EDUCATION, LIFELONG LEARNING AND CULTURE COMMITTEE

Wednesday 23 April 2008

Session 3

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EDUCATION, LIFELONG LEARNING AND CULTURE COMMITTEE
9th Meeting 2008, 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)
*Mary Mulligan (Linlithgow) (Lab)
*Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD)
*Elizabeth Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

Richard Baker (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Hugh O'Donnell (Central Scotland) (LD)
Shirley-Anne Somerville (Lothians) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING GAVE EVIDENCE:

Judith Gillespie (Scottish Parent Teacher Council)
John McKnight (Community Learning and Development Managers Scotland Group)
Moira Niven (Association of Directors of Education in Scotland)
Alan Small (YouthLink Scotland)
Paul Stallan (Architecture and Design Scotland)
Louise Wilson (Educational Institute of Scotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Eugene Windsor

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Nick Hawthorne

ASSISTANT CLERK

Andrew Proudfoot

LOCATION

Committee Room 6

Scottish Parliament

Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee

Wednesday 23 April 2008

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 10:02*]

School Estate

The Convener (Karen Whitefield): Good morning and welcome to the ninth meeting in 2008 of the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee. The first agenda item is the committee's continuing consideration of the school estate. Our first panel of the morning will cover architecture and design issues. I am delighted to welcome Paul Stallan, education design champion and a director of Architecture and Design Scotland, and Moira Niven, the convener of the resources committee within the estates sub-group of the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland. Thank you for your attendance at committee today and for advance copies of your written submissions. Because we are keen to engage with you, we will move straight to questions. I invite Mr Gibson to kick off.

Rob Gibson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP): Good morning. The committee heard last week that schools' requirements are changing. What was suitable in the past, for example a traditional, stone-built Victorian primary school, is difficult to adapt to meet modern requirements for integrated working, community use, access for people with disabilities, environmental sustainability and flexible classroom sizes. Are changing ideas about suitability so great that they add significantly to the requirements for upgrading the estate?

Paul Stallan (Architecture and Design Scotland): Flexibility is a key consideration in meeting the requirements of the new curriculum. Teaching styles have changed over the years from a chalk-and-talk classroom arrangement to much more student-centred teaching, with children being given more one-to-one encouragement and attention. The class layout should reflect that. Even in daily situations, the classroom should support different arrangements. Modern schools should accommodate flexibility.

Moira Niven (Association of Directors of Education in Scotland): I have been jotting down a couple of ideas related to the new curriculum. Many changes are to do with methodology and will involve much more active learning. We will be engaging children in a very different way: there will be a lot of group work and a lot of cross-curricular work. Therefore, it will be most important to have plenty of space. Buildings might be old but that will be less of a difficulty if the classrooms and breakout areas are a good size. There must be space for creativity and the flexibility that Paul Stallan referred to.

We have to make the best use of what we have. Some buildings will be inherently limited, and that applies not only to the old Victorian buildings but to other buildings in which the space standards were low. I am thinking for example of a two-stream primary school with more than 400 children, which might also have a nursery attached, but which has only a single hall, which is also used for dining. In my education authority area, we have some buildings like that. They can lead to great difficulties, but they are very well managed by their head teachers.

Buildings are not the only issue. We have to be able to use our resources flexibly—resources such as information and communications technology systems, involving wireless computers, for example. We also need good external areas; the outdoor classroom can make a great difference to children's experience.

Rob Gibson: Changing ideas lead us to try to learn from what has gone before. How do assessments of improvements to buildings help with that? You have been doing that kind of work, Paul.

Paul Stallan: Architecture and Design Scotland has reviewed more than 50 schools. We have not reviewed many refurbishments; most of the schools that we have reviewed either have been completed recently or are currently on site. We use a robust and proven design methodology checklist, and the consensus is that many schools were compromising on space standards. Spaces were difficult and tight and the problems could be compounded by an inability to open up partitions or gain access to external areas or corridors. Many schools were overcellularised and could not respond dynamically to the diverse curriculum, which is what teachers were demanding.

Moira Niven: I agree. I have experience of early refurbishments of secondary schools in West Lothian, and working within existing school buildings limited what we could do. In our authority area—and I am sure in many others—space standards have developed as we have gained more experience of building and refurbishing schools. We have carried out such work in consultation with school staff. We have also attempted to consult children on planned new primary schools. It is important to hear everybody's views. With the new schools that we are building now, we will probably get a much better fix.

It is relatively early days in the consideration of the suitability of the existing schools estate, but we

now have a much more robust methodology and we are working with officials from central Government.

Rob Gibson: My colleagues will ask about several of those matters in more detail soon. You have summed up well the fact that there are issues and that the changes in our ideas of suitability are at an early stage. Does Paul Stallan want to say anything about that?

Paul Stallan: Yes. I concur with Moira Niven. The sector is learning. Skills are improving and the people who lead projects are taking account of some of the deficiencies in previous projects, so we are hopeful that some lessons have been learned.

Mary Mulligan (Linlithgow) (Lab): Audit Scotland has been clear that provision needs to be flexible to accommodate changing needs. In some areas, such as Ms Niven's—West Lothian—population is increasing, but in other areas, it is decreasing, so there are differing demands on schools. How is flexibility built into the design of a new build or a refurbishment?

Paul Stallan: If we have generous space for classrooms—if there is a reasonable volume to work with—there is scope for developing flexible teaching. It helps if the building is not convoluted and overly complicated but has a simple plan arrangement with circulation space and direct access to the playground. There could be some improvement in simple space standards. There are areas in which there is less innovation and budgets are not stretched, such as the ability to open out the building—perhaps to have patio doors on to a terrace, a sliding wall between classrooms or one that opens out on to a corridor. Those ideas tend to be value engineered out of the process and we end up with a closed cell in which, sometimes, it is not even possible to open the window.

Moira Niven: Although the population of West Lothian is growing, I have previous experience in Lothian Regional Council, where school rationalisations were, unfortunately, a major aspect, so I have seen both sides of the coin.

On the need to extend schools, we must take an overall view. It is important to anticipate a certain level of growth when we consider the school estate in a particular area. My experience has taught me that extensions need to be extendable, so we need to look to the longer term. Indeed, when we build a school, we often lay the foundations for the next part of an extension because that is cheaper than going back and doing it later. One of the reasons for that is the legislation on placing in schools, which means that we cannot easily assess and reserve the space that we will need to service new developments, so that is one approach that we can take to tackling the scale of the school.

Mary Mulligan mentioned declining populations as well as increasing ones. Councils need to consider their school estate in the context of their corporate asset management plans. In West Lothian Council, we have developed a school estate management plan. The development of such plans has been an excellent piece of work in Scotland. We have had good support from central Government officers and it gives us a strong basis on which to build.

It is important that people do not regard the school estate as just one wee corner of council provision; we must look at it more broadly. If there is surplus capacity, we must consider how it can be managed effectively. For example, a two-stream school became a single-stream school, with a library headquarters occupying the other part of the building, which released a building elsewhere. Such arrangements are worth while, but there are instances in which rationalisation of the school estate must be seriously considered.

10:15

Mary Mulligan: Colleagues will ask about rationalisation, but I want to pick up on Mr Stallan's comment about not being able to open windows in some schools. Which schools?

Paul Stallan: At Rosshall academy, in Cardonald, for example. In some early private finance initiative/public-private partnership schools there were issues to do with security when children left windows open, so most windows are—in effect—sealed, and the internal space is mechanically ventilated, which is not very pleasant.

Mary Mulligan: I am sure that you share my amazement that your fellow architects designed a school in such a way.

Paul Stallan: Well—yes. Being able to open the window is a basic requirement, especially when a classroom might contain 30 adolescent—

Elizabeth Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Boys.

Paul Stallan: Yes.

Mary Mulligan: Ms Niven made the point that 10 years ago, when some PFI/PPP projects started, there was perhaps not the knowledge that we have now. How has understanding of what is needed in schools increased?

Moira Niven: In the period before the big investment in schools, not an awful lot of new schools were built. When West Lothian Council built a secondary school, everyone came to look at it, which indicated that there had not been many

new builds. People had to gear up their understanding, expertise and knowledge. There was certainly a steep learning curve for me in my senior role, and I am sure that that was no different for other people. There was not a lot of guidance at the time, as Audit Scotland has said.

It is really important that authorities share practice and experience—good and bad. In the report "Improving the school estate", Audit Scotland said that not enough of that goes on. I agree, although information sharing has picked up in recent years. That is why ADES set up an estates sub-committee, which I chair.

West Lothian Council brought someone out full time to work on the report "More than just a place to learn: Design guidance for new schools", because we are planning new schools. I am not just punting West Lothian's line; we had huge input from authorities throughout Scotland in our consideration of what works and what does not work. The report includes a summary, "Key design principles", and an appendix in which are listed features that we think should be in new schools, which have been gathered from throughout the country, south of the border and—I think—Ireland. We list design features that impressed our officers, children and staff and features that are not appropriate for new schools. There is a huge database, which is available to everyone, because everyone contributed. It is important that we all share good practice.

Mary Mulligan: That is helpful. My final question is on flexibility of use, given changes in policy. You talked about a primary school with a gym hall that is used for dining. Current policy is to increase the availability of physical education to two hours per week; the number of pupils who may receive free school meals is increasing, which might increase take-up; and class-size reductions will come on stream. How can you plan for all that?

Moira Niven: The question is really how we all plan for it, as it is not a single authority issue. When policies are developed, perhaps there should be more engagement on the possible consequences of and shortfalls in their delivery. I would not want anybody to think that I and my colleagues in ADES are anything other than supportive of high-quality physical education provision for children; however, we have to wrestle with the reality of how that provision can be delivered. That is one of the reasons why the group was set up. As you have seen in my paper, we felt that we needed to inform national policy and be more engaged in the debate about the consequences of some of those moves, including such things as class-size reductions. In some areas, some of those things are not possible without massive investment.

Mary Mulligan: Mr Stallan, are there design elements that can be built into a school, through either new build or refurbishment, that would provide that flexibility?

