pace and scale of implementation. I intend to see year-on-year progress, which is achievable. Local authorities are enthusiastic about making a difference in early years education. However, I ask members to bear with me. Five weeks in, I have managed to give the committee a lot of information. Under previous Governments, that was not expected of ministers for at least another six months.

Pauline McNeill: We at least had a legislative programme set out, which we have not had from your Administration.

Fiona Hyslop: I think that you will find that that did not take place until the autumn.

The Convener: I remind all members that, at the committee, they should address their comments through the chair.

Pauline McNeill: Sorry, convener, I just got a wee bit frustrated at that.

The Convener: It applies not only to members of the committee but to everyone sitting round the table.

Fiona Hyslop: Indeed.

Ken Macintosh: I have a question about additional support for learning. The Scottish

National Party manifesto made two welcome commitments. One was for a £10 million fund to help in training teachers and the other was a promise to

"review the operation and implementation of mainstreaming of children with additional support needs".

One of the issues that the committee will discuss is whether it needs to embark on a programme of post-legislative scrutiny. There is obviously no point in our duplicating the Executive's work on that, so what are the Executive's thoughts on it?

Fiona Hyslop: That is an interesting point. We have now reached the stage at which the policy and principle of mainstreaming are embedded in school education in Scotland. Our thinking behind having a review is that this is an opportune time to find out how mainstreaming is working. For many children, there is a great benefit, but each child is different and each child's experience of mainstreaming is different.

There are also concerns about resourcing. There were previously concerns about whether there would be an internal rationing system for additional support for learning resources based on what level of support plan a child had.

We intend to review the implementation and operation of mainstreaming—not to change the policy but to find out how it is working in practice and what is needed. We definitely need to liaise with the committee on that, because a committee inquiry might well be able to inform our work. I know that some academic research has been carried out into the implementation of mainstreaming. That is a useful source from which we both can start, but you are right that there is no point in duplication. The situation is similar with looked-after children: a strategy is being produced, and the issue is whether the committee would replicate a consultation that is taking place anyway.

Post-legislative scrutiny is an effective vehicle. Because the legislation is the driver for much of the policy and delivery in additional support for learning, one way of conducting a review is to examine how well the legislation is working. The issue is whether it is too early after the implementation of the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 to do that meaningfully. I will need to consult officials on that and on when it would best be done. Perhaps my officials could liaise with the clerks and the convener so that, before the committee's away day, we can give you an impression of what the best time for that would be.

There is obviously no point in the committee doing post-legislative scrutiny if we are carrying it out, but the committee has quite a good geographical spread and range of interests and

experience, so its perspective might be helpful, particularly bearing in mind the work that the previous committee did on the 2004 act. Post-legislative scrutiny might not sound very sexy or exciting, but it would probably allow you to get into the meat of what is happening—the nut and bolts of it—more than a general inquiry would. I hope that that is helpful.

Ken Macintosh: Is the £10 million fund dependent on the review.

Fiona Hyslop: No. That is separate.

Ken Macintosh: I meant “dependent on the spending review”.

Fiona Hyslop: Well, yes it is in the sense that we are looking at the current budgets to determine where we want to embed the funding. I would like it to be embedded in policy and baseline expenditure because continuing professional development in general is an issue that we want to progress.

Where additional support needs are concerned, it is essential that teachers have a regular opportunity to receive expert advice on how to deal with certain conditions. If we say to them that mainstreaming is the policy that must be pursued, they will need support in doing that. Some of that support must be additional staffing. That is one of the issues that we will have to wrestle with, as the committee would have to if it had an inquiry. Training is another element of that support. Perhaps such training should be done nationally rather than each local authority having to reinvent the wheel for training on how to help children with autism or dyslexia, for example. We might start with those subjects, but perhaps we could extend it.

There is a CPD fund for additional support for learning and we must work out how we can marry our plans with that. The new fund is separate from and not dependent on the review. Again, we will have to work with local authorities on the implementation of the fund.

We must ensure that children in mainstream schools who have additional support needs get the support that they need. When I go to schools, I ask how the mainstreaming policy is developing and the headteacher usually tells me that it is going well and that all the children have a better understanding of people with differences and disabilities. That immediate answer reflects the response of the majority of the children who do not have additional support needs, which is an interesting perspective, but it shows that mainstreaming is working. However, we must show that it works for the individual child who needs additional support by giving them not only the life opportunities that they deserve and need

but the education that they need when they need it, because each child is different.

Jeremy Purvis: Higher education has been part of your work so far. Are you aware of the work that Universities Scotland is doing? Have you had discussions with that organisation in the context of the upcoming budget process, which you touched on in your statement? Have you accepted the principle that, as part of Universities Scotland's bid for the spending review period, there should be more funded places for undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in Scotland?

Fiona Hyslop: Part of the preparation for the spending review was to request Universities Scotland to present more detailed proposals on what it needs. It welcomed the invitation to provide more detail. We are still in the process of receiving that, so I cannot say that I have seen the detail. Part of the process is looking at the student places that we have.

I am interested in a particular issue regarding postgraduate students. There has been an expansion in the number of postgraduate students, particularly from overseas, but there has been a reduction in the number of Scots who take up postgraduate places. We need to address that issue because if we want to develop the economy, we must ensure that we have the higher skill base of people with postgraduate degrees as well as first degrees.

Jeremy Purvis: What evidence can you cite for a fall in the number of Scotland-domiciled postgraduate students? The statistics that the Executive published in May show that there has been an increase in the number of such students.

Fiona Hyslop: I do not have the statistics to hand—you may have them—but they show that, although there has been an expansion in the overall number of postgraduate students, there has been a change in the proportions of those who are international and those who are domestic. My understanding is that the number of domestic students studying at postgraduate level has reduced.

Jeremy Purvis: It is certainly the case that the numbers of non-European, European Union and non-EU European postgraduates have gone up, but it is not the case that the number of Scotland-domiciled postgraduate students has fallen. The number of non-European students has increased at a higher rate, but that does equate to saying that the number of Scottish postgraduate students is falling. Between 1999 and 2005-06, the numbers went up by more than 2,000. I do not know whether Mr MacLean or Mr Batho has information on that.

Mark Batho (Scottish Executive): I have not got any detail on the figures at the moment, but we can look into them.

Jeremy Purvis: I am quoting from the Scottish Executive statistics publication of 16 May 2007 entitled "Students in Higher Education at Scottish Institutions 2005-06". I am disappointed that you do not have that to hand, but we can leave that point.

Fiona Hyslop: Different sets of figures come at different times. About four different sets of university figures come out and the ones that I looked at would not have come out in May; they would probably have been the January or February figures and there was concern about them then. The variation might be to do with the difference between the number of people who are offered postgraduate positions and the number who accept. I think that the concern is that although the number of international students coming to Scotland has certainly grown, which is good, we must ensure that we protect the percentage of postgraduate students who are Scots.

Jeremy Purvis: So you would be looking to alter the proportions of places for Scotland-domiciled and international postgraduate students.

Fiona Hyslop: It is important that we continue to have high levels of Scots going on to postgraduate study. Concerns have been expressed to me about the levels. I have seen the figures in previous statistics—possibly in an earlier publication than the one to which you referred. If we genuinely want to have an economically vibrant country, it is essential that we maintain the levels of not just first degrees but second degrees and postgraduate research.

The issue that you have raised is an illustration of the detail that we need from Universities Scotland. We need to know whether we have the balance that we need or whether that needs to change. You asked about the bids for the spending review. The detail that you are asking for is exactly what we need Universities Scotland to tell us—the balance that it wants, for example. Rather than my saying that I want more postgraduate students, I need to consider the data and Universities Scotland's arguments on the balance.

11:30

Jeremy Purvis: Would you be open to coming back to the committee to give your response to what Universities Scotland publishes on that? The committee might find it interesting to see what your response is to the details that it provides. As you know, Universities Scotland published its previous bid for the spending review.

Fiona Hyslop: That is certainly an issue in the preparation for the budget. Indeed, you would expect me, like previous ministers, to come to the committee to discuss the budget proposals. That is probably the most appropriate occasion on which to discuss that issue.

Jeremy Purvis: That would be helpful.

A specific point that has been raised in the past is the application of fees for non-Scotland-domiciled students—I do not know whether another member wants to ask about that as well. You are on the record as saying that the application of the fees for English students is "anti-English". In the past, you have said that

"English students would be treated the same as students from any other country, including Scots",

under an SNP Government and that

"We are the only party that has made a stance on this."