Paul Stallan: Definitely. There is flexibility at the micro-level within the teaching situation, and there have been fantastic examples of how a classroom can be arranged. Also, Architecture and Design Scotland has reviewed schools in the community context and has understood flexibility in its widest sense of how a school serves its community and how it might function during the summer holidays, at weekends or in the evenings. Part of that is about developing a security philosophy, so that parts of the building can be used by the public and parts can be kept private. We definitely think that new schools should be a positive high point in their communities and something that people champion.

The Convener: Mrs Niven, would it be possible for you to supply the committee with copies of the design paper to which you have alluded—not necessarily today, but after the meeting? Several members would be interested in that.

Moira Niven: I just happen to have some copies of it with me.

The Convener: You came prepared. You obviously anticipated our interest.

Moira Niven: I think that it is on our website, anyway. There is a database containing all the pictures—people took photographs of what they liked or did not like—including some of our own.

The Convener: I am sure that it will make interesting reading.

Christina McKelvie (Central Scotland) (SNP): Mr Stallan, do you think that there is a disparity in the quality of design of primary and secondary schools?

Paul Stallan: No, I do not think that there is. In Glasgow, there appeared to be a real urgency to build the public-private partnership secondary schools, and the primary schools seem to have been in a second wave of projects. Lessons have been learned from building the secondary schools, which has led to an improvement in the design of the primary schools. Also, the procurement process has become much more diverse and involves not only PPP but framework agreements, design and build and traditional procurement. People are being a bit more inventive and open in the procurement of school buildings. It is just because of the timeline that the primary schools are benefiting from the lessons that local authorities' estates teams and procurement teams learned from the experience of building the secondary schools.

Christina McKelvie: So, you think that the quality is patchy all over the country and different in different areas.

Paul Stallan: It is more inconsistent, but there is now an opportunity to build better schools. In Glasgow, there was nervousness about using the PPP process for building the primary schools as well as the secondary schools, so the people with whom we interfaced at a local authority level are holding design competitions and considering different forms of procurement and, in some schools, there is more community engagement. The process seems to be opening up a bit, which is good, because the quality is improving.

Christina McKelvie: So the pun in all this is that lessons have been learned.

Paul Stallan: I think so.

Christina McKelvie: Can design have an impact on social problems such as bullying?

Paul Stallan: Absolutely. One of the issues that arose during our review of the 50 schools was the quality of the external areas. That is sometimes left out of the process because it is viewed as something extra. A lot of consortiums and client groups are so focused on delivering the schools that they think about the landscape as being secondary.

The environment in which kids spend playtime can sometimes be pretty harsh and brutal. In some cases, the children's only option might be to play football. I have a son, and I know that football is not always what he wants to do. A huge area of tarmac is not that conducive to different types of play. We have had contact with an organisation called Grounds for Learning, which is considering different ways of informing the external spaces, and internal ones as well. In our recommendations, we have taken account of the need to plan simple spaces that can be easily supervised.

Moira Niven: It is an important aspect, and I am pleased that you asked the question. It is important that children feel valued when a new school is built. I have been amazed by the impact on children of even minor structural refurbishments to a school, on which relatively small amounts of money were spent.

In one school in an area with the highest level of deprivation, I was impressed by the way in which the children were engaged in the refurbishments. The head teacher involved the children in funny things such as the colour of the paintwork for the window trimmings—they came up with ideas that I would never have dreamed of. It was very much theirs, and there was an impact on the parents as well. They felt that it was their school; they had a sense of ownership and engagement.

The school had been the subject of quite a lot of vandalism, but we began to hear the names of the culprits from the children, because it was their school, and they had been involved in the refurbishment. That is important, and if it happens when a couple of hundred thousand pounds is spent on quite a large primary school, one can imagine the effect of replacing a building. The important thing for the authorities is to engage not just the children and the staff, but the wider community. People have to feel that a school is theirs and then they do not want it to be damaged. They have to value it.

The other issue concerns designing things—with advice from Paul Stallan and colleagues in his profession—in a way that does not encourage vandalism. We do not want to build somewhere where folk can congregate and drink Buckie. We want the windows to open, but for the design to assist in the protection of the building.

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): Mr Stallan, you mentioned earlier that, for a flexible approach, you would like generous use of space. I was surprised when I discovered how much the ratio of space to children varies in old and new schools throughout Scotland. Are there any standards for that? Do architects work to a set requirement per pupil when they design a school—or should they?

Paul Stallan: From our experience of reviewing and in practice, different local authorities apply different space standards. There are guidelines, but they are not consistent.

Ken Macintosh: Should they be consistent?

Paul Stallan: Yes, clear guidance should be given as a benchmark.

10:30

The Convener: Since 2000, £5.2 billion has been spent on the school estate, yet many schools are still not fit for purpose. Do you have any estimates of what it would cost to bring the rest of the school estate up to an acceptable standard and to make the schools fit for the 21st century?

Moira Niven: As I said in my submission, the people who are best placed to give such estimates are in the Scottish Government, which has information such as the core facts about the condition of buildings and, to a certain extent, their suitability. I seem to recall Audit Scotland quoting a figure; I cannot remember, but I think that it was also around £5 billion.

The main point that I wanted to make in my submission was that, although we have transformed parts of the estate, the issue of equity is very important. There must be a vision involving all children and all communities, and further investment is required. Clearly, that is material. Officers in the Scottish Government are in the best position to address that.

In my local authority area, we will soon not have any schools in the C or D categories. I think that about nine such schools were identified in our estate management plan, and we have a plan in place for every one of them, so that our 10-year financial strategy will deliver all schools in categories A and B.

Paul Stallan: Architecture and Design Scotland's focus lies with the budget and getting value for the investment that the Government is making—it is about trying to get the best possible results from the money that is being spent. There are a lot of enthusiastic, well-meaning people in local authorities—and of course everybody wants good schools—but Architecture and Design Scotland has found that there is a missing skill set in the local authority context, in that there are no design champions among the procurement teams. The estates teams that, in effect, run the projects are drawn from a finance background. We need to have more of a balance of skills.

One of Architecture and Design Scotland's key objectives is to make planning more multidisciplinary, with an emphasis on place making and design, and that applies even when a local authority refers to its own internal planning team. That is a cultural thing. Given that we have not been building schools for 30 years, it will take time to develop that skill set and for it to become embedded in the local authority context.

The Convener: You mentioned that we have not been building schools for quite some time. Audit Scotland reflected on that and, although I do not think that its report indicated how much it would cost to bring the remaining school estate up to an acceptable standard, it raised its concern with the committee last week that it could take 20 years to do that, even with the existing level of investment—if it is maintained. Is that a fair assessment? Should our schools have to wait for 20 years?

Do you have any concerns about whether the investment is actually there? The committee has heard in evidence that, although there has been considerable investment since 2000, there is no certainty about there actually being any funding at present, irrespective of how the new schools might be funded in the future.

Paul Stallan: I should pass on that question. Architecture and Design Scotland is not really intimate with the budget area.

Moira Niven: The report indicates a number of areas for action for the Scottish Government. We will have to await its response. One area that the report makes clear is that we need to have a clear picture of where we are, what requires to be done, and how to do things by way of an action plan. In terms of the total amount, I am working within available budgets, as are other members of ADES across Scotland. There has been some uplift nationally in the three-year settlement, but we do not know what will happen in the future.

If I may, I will return to an earlier point on school design and space standards. Authorities need to look at not only the school estate, but the whole estate. They need also to look at efficiency, as that can release resources to enable greater investment. I am thinking of the community primary school model that has no stand-alone community facility. For that reason, I would not want us to slavishly follow standards on how big each space has to be. We should look at the overall service that the building provides to the community as opposed to looking only at its provision of primary education, for example. There are ways of bringing efficiency into the system when new build is taking place if we use the opportunity to take a critical look at the other facilities in the area.

The money that is required is certainly large in scale. I do not see it there at present, but I do not know what the Government's longer-term plans are. Clearly, ADES has identified the school estate as a key priority.

The Convener: Will ADES make representations to the Government that it needs to make at least a comparable continuation of the funding that its predecessor made available from 2000 to allow continued investment in the school estate beyond 2008?

Moira Niven: Yes. We will press the importance of investment in the school estate.

The Convener: One issue that Audit Scotland raised on the school estate strategy was the variation in the definitions that local authorities use, which make it difficult to get a clear picture of what has been done around Scotland. It said that better monitoring is needed of improvements to the school estate. What are your views on that?

Audit Scotland also indicated that the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the Executive had been working to address the problem. It said that the Government had recognised that there had been a bit of a problem and that the issue needed to be worked on further. Are there flaws in the way in which we monitor the school estate strategy? How do we ensure that, when we judge all schools, there is a level playing field across Scotland?

Paul Stallan: The 50 schools that we reviewed—they had been bundled into two or three projects—were submitted by about 10 local authorities on a voluntary basis. I think that the desire was to invite constructive and critical input into the condition of the estate and how authorities are improving it. Architecture and Design Scotland

has an enabling panel of 100 people who come from a multidisciplinary background. They serve as a resource to help local authorities to review and audit the estate, develop briefs and so forth. We are trying to help the monitoring, reviewing and on-going improvement of the estate, including the way in which new schools are being procured.

Moira Niven: West Lothian Council used that service and thought that it was excellent. That feedback will be given to my colleagues in ADES. The service was helpful. We had two days of input from Architecture and Design Scotland and we found it valuable. I do not think that we have reached the review stage—that was the enabling stage—but we certainly want to do that.

I am not sure that I fully understood your question, convener. If I may, I will give my answer to what I think you asked. You mentioned definitions and the monitoring of progress. Clear targets were set for the number of schools, but that went only so far. We need to examine the whole estate and set targets for progress on that. In that way, we will consider the big picture.

The monitoring of improvements will require us to have a clearer fix on suitability. Excellent work has been done on tidying up issues about the condition of buildings and there is much more accurate information throughout the school estate, compared with when the work started. We have tightened that up, and we are working on the next bit. Our sub-group will meet Eileen Gill and Frank Newall to consider suitability and how we approach that. Until we have a more robust methodology, it is difficult to make the comparisons that are necessary for the monitoring and reporting.

The Convener: Despite the wording of my question, you managed to answer it.

Jeremy Purvis (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale) (LD): I want to move on to environmental sustainability in school design, but before I do so, I return to Mr Stallan's interesting comments about the capacity of local authorities, not just in education departments but in all areas. In my constituency, five new schools are being built, all of which raised planning issues, community concerns about siting and access, and all the other issues that arise when a large building is constructed in a community—often in the middle of the community. There are genuine concerns.

How many of the 32 councils in Scotland have enthusiastically embraced design as a principle in what they do? That is perhaps different from putting forward plans. How many local authorities genuinely embrace design and have the capacity to do that?

Paul Stallan: Architecture and Design Scotland has met pretty much all the directors of planning throughout the country. We have tried positively to encourage the new policy in architecture and the Government's place-making agenda. The planning teams have responded directly, and engaged and considered their skill sets. We have moved from a policy-driven planning system to one that is much more qualitative, with place making. Quite a bit of catch-up is still required to get the right blend of people—those who will champion design—in local authorities.

Glasgow has a new city design architect called Gerry Grams, and Edinburgh has Ricardo Marini and Sir Terry Farrell. Aberdeen, Inverness and others have said that they are passionate about championing design because the public are responding to it. People have only to switch on the telly—every second programme is about houses and design. Design is now embedded deeply in the school curriculum. A lot of local authorities are passionate about design. It is important at grass-roots level in the curriculum and at policy level for the Government.

We now need to consider implementation. That is what we found in relation to the schools, or PPP, process. It is not that people do not want the best. The question is how to achieve the best and maintain a design agenda all the way through the process. Whether the mechanism that is used is PPP, private finance initiative, design and build or traditional, with the right team and the right priorities, good results will be achieved. It is less about aspiration than it is a cultural issue. Local authorities are ambitious and are beginning to embrace policy on architecture and all the positive things that people are thinking about creating places.

10:45

Jeremy Purvis: Other colleagues will ask about the impact on design of funding methods. The secondary school that is being built in my constituency is a PPP school. In the Borders, three new primary schools are being built through the traditional funding mechanism. Whereas the design process for the PPP school was, "What do we want the secondary school to be?", for the primary schools, it was, "We have this amount of money. What can we get for it?" The funding mechanism has an impact on the way in which schools are put together. Are there local authorities that say, regardless of the mechanism, "This is how much we've got. What can we build?", rather than, "We need a new school. What should that school be like?" What is the experience in the areas that you have looked at? How many local authorities have said, "We've got a blank sheet of paper and this is our school of the future"—which is the ethos of the schools of the future process—rather than, "We've got a capital budget. This is

how much we can afford through prudential borrowing", or, "This is how much we can get through revenue cost or PPP."

Paul Stallan: In our experience, it has never been about budget. Architecture and Design Scotland's evidence is that the old excuse, "We don't have enough money and we can't afford a good school", no longer holds. If you have an enlightened client—who has aspirations, the skills to procure the school properly and the right emphasis on process—you will achieve a good school, on budget. Design is not about the frills that you add; it is, for example, about how to place the school correctly in its site and how to orientate it in relation to the sun. It is about someone reinforcing that agenda all the way through the process, right through to construction. It is not good enough to say, "We want a good school." People have to be incentivised to take on ownership and care. It is an issue of design leadership in local authorities. That is where we have identified the failing.

Moira Niven: I agree with much of what Paul Stallan says. It is possible to have reasonable cost and good design. The joke in our architects' department was that I was always looking for a well-costed, elegant box. Our in-house team came up with some innovative and attractive designs, which were much appreciated by the community.

There are communities in which we are building new schools and in which we have tried to engage with the wider community as well as the school community. In the public spend, £30 million on a new high school is the biggest investment some of these towns will ever make. We had a fascinating debate about whether a new school should be in the centre of the town or on the outskirts. The school is slightly on the outside of the town. The pros and cons of such a decision need to be teased through, and everybody needs to feel that they have been heard. A document that I have with me includes the quotation:

"New schools should be landmark buildings in the context of the development of the local communities. They should be learning centres that, by design and quality, raise the motivation, aspiration and attainment of the learners who use them."

We should probably add, "And the community to which they belong."

You mentioned financial constraints. We have often had to do a bit of catch-up with the population in my area—I am sure that that has happened elsewhere, too. The financial constraints are real, which is why we should sometimes be a bit more creative and think not only about the school. Perhaps other buildings can be taken out of use, so that we sweat the asset, but have a much better asset. With our architects, I have taken our chief executive round new buildings to explain why they were a little more expensive and to point out that the look and feel and how people respond to buildings and their use are important. I think that he took on board those points.

Jeremy Purvis: That is valid.

Environmental aspects of buildings have been considered to be frills. The PPP school that is being built in my area is being heated by biomass, whereas the traditional-build schools will not be heated by sustainable means—somebody who was opposed to PPP might say that that is perverse. The council has not resolved the issue. There is a technical aspect about whether biomass systems are appropriate for primary schools rather than secondary schools, given the scale. On design and sustainability, cost is a key consideration—I have seen that happening live in my area.

The capital cost of installing sustainable technology is a larger up-front cost, which is not spread over 30 years as it would be with traditional fuelling systems. That is often a deterrent for councils when they have a set capital budget. With the PPP school in my area, the process was easier, because the council stipulated that it would not accept bids unless they included biomass heating for the high school. That was costed in as part of the bid process. With the capital build, the local authority did not do that, because the up-front capital costs would have been considerably greater and the council must work within a three-year spending period. What is your experience on the environmental sustainability of schools? Have we got the approach right on that?

Paul Stallan: Architecture and Design Scotland sees environmental issues on two fronts. First, as Audit Scotland has documented, the review process has shown that the majority of schools that have been built or are being built are failing on environmental quality. I am talking not about sustainability and green issues, but simple issues such as daylight, ventilation and windows that can be opened. The aim has been to create a space, keep the kids secure and give them a roof, but the comfort factors in the spaces have been compromised. Architecture and Design Scotland would be pleased if the simple issues about how comfortable people are in their environment were addressed. The bulk procurement method and the lack of vision in the briefing process may have resulted in shed-like schools that have no mass to retain heat, so they become difficult buildings to run. On the simple environmental issues, there is definitely scope for improvement, although improvement is taking place.

On low energy use and on-going embedded sustainable design, we rely on leadership and more championing of the issues in local authorities

to provide a fuller understanding. In our experience, the estates teams that we work with probably do not know a great deal about sustainable or green engineering.

Jeremy Purvis: That is my experience of the process for PPP secondary schools. It is easier for the council to stipulate in a contract and allow other professionals to come up with solutions. This is no criticism of local authorities, but they are not experts in sustainable or renewable energy so, with the traditional-build method, if the internal team has to choose technologies, that puts pressure on capacity in the team. There are creative ways of getting around that, and advice can certainly be outsourced, but there are practical considerations to be taken. Those people are your staff, I guess.

Moira Niven: My local authority never used to have an energy manager, but it does now. Some of our efficiency targets make up a material aspect of the budget process. One of the disciplines that PPP brought was the requirement to consider the efficiency of the building's operation in the longer term—it became important to think about on-going, cyclical maintenance.

One of the lessons that we learned involved the idea of using passive ventilation systems. I have had a fairly major continuing professional development experience as a result of a situation in one of our schools, because we had to correct a problem with ventilation. It is more expensive to fix such problems after the event. Issues such as window design are important. I wondered about the height of the corridors in one of our new primary schools, but it was explained to me that the windows in the high ceiling were important to get the air circulation going. Clearly, people are picking up on such issues.

The Carbon Trust gave our management team an interesting presentation, which I will share with colleagues, although many of them have had that presentation, too. The Carbon Trust talked about the room data sheets and standards and also roughly quantified the capital cost in percentage terms. However, when you think about the energy costs, you realise that they must be part of any business case.

There is a question of balance. In a local authority in which some schools are in poor condition, it is quite difficult for people to do a 100 per cent job in one place while knowing that the resources are not available to sort out other pressing issues. The decisions are not easy.

Jeremy Purvis: You mentioned a new energy manager. Is that person the energy manager for the whole of West Lothian Council or just for the education department?

Moira Niven: He is the energy manager for the council, but education is the biggest part of the estate.

Jeremy Purvis: Does ADES know what the picture is across all the local authorities?

Moira Niven: No, but I think that there has been some positive movement in local authorities in recent years, for reasons of budget as well as the sustainability agenda, which is a big part of it. The energy manager has also worked closely with a lot of our eco-committees in schools.

I have mentioned the corporate asset management plan twice, but I will mention it a third time. It is important that that plan is integrated with financial planning, so that, when it is decided that it is time to lose some of the buildings that are inefficient and, perhaps, past their sell-by date, it is possible to look strategically at how provision is made in an area and at the associated revenue costs.

Aileen Campbell (South of Scotland) (SNP): Is there a danger that putting a wind turbine in a school is simply ticking a box rather than doing something that actually makes the school greener?

Paul Stallan: Yes. It does not address the deep-rooted issue. There is a lot of green jewellery—or greenwash.

Aileen Campbell: Last week, we heard from the City of Edinburgh Council about how traditional procurement methods allowed more engagement between users and designers than was allowed under PPP, and that the projects that had been funded by PPP lacked civic presence. North Lanarkshire Council told a different story, however. Do you believe that procurement has an impact on design?

Paul Stallan: Yes. Architecture and Design Scotland see procurement as a twofold exercise. The sector has been on a massive learning curve. PPP has been an insensitive model, but that is not to say that it does not work. With skills developing in the sector and in the industry, PPP and PFI can be made to work. Indeed, south of the border, there are certainly examples where they have worked. However, my organisation's overriding message is that this is all about leadership, resources, people and skills. There needs to be a trade-off.