Do you intend to change the approach for the application of fees to English-domiciled students?

Fiona Hyslop: It was regrettable that the previous Government introduced variable top-up fees for students from England, Wales and Northern Ireland. There was a fee hike, which in effect brought in an additional fee cost to English students. My comments, which you quoted, were right. I thought that it was wrong at the time, which is why we voted against it. Interestingly, the SNP was the only party to stand up for English students when it came to the vote in Parliament just about a year ago.

Jeremy Purvis: Is it still wrong?

Fiona Hyslop: Yes, I think that it is still wrong. When will we right that wrong? In an independent Scotland, an SNP Government would treat English, Welsh and Northern Irish students exactly the same as students from France and Germany, first because it is desirable and secondly because we would have to under EU legislation. The question is whether we would want to lift that fee now, which is probably the question that you are coming to.

Jeremy Purvis: Yes.

Fiona Hyslop: I think that it is one of a number of issues in the queue for delivery. When I was asked at the time whether I would change it, I said that it is something that we would want to change but that the issue is the priority that we would give it compared with other issues. Should we change fees for English students that were introduced by the previous Government? The mistake was made previously, but can we right all the mistakes that were made previously? Probably not and, given a choice between part-time Scottish students receiving finances from the spending review and rectifying the problem in question caused by the

previous Government, I think that part-time Scottish students—many of whom are from deprived areas—are probably more deserving of investment from the Government in a shopping list of order of priorities.

So the answer is yes, I would want to right that wrong, but I do not know whether I can do that now, so let us have a look at the comprehensive spending review. However, I think that the previous Executive took the wrong decision. It was meant to prevent medical students from flooding over the border from England to Scotland and to preserve the number of medical places for Scots. However, we have probably lost more Scottish students as a result of the debacle of the UK's modernising medical careers structure than we ever prevented the loss of with the hike in fees.

Jeremy Purvis: Why did you say that you would have to wait until Scotland was independent before you made that change? You have the powers to do it.

Fiona Hyslop: No, we do not have to wait; we could do it now. All that I am saying is that other spending priorities sit ahead of that one. If we spent all our money and used all our resources undoing all the mistakes of the previous Government, that would leave us less room to manoeuvre to make progress in the areas that we have to make progress in. For example, I would want to address funding for part-time students first.

It is not that we cannot make the change; it is just that we are choosing at this stage not to undo all the things that the previous Executive did. In an independent country, students from England, Wales and Northern Ireland would be treated in exactly the same way as students from other countries in the EU, and that is perhaps a simpler way of addressing it.

Jeremy Purvis: So, when you decided that the scheme was discriminatory and anti-English, that you were the only party making a stand against it, and that you would scrap the fees when you got to power, what you meant to say was that those students would be put in a queue.

Fiona Hyslop: We said that we wanted to get rid of the fees, and I have said that we want to get rid of them. It is simply a matter of prioritising spending. We cannot spend all our time unpicking everything that the previous Government did. Frankly, we are making significant progress on abolishing the graduate endowment fee, for which I believe we have your support. Is not abolishing the graduate endowment fee for Scots—remember that students from England, Wales and Northern Ireland do not pay the graduate endowment fee—a higher priority than reducing the fee levels for English students that were

introduced by the previous Government? Probably.

Politics is about priorities, and we set out our stall when we voted against the introduction of top-up fees. We did not think that it should have happened. However, we need to drive forward our agenda, which is making a significant impact on relieving Scottish students of debt. The fact that students who are currently sitting their finals, students who are at university and students who are about to go to university will not have to pay the £2,000 graduate endowment fee is a major step forward. That is one of the things on which we want to make progress. The scheme was established by the previous Government and it is one of our priorities for change, but not everything can be a priority. Such are the choices in politics.

Jeremy Purvis: Another choice that you made was when you took a clear stance on the increase in fees for medical students, which you voted against when you were in opposition. Is that another policy that you have decided not to change?

Fiona Hyslop: The fees for medical students were the same as the other fees that were introduced. However, when the previous Government introduced an across-the-board increase in variable top-up fees for English students, it decided to increase the fees for medical students even further. It wanted to do so in order to deter English medical students from taking up places in Scottish universities. That was blatantly discriminatory, and it was a duff policy because it did not achieve what it was meant to achieve. In fact, one university principal said that the number of English medical students who were deterred from taking up places in Scotland would have fitted in a bus. The British Medical Association did not think that it was a good idea, Universities Scotland did not think that it was a good idea, and we did not think that it was a good idea. We voted against it because we thought that it was wrong.