11:00

Moira Niven: With regard to the PPP debate, I am interested mainly in having really good-quality schools that give children a better educational experience, in a financial situation that we can live with and manage. The fact is that the various models are suited to different times and

circumstances. For example, my authority used PPP to construct a new primary school and refurbish three high schools and two primary schools. However, when we came to refurbish five secondary schools, the PPP team leader and I had to say to the chief executive, "We really can't recommend using PPP here, because it's simply not best value". We had many helpful discussions with and support from the Scottish Executive's PFI unit, and the lesson that I learned was that at that point the PFI model just did not work with large-scale refurbishment projects. However, after reconfiguring everything, we went for two new secondary schools under PFI—it works much better in that context—and decided to find other models for refurbishing the other three schools. I am pleased to say that that work is starting about now. Of course, the whole process has meant a delay, but the point is that we should think carefully about whether PPP/PFI really is the only solution for certain projects.

Like many local authorities, we have tried hard in our PPP projects as well as in projects using traditional procurement methods to engage staff more in having much more involvement in key issues such as the scale and design of schools.

Aileen Campbell: In that case, why has the basic design of things such as ventilation, space, heating and lighting been found wanting in schools? Surely anyone designing a school does not need to be told that it should have windows that open. Why have such problems arisen?

Moira Niven: When in the authority's early years we carried out refurbishments using traditional procurement methods, we ended up with rooms that were overheating because the ventilation was not very good. Perhaps we were unused to schools that did not have gaping holes—or what might be called unintentional ventilation. With both PPP and traditional procurement methods, people can sometimes get things wrong. As we pointed out earlier, people were launching into major rebuilding and refurbishment programmes without the necessary preparation and guidance and without getting people up to speed on the issues before work began.

Aileen Campbell: Surely heating, lighting and ventilation should be considerations from the very start of a project, regardless of the funding method. I still cannot understand why such things are going wrong.

Paul Stallan: The design of many schools was very generic and basic because the pressure was on to give the kids accommodation. Early PPP projects involved what might be called extruded portal frames that were not sensitive to aspects such as orientation—for example, the façade of the south elevation might have been the same as that of the north elevation. Such pattern-book solutions, which were purchased in bulk, were simply not site specific. The fact is that one size does not fit all, and we felt that there was no sensitivity to or awareness of local considerations in those designs.

The challenge is to break down the scale of a project and have more intimate dialogue with the community. It is important to understand the specific context of each site—for example, whether it has trees on it, whether it has a view or whether it is orientated towards the road. It is not acceptable just to superimpose one pattern from a book full of patterns and say, "Here is a school for 300, 1,000 or 2,000 students." The previous, debased method was to build what were really just sheds—I know that that is a quite bleak statement—but the approach has moved on. I hope that there is a better understanding of some of the issues so that that method will no longer be used.

Aileen Campbell: Given the consultation that has been embarked on with all school users, do you think that West Lothian has a good model? If that is considered best practice, how can it be rolled out across the country?

Moira Niven: Many authorities have reviewed and developed their levels of consultation and involvement.

I read what some of the other submissions said about issues such as decant, the size of spaces and the type of facilities. We had a consultation strategy as part of our first project, and that has been further developed. A senior liaison officer was based in each of the high schools, with a remit to undertake engagement and discussion with the schools. That has worked well. The implementation of the process has been important. One colleague—he has been a member of our local negotiating committee for teachers, which negotiates with the professional associations—developed a particular practice in his secondary school, which required refurbishment and extension. We thought that his approach was very good and shared it with liaison officers in the other schools.

It is important that the decisions are taken through our committees. Local politicians have been involved in decisions about, for example, whether spaces needed to be bigger, even when the cost was greater, because we thought that that was the best thing to do.

We have also had some interesting consultations with the Lighthouse in Glasgow involving children. That has been a really good experience. The school will be their space, and they have to feel that they have had some input into its design. We have done that for designs for

new community primary schools. I know that many authorities are doing that now because we meet them at sessions in which different authorities participate. The process has moved on—it is certainly more robust now—but we are lucky in that we had a consultation strategy from the beginning.

Aileen Campbell: Is the consultation process affected by the method of procurement? Is damage caused by either PPP or the traditional methods?

Moira Niven: I do not think so, although I am not sure how much consultation we used to do in the past, when we used traditional procurement methods. We have been on a journey. We have a mixed economy, in that we have used both PPP and traditional procurement methods. There is now a greater awareness of the importance of involving stakeholders in general. I am not sure whether consultation was done to any great extent in the past. I can speak only for the period during which I have been involved, but I hear similar stories from colleagues in ADES. The world has moved on and people are more engaged in all these processes. We have a much more open society.

Paul Stallan: This is a question of leadership, regardless of the procurement process. The briefing can be structured in such a way that engagement with the community can take place. We have seen the beginning of that in some PFI/PPP processes. The system is not perfect yet, but it can be if people are willing and have the time.

One of the other major factors that affected quality of outcome was the pressure that local authorities were put under to deliver schools. If an additional six months was built into the process to allow some community buy-in and stakeholder discussions, that paid dividends, in that people felt that they had some relationship with the outcome.

The Convener: Can I clarify that whether or how windows open or close, or whether there is good lighting, is to do with the design specification and not with how the school is paid for?

Paul Stallan: Those issues are to do with design leadership. Design specification is about the process. Building buildings is complicated and it is quite a long journey—it can take up to 18 months or two years to develop a project from a sketch design to handing over the keys to the head teacher at the end. Throughout that process, there are opportunities to save money and change things. You need people who have the right interests. If, without a robust specification, the risk is transferred—even with the best intentions—to a contractor, who is only really incentivised to make money, they will dilute, change and manipulate the design. At the end of the process, what you thought would be a window will not be a window—although it might just be a different kind of window. All those things are potentially up for grabs in the process, so it is about ownership and the right teams delivering those projects, whether they are procured through traditional methods or are PPP projects.

The Convener: The key phrase there was "robust specification". It is not unknown for architects to want to change things. In fact, we know that from our experience of this very building.

Paul Stallan: As regards the teams and practices that we reviewed, the architect and client team are generally incredibly passionate about doing good-quality work. If the process is cut at tender stage, even with the best specification people will no longer have any interest in, ownership of or influence over the project. Ownership is passed across, and during the period between the tender stage and going on site, the specification will change, despite all the drawings and detail being in place. The nature of PFI design and build is that the contractor effectively takes on ownership and risk and builds to his specification, which is similar to, but never really the same as, the original. Therefore, people need to monitor activity and changes all the way through the process.

Jeremy Purvis: Local authorities used to have clerks of works—the term sounds extremely old fashioned. In a modern context, the clerk of works role is taken by a set of individuals at local authority level who are able to be robust with contractors throughout the process, regardless of whether it is a PPP or a traditional build. How good are local authorities at doing that?

I am looking into a situation in which a big chunk of a contract was left out, for which the council now has to pay out a considerable sum. That had nothing to do with the contractor; the situation arose because a piece of paperwork had not been processed by the council. If a clerk of works or team of individuals robustly oversees such a process from beginning to end, there is greater control. I would think that such an approach is fairly traditional in your industry.

Paul Stallan: The evidence of Architecture and Design Scotland is that once ownership passes from the team that has public ownership at heart to another, commercial party, control is lost. Mechanisms that allow control to be maintained under PPP or traditional procurement methods are, on the whole, not applied—for example, an old-fashioned clerk of works is not appointed. We need such mechanisms in the process to maintain integrity.

11:15

Jeremy Purvis: Do only some authorities do that? Where are we throughout Scotland on that? Is the evidence patchy?

Paul Stallan: We are early in the process. The parallels are with the planning system. The issue is cultural and concerns having the skill set—the skills of urban designers, other designers, architects, planners and landscape architects—embedded in the process. A person cannot procure a school just by being an accountant or a surveyor. People who have a balanced view of what to specify are needed.

Our experience is that, in the past 30 years, local authorities have lost all their architectural departments—their city architects and clerks of works—leaving the estates team and planning people. Building up more multidisciplinary teams that have a balanced view of the process would address the situation. We have worked with planning directors throughout Scotland to achieve that blend of skills.

Moira Niven: My authority has a dedicated schools team that comprises architects and others in related professions. We also have a senior technical officer for our two new-build secondary schools. When £60 million of building work is being done for us, we watch it carefully. We meet regularly the company that is building the schools, and the senior technical officer watches the situation like a hawk. We have identified several points that we have brought to the company's attention and which have been dealt with.

Jeremy Purvis: Larger authorities tend to have such capacity, whereas the burden on smaller authorities is increased.

Moira Niven: Indeed.

Jeremy Purvis: With your ADES hat on, will you say what the national position is? Are we 40, 20 or 70 per cent there?

Moira Niven: It is difficult for me to know such detail, given my role in ADES. I know that the colleague whom I mentioned is part of a network group that operates throughout Scotland, so equivalent individuals must exist, but I can speak in detail only about one authority.

Given the scale of investment, it must be watched carefully. I agree with Paul Stallan's comment that it is important for a council to have the full range and depth of experience to call on. My council is fortunate to have that. My authority is not very big, although it is not tiny—we are medium sized.

Rob Gibson: I am still thinking about the effect of funding methods on design. The Holmhills wood community park action group's report of its survey of 30 councils and 268 schools that were built under PPP says that we have lost 320 acres of land because many of those schools were built on greenfield sites and playing fields. What is your experience of that in West Lothian? For example, does a conflict exist between the corporate asset management plan, which requires money, and providing playing fields at new sites?

Moira Niven: We also have building work that is not part of a PPP. As we had already reviewed with sportscotland all the indoor and outdoor sports facilities in West Lothian, we undertook a wider open space and playing field review, after which we built up with sportscotland a model of where we required open space and playing fields.

School refurbishment—which is procured using traditional funding methods—and the PPP project have contributed to ideas about how many playing fields are required, what the changing facilities should be and so on. As a result, we have released some land, but that should be considered as part of the big picture. Also, under the strategic plan, new schools are planned for the core development areas. It is important to consider the big picture, as doing so allows us to make sensible decisions about what to release and what not to release.

Rob Gibson: Has open space for children to play on been lost in your area?

Moira Niven: Sites will be released for development but other sites have been enhanced. Simply having a lot of poor-quality areas, some of which were industrial, is not of any benefit. The quality of play and sports facilities has been greatly enhanced and is, I am sure, contributing to the higher levels of participation in sports that we have witnessed.

Rob Gibson: What is the opinion from a design point of view?

Paul Stallan: The evidence is that a number of schools have been compromised. Schools have to continue operating during the building process, so people have built on playing fields before demolishing the existing school. All sorts of complex health and safety issues arise when a contractor is working on an adjacent site.

At times, we have struggled to recommend a school as good, perhaps because it has had to be built into a corner, or because it has not had the greatest aspect from the main street of the community. Those are issues that authorities struggle with, and a lot of creative estate management is required to overcome the challenges.

Ken Macintosh: In response to the convener's question on how much money is required to continue the investment in the school estate, you

said, Ms Niven, that you did not know exactly, but that it was a large amount and was not available at present—in other words, that there were not sufficient funds.

Moira Niven: That is certainly the position that we have been discussing in ADES.

Ken Macintosh: What impact is that having? Have there been delays in decision making? Have compromises been made as alternative plans are pursued? What is happening in the meantime, until an announcement on additional central funding is made—whatever method of funding is used, and assuming that there will be additional funding?

Moira Niven: Obviously, authorities are using the resources that are available to them. I think that the uplift was £150 million in the three-year settlement. For a medium-sized authority such as ours, that amounts to perhaps £3.5 million. I assume that, in allocating the money, the Government's priorities are no different from ours. We have to ensure that buildings meet all the legislative requirements. All that an authority can do is target resources to the areas of greatest need.

If there is pressure, you can end up adding an extension to a school that it would be better to redevelop. Such situations can occur. In our area, when moneys were coming through, the architects would say, "It would really be better to flatten that and build a new one," but that was not realistic for us, because it was hugely expensive. A balance has to be struck, taking into account the health and safety requirements, the suitability, and the provision of sufficient places, which in some areas is a real pressure.

Ken Macintosh: Is there a sense of anxiety or urgency among colleagues throughout Scotland who are waiting to find out when there will be an announcement on central funding of the continuing school building programme?

Moira Niven: My written submission reflects that when it says that the ADES position is that authorities acknowledge that a lot has been achieved in parts of the school estate but the remainder is still to be done. The authorities would welcome enhanced investment to be able to progress that work.

Ken Macintosh: Last week, we received evidence that suggested that the different funding methods were in danger of producing a two-tier system of school buildings in that, because of contractual obligations, the new PFI buildings were built to and are maintained to a high standard. The City of Edinburgh Council gave evidence that, rather than spending £25 per square metre to maintain its traditional estate, it was spending £9 per square metre and, therefore, the gap between its traditional buildings and new buildings was widening. Are you aware of that? Can we address it?

Paul Stallan: One of the early attractive features of PFI was the fact that the buildings were on hire purchase, as it were, and had a continuing maintenance regime, which obviously was highly attractive to local authorities. The differences in on-going costings for aftercare have not been brought to Architecture and Design Scotland's attention, but we are interested in the matter from a design perspective, in terms of future proofing. However, I am probably not as aware of the situation as Moira Niven, who perhaps is better placed to answer.

Moira Niven: Colleagues have expressed anxiety about that at our ADES meetings. Part of the estate is built and there is a plan to maintain it for an amount of time; the concern is about the extent to which it will be possible to support maintenance on the balance of the estate. My authority has a 10-year plan and a reasonably good level of longer-term investment for the main school estate. The PPP projects have 30 years to run, but the rest of the school estate will continue to be a pressure, which is why it is important that we ensure that we have the right size of school estate in the right place—the right scale for current and anticipated provision—and that we continue to consider rationalisation of school buildings where appropriate. It is therefore important that authorities produce population projections. Our committee is considering that. I noticed that that is also one of the recommendations in the Audit Scotland report. We are organising a seminar for ADES members on how to consider longer-term demand.

The Convener: Two members have indicated that they want to ask quick final questions.

Christina McKelvie: There are statements in the Audit Scotland report about PFI/PPP funding mechanisms squeezing the education budget in other areas. Is that the case and, if so, what other areas are being squeezed?

Moira Niven: I noticed that there was reference to councils not having made provision in their budgets. We have a longer-term financial strategy in place, and the indexation that we are required to apply to it is part of that provision. The difference is that one element of the estate is built in. Financial settlements are tight, which is why we are, for example, examining our energy consumption. As well as being a sustainability issue, making the best use of our resources is a financial issue. It certainly puts pressure on us, but the authority is continually considering how to use its resources most efficiently.

11:30

Mary Mulligan: I misled you into believing that you would be asked about rationalisation, although you started to deal with the issue when you responded to Ken Macintosh.

I invite you to reply to my question with your ADES hat on, as it is clearly not about the situation in West Lothian. Is it the case that, around the country, there are schools that are nowhere near full to capacity? Through rationalisation, could money be freed up to improve the school estate in those areas? Would that provide sufficient funds, even if it were desirable?

Moira Niven: Each authority must look to its own estate. If one reads the information in the statistical bulletin about capacity usage, one will find that there are areas of the country in which there is already spare capacity or in which it is anticipated that spare capacity will emerge. It makes no sense for authorities to support buildings with empty seats.

I know that the Government is undertaking a review of rationalisation, which is welcome, because it is important to debate and discuss how rationalisation takes place. I have mentioned the need to consider wider community provision. We must look at the whole package. How we carry out rationalisation is extremely important, so ADES welcomes the Government's review.

However, it will be important to continue to adjust the school estate, both in areas in which there is growth and in areas in which there is not. If an authority is to facilitate such growth and to accommodate it in revenue and capital terms, it will have to examine provision in the areas in which there is no growth. We must continue to address that issue. From my experience in the days of Lothian Regional Council, I am well aware of how contentious and how difficult it is for everyone who is involved in school provision.

Mary Mulligan: Thank you.

The Convener: That concludes the committee's questions. I thank the witnesses for their attendance. In particular, I thank Moira Niven for so thoughtfully bringing along with her copies of her paper, on which I am sure the committee will reflect.

I suspend the meeting briefly to allow our witnesses to change over.

11:33

Meeting suspended.

11:38

On resuming—

The Convener: I reconvene this meeting of the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee and welcome our second panel of the morning. We are joined by Louise Wilson, the Educational Institute of Scotland's national officer with responsibility for employment relations; Alan Small, the vice-chair of YouthLink Scotland's working group on youth work and schools; John McKnight, the chairperson of community learning and development managers Scotland group; and last but not least, Judith Gillespie, the development manager of the Scottish Parent Teacher Council. I thank you all for attending the committee today and for your written submissions, which we received in advance. Time is moving on, so we will move straight to questions.

Rob Gibson: I will try to be brief. You may all have a view on this, but if you do not that is fair enough. Have ideas of suitability changed significantly over the past 10 years?

Judith Gillespie (Scottish Parent Teacher Council): The length of the contract that locks down PPPs is significant. I can offer two dates that will allow you to appreciate that. The first is that personal computers came into schools around 1984, which is 24 years ago. That period is less than the length of a PPP contract. The personal computers that were introduced in 1984 were Acorn BBC model Bs. The significance of the introduction of computers into schools is that it was expected that they would be in computer laboratories, which would be fixed places where youngsters would go to use the computers. In addition, each computer in those days had its own printer attached. Obviously, people now think of computers in schools as being PCs with wireless connection and of there being only one or two printers. There has therefore been a major concept change over the past 24 years, but the contracts for many schools are locked down for 25 or 30 years. It is interesting to bear that concept shift in mind.

Rob Gibson: Are there any other examples?

Judith Gillespie: Standard grades were introduced in the 1980s, but they are now being considered for removal. That is another measure of change.

Rob Gibson: Would other witnesses like to contribute?

Louise Wilson (Educational Institute of Scotland): There have been curricular changes that affect suitability, such as the curriculum for excellence. However, not much research has been done on what is a good or the best design of school for delivering the curriculum. The EIS is

beginning to look into that. We are in contact with the Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland, and we hope that we can develop our thinking on design suitability. Despite the fact that new school buildings are going up everywhere and that there has been major input to design, suitability has not been a main consideration.

Our members' criteria for suitability are probably the same as they were 50 years ago: good lighting and ventilation, warmth in winter, adequate space and corridors in which people can move around safely. All those aspects make a school building suitable to work in. The aesthetics can be part of suitability, but if we do not get the basics right we will not build schools for the future.

John McKnight (Community Learning and Development Managers Scotland Group): In the 1970s, a number of schools had social and recreational wings built into them, which were termed informal education wings, or IFE wings. They were popular and busy, particularly in the former Strathclyde Region. Those facilities have slowly eroded over the years, and a good number of the buildings that are under construction do not have IFE wings. However, we have an opportunity to change that. I take on board the point that was made about curriculum for excellence in that respect. Certainly, some local authorities have started to introduce facilities that are more community based. It was interesting to hear the ADES representative comment earlier on flexibility in the context of primary schools and local communities. I recommend that the committee consider that type of approach for the future, because schools are part of communities rather than communities being part of schools. It is important that we recognise the opportunities that will arise from current new constructions and from those that will take place over the next five to 10 years.

Rob Gibson: One of my colleagues will talk about community use soon.

Alan Small (YouthLink Scotland): The question of suitability begs the question: Suitability for what? It will be obvious from the paper that I submitted that I regard schools essentially as community facilities. I suppose the question is whether the design of schools has changed over the past 10 years in a way that has made their use as community facilities more or less feasible and likely. My stance is that their design has made it less likely.

Rob Gibson: What in particular has made it less likely?