I always argued that the hike in fees for English medical students was the wrong solution to a real problem. The real problem that we had with junior doctors in Scotland was the career choices that they made later, not the number of applicants for university places. If we want to ensure that more Scots medical students stay in Scotland, we ought to address their career progression. I do not think that that will be an issue for this committee, but it is an issue for the Health and Sport Committee. We must ensure that we support junior doctors and encourage them to stay in Scotland.

The increase in fees for medical students was a flawed policy. However, is it a priority for us to change that policy? Frankly, I think that there are other things on our list of priorities—not least

nursery education, the reduction of class sizes and the abolition of the graduate endowment fee. My answer is the same as my answer to your previous question. In politics, we have to set priorities, and that issue is not a priority just now. It was not a helpful policy when it was introduced, which is why we voted against it.

Jeremy Purvis: Have you costed what the change would be just to reduce the medical student fees? I understand that you have made a connection between the two issues, but there is a distinction between the application of fees to English, Welsh and Northern Irish students studying in Scotland, which is discriminatory, and the increase in the fees that English, Welsh and Northern Irish medical students have to pay.

Fiona Hyslop: It is £1,500 more.

Jeremy Purvis: How many students does that apply to?

Fiona Hyslop: Convener, your invitation was for me to come and outline what the Government wants to do and what our priorities are. We could spend a lot of time in discussing the problems of the previous Government's decision to introduce top-up fees for English students. However, I do not intend to make any movement on that because we have other priorities, which I have set out. I appeal to your judgment as to how we should proceed. We could spend a lot of time discussing the previous Government, but perhaps we should spend more time discussing our plans and the proposals that I have presented to the committee this morning.

The Convener: Absolutely. However, Mr Purvis has the right to ask his questions, even though you are under no obligation to answer them.

Fiona Hyslop: There is a danger of repetition.

Jeremy Purvis: That is fine, convener.

The Convener: Time is marching on. The minister has been very indulgent, so I ask Mr Purvis to ask one final question—other members wish to ask questions, too.

Jeremy Purvis: It has been helpful, cabinet secretary, that you have said that you are not going to move on the two areas that I asked about.

You have spoken about relieving student debt, although you used different language in your manifesto, which spoke about removing the burden of debt repayments. In your recent statement to Parliament and, I think, today, you spoke about relieving the burden. When will you make clear proposals? You have said that more than 300,000 individuals in Scotland will benefit, but when will you come back to Parliament with proposals to benefit the 300,000 Scotland-domiciled and resident graduates for whom you

have made a commitment to assume debt repayments?

Fiona Hyslop: To assume debt repayments means to remove debt repayments from graduates who have that burden of debt. In effect, we will be relieving them of the responsibility, because we will be standing in their shoes. You can use the word "remove" or the word "relieve"; to me, it is one and the same thing.

The measures will be part of the spending review. The difficulty is that much of our work will depend on our discussions of the spending review and on negotiations with the Treasury. That will take time, but I will certainly come back to the committee when I have information on progress. We are making progress on grants and loans, and we have made an early impact on the graduate endowment fee. We had to do that for people who are starting university this year or who have been sitting their finals; people have to know what is likely to happen—depending on Parliament's approval. Where necessary, we have moved quickly to maximise our impact this academic year.

Aileen Campbell: The time for this point has probably passed. Jeremy Purvis was talking about postgraduates, and a person has to graduate before they can become a postgraduate. Will removing the barriers to higher education be part of a Government strategy to get more Scotland-domiciled students into postgraduate education?

Fiona Hyslop: This Government is determined to tackle the issue of debt. The fear of debt has the biggest impact on people who are perhaps the least likely to want to go to university.

Debt is one burden but other issues will have to be addressed, too—for example, we have to consider people with families and the age profile of people who want to go to university. I am very keen that people with the ability to learn are given the opportunity to go to university. There has been a reduction in participation levels at university from 51 per cent to 47 per cent; that has been a dramatic change after decades in which the trend was in the other direction.