Alan Small: I concur with John McKnight's earlier point in that respect. We are slightly obsessed with something called schooling, so we do not pay enough attention to something called learning. Your committee is entitled the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee—the title does not refer to schooling and lifelong learning. There is a subtle but fundamental difference between education and schooling.

11:45

Jeremy Purvis: That is tantalising. Why do you think that community use has become less likely? I was going to ask panel members whether they agree with Audit Scotland's finding that users—that includes teachers and learners—are generally satisfied with the schools and new facilities that have been built, although there have been problems, for example to do with environmental matters. Why do you think that the new schools are less suitable for wider use?

Alan Small: During past years, schools have been put under immense pressure by Government to produce the goods, which the Government defines in terms of exam passes. That has made schools turn inwards and focus on essential matters, which Judith Gillespie and Louise Wilson described. I do not at all take issue with those essential matters, but there is a price to be paid for taking such an approach. Society as a whole has focused on schooling and withdrawn from considering lifelong learning.

Jeremy Purvis: What do other panel members think about the suitability of new buildings and the experiences of users?

Louise Wilson: You will have seen the submission from EIS, in which we refer to our paper "EIS Survey of New and Refurbished Schools: Report of Findings", which was published in 2004. It is interesting that the conclusions in the Audit Scotland report reflect issues that our members were reporting four years ago. I take Moira Niven's point about how things have changed because people have learned from experience, but have they learned enough?

My role involves dealing with health and safety for the unions. In my experience, there have been difficulties to do with health and safety in many new builds and in many refurbished schools in particular. When a building is finished it looks bright, shiny and wonderful, but it is unfortunate that that does not always reflect reality. There have often been long snagging lists—as builders call them—of things that need to be put right. However, as you said, there is satisfaction overall. The new school is generally better than the old one, which might have been a rundown Victorian building or a 1970s building that was falling apart at the seams.

The main problems that I have had to deal with have involved failure to comply with building regulations, as happened in Glasgow secondary

schools, where basic problems should have been put right at the start. We have battled for six years to get Glasgow City Council to take the necessary action. There has been dissatisfaction about such issues, but there is satisfaction overall, because provision is better than it was in the past.

John McKnight: Instead of considering user satisfaction, which is generally accepted, we should perhaps be considering non-users in our communities. The committee might want to consider the groups of people who do not feel able to access facilities, for whatever reason.

Jeremy Purvis: I think that another committee member will ask about that, but my question was about users. Do the parent councils have a view?

Judith Gillespie: Parents come into schools, so they are more concerned about access. We hear stories of problems around the country, but there have always been problems with new and refurbished buildings. Pupils are getting facilities that, on the whole, are better than the ones they had in the past.

Jeremy Purvis: I want to ask another question about users, rather than non-users. Have parents, teachers and pupils—I hope that that includes all users in the community—been involved more or less in the design process as it has changed over the past few years? Has there been more input from pupils, staff and the community?

Louise Wilson: I return to the Glasgow example. I am glad that I am not the first person to mention Rosshall academy. If the committee is interested in reading about it, I can make available copies of our journal, the *Scottish Educational Journal*, which gives the background to that PPP project, from which the unions were totally excluded. The door was shut on us. I think that other authorities have learned from that Glasgow example. If teachers, pupils, parents and all those who will use the school are not consulted, the end product will not be what they want. We heard earlier about process. The way in which people perceive a school—how they feel about it—is important in that process, as are the checks for important issues such as classroom size, ventilation, lighting and acoustics.

Judith Gillespie: From parents' point of view, there may be consultation, but it is of the standard kind: we ask you and then we ignore you. Many people feel frustrated when they are asked to comment, make an input and then see no result.

One major issue with PPP contracts in particular is the absolute financial constraints. If there is any upward change in cost, an adjustment has to be made elsewhere. Perhaps having to set a financial limit is an inevitable feature of the process of constructing a public building, but people feel that constraints determine too much of what is done, and that their views are not fed into the system and given sufficient consideration. Certainly, the parents from whom we heard told us that they were not involved. Whether the latest round has been different, I cannot say.

Alan Small: Budget constraints are an issue, although I agree with Judith Gillespie that they are often used as an excuse not to consult. And by consult, I mean consult: there has to be dialogue, not dialogue with the deaf.

John McKnight: Obviously, there have been some good examples of practice and consultation. Equally, some have not been effective. I draw the committee's attention to the national standards for community engagement as a model and template, including in relation to transparency, ownership, feedback and progress. People should refer to them. They allow communities to be fully involved in the process of bringing new facilities on board.

Aileen Campbell: How much consultation goes on after people have moved into a school and things have had the chance to bed in? I am thinking of teachers, users, non-users—whomever.

Louise Wilson: Many secondary schools have health and safety committees. Outstanding issues from the build process, including things that were not done properly or problems that emerge—ventilation, for example—can be processed through those committees. Councils also have health and safety committees to which school committees can refer issues that they want the council to deal with. I do not want to hark back to Glasgow, but we went through such a process there. Ideally, health and safety committees should address any problem that is a health and safety issue.

Schools now work in the spirit of collegiality and are seen as local bargaining units. If a problem is having an impact on education, the school can discuss it at both school and LNCT level. There are avenues for consultation.

As a union, we often do not wait to be consulted: we raise issues and use existing mechanisms to try to get results and to resolve issues that have not been fully dealt with in the design process.

Elizabeth Smith: I turn your attention to community use by current users and users in the future. We heard from the earlier panel that a school's results are likely to be enhanced when there is a sense of ownership—when parents and pupils feel involved in the school and feel that it is theirs. A lot of local authorities believe that the same is true of community involvement. Will you comment on the difficulties that schools, local authorities and communities face in trying to achieve the best education opportunities for pupils and maximum community involvement? Are there

problems? Some people have flagged up pupil safety issues.

Judith Gillespie: There are considerable constraints on outside use of schools. The old-fashioned idea of people owning the school involved, for example, groups of parents going in and painting the school, only to find that it was completely covered with pictures and so on. That does not apply with PPP schools because of the incentive on the consortium to minimise maintenance costs. Basically, things that would increase maintenance are not allowed. There is also a complicated booking system, so getting into the school and using it becomes difficult.

I had a colleague who was part of the PPP in Dunbar, for which the facilities management was in Stirling. When my colleague phoned up and asked about using the school, the person who was doing the booking did not have a clue what the school was like. They did not know how halls connect, the size of the various rooms or where the stairs are. An attempt to organise a let for a normal parents function became extremely complicated and involved much more paperwork than the previous system of sorting it out with the janny and taking out a let with the local authority.

Lets have always been contracts with conditions by which the person who takes out the let has to abide. However, lets were usually designed to make it easy for people to use the school. Organisation of lets remotely through a facilities manager has made the process extremely complicated. If a contract was, in the first place—when the school was built—negotiated to give parents cheap lets for activities, that would keep the price down, but facilities managers often charge considerably more for other community groups.

The other aspect, which is live for me, is that community use of schools is, particularly when pupils are present, becoming much more difficult because of child protection legislation. That is another complication in respect of regarding a school as an open community asset. In the previous generation of building, schools were deliberately designed for community use, particularly in remote areas such as the Western Isles. Often, the local library would be located in the school. My point is not to do with the school building or the management or the finances. That legislation is simply another complication in making schools open places. The impediments to community use are considerable.

Alan Small: One of my first tasks when I joined the inspectorate in the early 1970s was to go to Glasgow and visit two youth clubs that met in secondary schools. I arrived—you will enjoy this—and was met by a chauffeur in full regalia. I got into the car and was driven in splendid style to two schools, where I met the headteacher and the person in charge of the youth club. They walked round all the facilities that were used in the evening and checked the quality of the buildings. At the end of the evening, the youth club leader went round with the janitor and checked to make sure that no damage had been done.

I do not pretend that community use is not complicated. All I will say is that, where there is a will to address the issues, people can make progress. If there is no will to address them, nothing will happen and we will just be faced with impediments and good reasons why the community cannot use the school.

12:00

John McKnight: I agree with the previous comments. It has become more complicated to access schools in the evening and in the daytime. Leaving aside the financial issues, to which I am sure we will come later on, colleagues throughout the country have mentioned the growing complexity for many community groups in trying to speak to the right people. If such groups do not have the confidence and the capacity to make the approaches to facilities management or the relevant people, they find themselves in difficulties and they struggle, particularly with regard to some of the new larger and more complex facilities. To pick up Mr Small's point, one thing leads to another and although they are perhaps not asked to leave the facility, it is made clear that there are difficulties.

We live in a world that has become more complex, and I am not sure that we have the right support in place to enable all community groups to access schools. I am not saying that community groups all have difficulties; some are more than capable of making use of new facilities, but some sectors of our community struggle in the new regimes.

Elizabeth Smith: Given what you have just said, would you consider that some of the hindrances and difficulties that community groups face are more to do with the bureaucracy relating to health and safety regulations, or is there unwillingness to allow schools to be used by the community? Is it a mix of those two things, or is one more dominant?

John McKnight: There is perhaps a culture, as we have said, in which the facilities are managed by separate organisations. Those organisations have a different mindset from the traditional local authority letting office and the officers who may have managed that facility in the past. We are in a different world now, which is why these issues are coming up, leaving aside health and safety and security issues.

Judith Gillespie: A lot of it is to do with whether the original contract was drawn up to allow for community use. I do not know what evidence the City of Edinburgh Council has given, but its first-round contract did not allow for enough time for community use. It has re-examined the contracts to try to expand them, but the real problem is that the original contracts are locked in for 25 years. Adjustment of contracts is an extremely expensive business because the contract is made, and as long as the contractor delivers, one does not have a complaint against them.

One of the problems is that when the contracts first came in, people did not appreciate how restrictive they would be, and how careful they had to be in thinking of possible uses for the school. If one has been negotiating a contract that will hold for 25 or 30 years, it is extraordinarily difficult to anticipate at the start of that period what might be required over the entire time, so that one can build into the contract the level of flexibility that will allow for changes in use.

In my evidence, I gave the example of a school in Fife. It has state-of-the-art playing facilities, but during contract negotiations agreement with the sports council for the facilities to be open and generally available was forgotten. Locking of facilities because they have been forgotten in contract negotiation is a real problem. People have learned the lessons: if they go through the process again they will think it through and include such provisions.

Some schools are still experiencing the result of such failures. Even with better contracts, the complexity of the booking system means that it is very hard for people to understand, so booking takes a lot of determination. For example, parents groups are not used to being asked to carry out risk assessments for coffee evenings, and do not know what to do. That is a serious piece of bureaucracy that makes people decide to hold their meetings in the village hall instead. I know that many groups, such as drama groups, are deciding that it is better not to bother with the school because using it is too difficult. Maybe in a generation it will be better, but a bunch of schools are difficult.

Elizabeth Smith: In schools that are fairly extensively used by the community and where there is a greater uptake by the community of the facilities for extracurricular activities, is there any evidence that the pupils are inspired to take up those activities and that a greater percentage are taking part in the extracurricular dimension?

Judith Gillespie: I have anecdotal evidence about a community primary school in Fife that predates any PFI/PPP and which is active almost 24/7. It was built as a community school and it is constantly active. I went to a meeting there—the buzz is just fantastic and there are people coming and going for all kinds of activities.

Elizabeth Smith: Are the pupils coming and going all the time?

Judith Gillespie: Yes, there are children—who, I assume, are pupils—as well as adults.

Alan Small: I point the committee in the direction of Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education inspection reports, which flag up good practice in this matter.

Elizabeth Smith: I want to come back to the point that I am not aware of statistics that prove whether the existence of extracurricular activities—in a broad sense—in a school is due to good leadership in that school or whether it is a spin-off of community involvement in the school, whereby the pupils are aware that the activities are something to do in that community. Do you have any evidence of that, anecdotal or otherwise?

Alan Small: Based on experience, I think that a lot comes down to the quality of the headteacher's leadership. The temptation is to say, "I, me, my and mine," but I think that that is short-termist. It is in the interests of a school to develop, build, forge and nurture good relationships with the community in which it is set. As I say in my written submission, schools and their communities is a very different concept from communities and their schools.

Elizabeth Smith: One of the positive things behind the curriculum for excellence is the fact that it recognises that difference. If schools are going to be very much part of their communities and the communities are going to be part of their schools, if you like, it is essential that we get right the community aspect of development of new builds. As you say, that is an important part of the education process. I am anxious to know whether the issue is to do with better facilities being built in the future or whether it is about better use being made of existing facilities, which is something to which Mr McKnight referred earlier.

Mary Mulligan: I have a brief supplementary question on that point. You have given examples of what can be described only as bad practice, which lets down not just the pupils but the communities around the schools. I hope that you accept that I could give you examples of good practice even from the beginning of the improvements and new builds that have been going on. I am not sure what makes the difference. Is there some action that we could recommend, which would mean that the good practice that exists around Scotland would be followed to ensure community involvement in the design process? The practice of a person in Dunbar having to phone someone in Stirling about using

their local school seems ridiculous. How can we get away from that and prevent it from happening in the future? Our schools should be central to what is going on in their communities.

Judith Gillespie: The contract comes from a particular funding system. When traditional procurement is used, there is no on-going maintenance contract. Maintenance contracts often bring restrictions.

I am well aware of the different aspects of a school's development. There is the build bit, which is about design—we get good design and bad design with both PPP and normal procurement. Then, there is the maintenance part. From the users' point of view, the difficulty has come from the contract for maintenance and the people who negotiated the contract not being wise enough to anticipate change. I would have thought that, if an authority continued with the contracts system, it would be essential to have a break every five years to review whether there had been any changes. At such five-yearly reviews, people could consider whether there was anything coming over the horizon that would necessitate a change in the contract for the next five years before it was locked down again. That is a major issue. The City of Edinburgh Council has learnt that it did not negotiate enough community use in its early contracts, but there is no opportunity to say, "We made a mistake—can we please change the contracts?" or, "Well, the contracts will be open to review in five years—we can make adjustments then."

The system of contracts for maintenance brings with it the guarantee that schools will not deteriorate as they used to because councils tended to save money by not maintaining buildings, which was done using emergency funding. However, if we continue with that system, we must build in flexibility. I mentioned the shifts in the use of computers. Periodic review is required not only in relation to community use; a similar process is required for use of rooms and other facilities in schools. Thirty years is too long a time to plan for, because education changes. The need for features such as wide corridors and good ventilation will not change, but the here-and-now requirements in education change a lot. We need a process of review of schools and how they are used.

John McKnight: We have opportunities to build on good practice. We have the rephrased or revamped the "How good is our school?" inspection framework, which places a much greater onus on headteachers and schools to be active in communities. In my authority, I see early evidence that headteachers are becoming much more active in local community activity and want to engage in local community planning structures and in neighbourhood and locality planning. That seems to be a first step in the right direction. We should build on the good practice that undoubtedly exists and share it with authorities and colleagues that are still struggling to make progress. I would underpin all that work with the national standards for community engagement.

Mary Mulligan: My frustration comes from knowing that it can be done—I have seen schools in which there is community involvement that did not exist prior to improvements. However, the frustration is that, as Mrs Gillespie said, some schools are tied into contracts that will not allow community involvement for some time. I suspect that Mrs Gillespie's suggestion of having a break for review would have been helpful. We should consider such a provision for the future.

Aileen Campbell: How damaging have some contracts been to communities and what were the community reactions when people found out that they could not use a facility that they had been told about?

Judith Gillespie: Many small community groups have moved away from schools because they have not been able to use them, which is a great shame. However, the situation varies in that even though there has been a massive increase in the number of school builds—we have had about 200 in recent years—there are about 2,500 schools throughout Scotland, so many schools are not restricted in any way. Some groups have had to move from one school to another, but if the first school had new facilities, that is a real problem. Many new schools have good theatre facilities, but if local drama groups find them too expensive, they must go back to using the village hall, which is a great shame. The activities have not necessarily ceased; the issue is that groups have not been able to take advantage of good facilities because they are excluded because of restrictions, cost or some other matter.

Alan Small: The infrastructure between school and community is subtle and fragile. I have concerns about the message that is sent out to local voluntary community groups if they learn that their needs were not taken into account at the design stage and if the pricing policy is such that they cannot afford to rent facilities in their community. That sends out entirely the wrong message to local adults, who often give up their time voluntarily to work with the community and the community's children.

12:15

Jeremy Purvis: On maintenance, I acknowledge all the issues in respect of cost and facilities. In the five years since I was elected, I have come to see that policy change in a local

authority can radically affect whether facilities are used. A local authority in my area has just radically changed the pricing structure of community assets, including schools irrespective of the funding mechanism that was used.

I am interested in where the balance lies for users. Mrs Gillespie highlighted the complexities and restrictions of the contract. That is a fair point, but it was not balanced with mention of the fact that the assets will be properly maintained. You highlighted areas in which councils try to save money: they do not replace a carpet this year, but will try to do it next year; they do not paint the windows this year. We all know that one of the reasons why we must renew the estate is that there have been shavings off the investment in many buildings. That tends not to happen in a contract in which maintenance has been agreed for 25 years. In such contracts, the council has negotiated an asset that will return to the public purse. I did not get that balance from your evidence. Is that a consideration? Will the schools be assets that are well maintained for the pupils?

Judith Gillespie: With PPP, the question is whether maintaining schools in a fixed state has disadvantages because you are locked in or whether it delivers good-quality provision. There are aspects that are a serious drawback in many schools, such as the inability to put posters up on school walls. Non-PPP schools, particularly primary schools, are a riot of displays. That is an important educational aspect for the youngsters.

Jeremy Purvis: We all know that some of those posters are hiding the cracks in the walls.

Judith Gillespie: I am well aware of that. My children were at school during what was probably the worst period of school maintenance, but the teachers created an environment that was fantastic for the kids. Yes, you lose the cracks with PPP, but you also lose that exciting environment. I agree that there is a balance. The idea of locking in maintenance is not inherently evil, which is why I suggested building breaks into contracts so that constraints that cause problems can be got rid of. When the PPP process was introduced, people had no experience of it and no one knew what they should build into contracts and think about. We are now at a different stage—we have learned from previous mistakes and from good practice. I take the point that there are many schools that do really good work. In moving forward, we need to be objective. Rather than being locked into thinking, "This is right and that's wrong", we should consider the good in everything, and deliver for the school, the pupils and the community.

Jeremy Purvis: There are two renegotiating elements built into the contract of the three high schools that are being built in the Borders through PPP.

Ken Macintosh: I acknowledge the comments about the difficulties with some of the new builds but, like my colleagues, I am aware of the community enhancement that those new builds have provided. When I drive past Williamwood high school in my area in the evening I am always amazed at how many cars are there. The lack of sports facilities in my area has been addressed by those new schools—huge advantage has been taken of them. I am not aware of any community that is against new schools—far from it. They are all desperate to get their new school. Some have got theirs and some have not. The ones that have not had an upgrade, a refurbishment or a new school are desperate to get a new school, hopefully with none of the mistakes that were made previously and with the new five-yearly break built into the contract.

Do you get that impression? At the moment, there seems to be an impasse, in that whatever funding mechanism the Government ends up using, the money is not forthcoming at the moment. I get the impression that communities are getting more and more frustrated. Children are at school for relatively few years and it takes so long to build a school that communities can see that the current generation of children will go all the way through school without getting a new facility. Is that your perception, too?

Judith Gillespie: Totally. Parents whose children are not at a new school are desperate for one.

The school that I know particularly well, which is Boroughmuir high school in Edinburgh, was built in 1911 and is one of the original secondary schools built as a result of the success of the Education (Scotland) Act 1872. The situation there is so bad that a parent—who, thank goodness, happens to be an extremely capable, prize-winning architect—has come up with amazing and innovative plans to redevelop the school, which is a listed building. However, there is no money to take advantage of his amazing design work, which is being given as a present to the local authority. The parents in the school are extremely frustrated. I have heard that people with children at Madras college in Fife are equally desperate for a new school.