We have to consider debt, widening access and giving opportunities, and we have to ensure that young people in schools can make the right decisions. Some young people might want to go into vocational education, and there has to be parity of esteem between that and university education. We have to ensure that young people's career choices and life choices are appropriate to them, and that young people are not held back by poverty or by not having a family background of relatives going to university. Also, some people who automatically choose to go to university might

benefit from doing something else. They should have the choice of vocational education.

In order to widen access, not only universities but schools should be changing things. Schools should be encouraging goals and ambitions and should be providing proper information about career opportunities earlier on, so that young people can make the life choices that are best suited to them.

11:45

The Convener: On that point, you will be aware that North Lanarkshire Council has been developing 21st century comprehensives—the model is vocational excellence as well as academic excellence in schools. Will additional funding be available to local authorities such as North Lanarkshire Council to pilot a vocational skills strategy? How will you ensure that we have a proper vocational qualification framework in Scotland so that we do not just talk about parity of esteem between the academic and the vocational but make it a reality?

Fiona Hyslop: We have announced that we want to introduce a skills strategy that goes from the early years right through. We will have to look at the vocational skills strategy that you are talking about at a local level and we will have to agree with local authorities the sort of things that we expect to see.

In relation to colleges, again much will depend on the local area. Facilities in local schools might be more fitting, but there is an issue about ensuring that young people have an opportunity to go off site, away from more formal education, to experience the adult world. We therefore have to make sure that our colleges, many of which are already doing great work with young people, are geared up to offer that opportunity.

Employers are going to be the big challenge for us. How can we engage employers and get them to provide facilities and experiences to young people that will give them some status? That is particularly relevant to young men who need such opportunities—for example, working with an older role model in a way that might not necessarily happen in a school setting, where it might not be appropriate. I am very interested to see what the North Lanarkshire schools are doing, but we have to marry all that work with employers and colleges.

You are absolutely right about the qualification framework. We have a great opportunity, which is why I am enthusiastic about meeting the European Commissioner for Education, Training, Culture and Youth tomorrow. The Scottish credit and qualifications framework, which is internationally recognised, could work harder for us. It is informing some of the work that is being done in

Europe on the development of a European qualification framework.

It is essential for vocational qualifications to have parity of esteem with academic qualifications. We have to do more work on that, and it will be interesting to see how the schools for work roll-out is supported in different areas. If the committee has views on how the schools for work programme is operating or whether it can be developed or enhanced, I would welcome hearing those.

The Convener: I am sure that North Lanarkshire schools would welcome a visit. The partnership is not just with the schools but with local colleges, which deliver vocational education in the schools. The young people are able to go out into the community—each primary and high school is in partnership and has a contract with a local company. There is constant learning and development of skills that meet the needs of local employers. There is much to recommend in the model that is being used in North Lanarkshire. I am sure that the council would be happy to have you.

Fiona Hyslop: Thank you.

Rob Gibson: As an addendum, the UHI Millennium Institute has majored in marrying vocational education with higher education. Have you considered how university status for the UHI Millennium Institute can be fast tracked? Can we expect that to happen in the near future? It is important because parity of esteem for vocational courses relies on the UHI having a permanent set-up and on its being a model for other parts of rural Scotland.

Fiona Hyslop: You raise an important question that I will discuss with officials. I intend to visit Inverness and to hold discussions with the relevant bodies. You will understand that it would be premature for me to make any decisions today and announce them to the committee, but we need to develop that work and decide how to go forward and achieve parity of esteem and recognition for vocational education.

The credit and qualifications framework is very important because a huge percentage of higher education is delivered in colleges, so we have to address the relationship between colleges and universities and the status of the UHI Millennium Institute. However, it would be premature for me to make any statement to the committee before I have had discussions with the relevant officials.

The Convener: That concludes our questions, minister. Thank you very much for your attendance at the committee. You are likely to receive a formal invitation to our committee away day and I hope that you and your deputies will be able to accept that when it arrives.

Fiona Hyslop: Thank you.

Meeting closed at 11:51.

The Convener: I remind committee members that our away day will take place on 27 and 28 August at Keavil House hotel, which is just outside Dunfermline. It is an appropriate location for the committee's away day; some of you might not know that the building was a children's home before it was turned into a hotel. The clerks have made a good choice of location.

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