People do not want the process of building new schools to stop; they want it to be improved so that there are no problems.

Christina McKelvie: Do you believe that PPP/PFI schemes provide value for money?

Louise Wilson: The view of the EIS is that such schemes have not provided value for money. Our position is that other procurement systems should be considered. However, there have been differences in the way in which individual PPP or PFI schemes have worked out; our position might

have been coloured by the initial project in Glasgow.

Judith Gillespie: PFI is an extremely strange creature. I was involved with the first Audit Scotland report on the subject, which was a wonderful learning experience. I was staggered to learn that, at the end of the day, all the money comes out of the public purse, because the money that is raised by the consortia is repaid through borrowing and the maintenance contract is largely paid for out of council funding.

I understand that there will always be profit involved in building a school, because the builder will make the profit that a contractor usually makes, but it is extraordinarily strange that we are confronted with the myth that PFI somehow brings in private money. Given that, at the end of the day, the money comes from the public purse, I have long been puzzled about why the system could not have involved normal public procurement—either way, the Government pays.

Alan Small: I am not representing any organisation but, for what it is worth, my view is that there is a public perception that PPP/PFI schemes do not provide good value for money. As the story unravels, that view is reinforced.

The Convener: Does the panel have any views about what local authority representatives told the committee last week, which was that prudential borrowing would not enable the 32 local authorities—particularly the local authorities that were represented here last week—to refurbish or rebuild their school estate in order to bring it up to an acceptable standard? If what we were told is true, do you think that it is acceptable that we face a situation in which our school estate continues to deteriorate?

Louise Wilson: Obviously, we cannot accept a situation in which the school estate deteriorates. We should be building on the good things that have been done in the past two years. I do not have the evidence to make a judgment on what local authorities have said about the mechanism for funding the refurbishment or rebuilding of schools. Their representatives gave evidence to the committee and members will judge whether their assumptions were accurate. The EIS hopes that funds will be available to provide the necessary schools. As Judith Gillespie said, there are communities that are desperate for schools and there are teachers and pupils who are desperate for repairs to be carried out and for schools to be brought up to a decent standard. Children in Scotland deserve schools that meet such standards.

Judith Gillespie: I have always been puzzled about why, for a long time, people were told that PFI was the only game in town. At the end of the day, the Government pays, so I do not see why it cannot provide such loans, but I am not an expert. However, there is certainly a huge demand for new schools. If the building programme were suddenly to stop, people would feel extremely disappointed.

The Convener: I think that the technical reason for that is that the financing of PFI projects does not have to appear under the public sector borrowing requirement, but we might not want to get into such a technical argument.

Alan Small: In the 1970s and 80s, I was lucky to work with Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education in the Shetland Islands, where the most fantastic schools, which were a joy and a delight to be in, were being built. Simultaneously, I spent a lot of time working in Glasgow. I often came out of schools wondering whether I would want to work in them, never mind let my children be educated in them. I know that that situation is being addressed; I am just saying that there is an extraordinary and quite unacceptable gulf between the schools in Shetland and some of the schools on mainland Scotland.

The Convener: Equally, some fantastic schools have been built in North Lanarkshire under PPP. I would defy anyone to build a better high school than Airdrie academy, but that is a personal view.

Mary Mulligan: For many people, school closures are one of the most distressing times that they experience. The process of school closures is often referred to as rationalisation; indeed, I think that I used the term "rationalisation" in discussion with the previous panel.

Given that we have schools with low occupancy rates and that we are struggling to meet the demand to maintain the school estate, how do we achieve the right balance between rationalisation and maintaining a good standard of schools for our children and teachers?

Judith Gillespie: Rationalisation has worked more easily when people have been promised something that was much better than what they had. Successful local authorities have bought out opposition by promising people nice new schools, the building of which has often meant rationalisation, amalgamation and merger. Without that incentive, people will be extremely defensive.

Given that the population has changed a great deal, it is totally reasonable for adjustments to be made to the school estate. Moira Niven made the point that, although the population of an area might be expanding overall, the population of part of that area might be in decline. If many of the schools in that part of the area were half empty, the local authority would have to make an adjustment if it wanted to provide new schools in the rest of the area.

I think that North Lanarkshire Council had to move schools in Cumbernauld across the road. Some of the mergers that happened there, which involved combining denominational and non-denominational schools, are now held up as examples of good practice, but I remember the process of those mergers as being extremely painful—the two parent groups took a long time to adjust and to see the benefits of the proposal.

Rationalisation is a painful process, but if we take stock a few years down the line, we sometimes realise that it was worth it. Rationalisation is nearly always made much easier if an authority can offer people something that is better than what they already have. A new school is often the carrot, particularly if it will have state-of-the-art sports facilities, which old schools do not have. Basically, people have to be bought out.

Louise Wilson: It is not just a question of buying people out; they need to be involved in the process. Consultation is essential. The idea of closing a school always meets with opposition initially, but it is necessary to look to the future and to think about what the change would mean for pupils and staff. There are things that local authorities can do. They can plan. They can consider birth rates, how many people are coming through, immigration and the distribution of people and populations. Political decisions will also make an impact. We are not dealing with class sizes today, but decisions on class sizes that may be taken in the future will have an impact on schools.

John McKnight: I reaffirm that the process of engaging communities in rationalisation—or whatever term we want to use—and the time that is taken to prepare for that process are critical. The officers who are involved in it should be thoroughly prepared and briefed on the job ahead, and they should follow the principles of sound community engagement. If we work our way through things with people rather than against them, we will achieve a joint end result. That is the critical point.

Louise Wilson: From my experience of local government, there seems to be a lot of good practice in many areas in how school-building processes are handled, but it seems that that good practice is not always shared effectively. Perhaps COSLA's role in leading and gathering best practice could be considered. Its involvement in bringing together and distributing good practice seems to be lacking in some areas—in health and safety, for example. Perhaps that is another field in which that central organisation could be more involved.

The Convener: That concludes the committee's questions. I thank the witnesses for attending the meeting and for the written briefings that they supplied in advance of it. There will be a brief suspension to allow them to leave.

12:31

Meeting suspended.

12:33

On resuming—

Panjabi Language Examination

The Convener: Agenda item 2 is on the provision of a Panjabi language examination in Scottish schools. The committee received a letter on the matter from the Guru Nanak Sikh Temple in Glasgow.

Members have in front of them a paper that the clerks prepared. You will remember that at an earlier committee meeting we agreed to write to the Scottish Qualifications Authority to seek its comments. We have now received a response and I am keen to learn what members' view are on how we should progress the matter.

Mary Mulligan: The clerk's briefing paper states:

"The costs of running the examinations are significant".

How much are they, and did Glasgow City Council pay for them?

The Convener: No. The Scottish Executive did so. It made the awards.

Mary Mulligan: So the costs were covered by the three-year funding that was available. How much was that?

The Convener: It was £75,000 over three years. The clerks are not entirely sure whether the Scottish Executive paid the whole amount or whether Glasgow City Council provided part funding.

Mary Mulligan: Thank you.

Christina McKelvie: The SQA's response refers to

"the possible inclusion of Panjabi and other ethnic minority languages within the SQA diet"

and says that it is reviewing that possibility. The SQA expects to complete the review by the end of June, but do we have any hint as to whether it will include Panjabi in the diet?

The Convener: The issue is that the SQA is not going to do it, which is why the Sikh temple is exercised. Panjabi may well be included in future diets, but there will certainly be a gap when students will not be able to get qualifications for a period. It may take one or two years for the SQA to address the matter.

Jeremy Purvis: We have to strike a balance between what is a policy issue and what is generally an issue for the local MSP or MSPs to take up with the minister directly, as to whether the Government would provide gap funding. The SQA response is encouraging about the provision of Panjabi for future years—the convener is correct about that—but Shawlands is concerned about the coming academic year. I do not think that the committee should go down the route of making funding requests of the Government, but if we wish to take the matter further it is open to us to ask the minister about the Government's position. I do not know what constituency Shawlands academy is in, or whether the local MSPs have been engaged with the Government. It is a difficult issue. I am sure that schools in my constituency would write to the committee if they knew that it was able to take up an issue. Notwithstanding the policy and the national significance of this case, it is a difficult one to balance. I would certainly be happy if the committee wrote to the minister asking what the Government policy is. Given the fact that the examination was previously funded by the Government, it was considered at one time that funding was merited. We can find out what is the position of the new Government.

Rob Gibson: We could explore this a bit further by informing the Sikh temple of the response and also by asking the SQA to tell us about the outcomes of its review in June.

Mary Mulligan: On Jeremy Purvis's point about allowing the local MSP to take up the matter, I wonder if the young people come from a wider area than the Shawlands catchment area and therefore that more than one MSP may be involved.

The SQA response says that there has been a low take-up of the units that it provides. I suspect that that is probably because people were doing the other exam and therefore did not need to take an additional unit. I wonder whether we will now see a corresponding increase in the take-up of the SQA units. Perhaps that is one way to address the matter. Clearly, there has been a recognition that the exam is of value. I wonder why the SQA is not looking to develop provision more quickly than it suggests in its response.

I agree with Jeremy Purvis's suggestion that we should write to the minister and ask what is her intention regarding the matter. We should also do what Rob Gibson suggested, and ask the SQA to come back to us after June to let us know the results of its review.

The Convener: There seems to be consensus around the action that the committee will take. The first suggestion is that we write to the minister and ask for her views on the matter. We will also write to the SQA and ask it to give us an indication of its findings once its review has concluded in June. In addition, we will ask the SQA why it is unlikely that the qualification diet will consider this matter earlier rather than later. We will write to the Sikh temple informing it of the action of the committee but also to encourage it to contact the MSPs of the

young people who are engaged in this educational endeavour at the temple.

That concludes this meeting of the committee.

Meeting closed at 12:40.

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