

EDUCATION, LIFELONG LEARNING AND CULTURE COMMITTEE

Wednesday 12 November 2008

Session 3

£5.00

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EDUCATION, LIFELONG LEARNING AND CULTURE COMMITTEE 27th Meeting 2008, Session 3

CONVENER

*Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

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

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

Ted Brocklebank (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Bill Kidd (Glasgow) (SNP)
Hugh O'Donnell (Central Scotland) (LD)
Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING GAVE EVIDENCE:

Robin Gourlay (East Ayrshire Council)
Albert Henderson (Inverclyde Council)
Lynn Mirley (Scottish Borders Council)
Councillor Kirsty West (Aberdeen City Council)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Eugene Windsor

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Nick Hawthorne

ASSISTANT CLERK

Andrew Proudfoot

LOCATION

Committee Room 5

Scottish Parliament

Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee

Wednesday 12 November 2008

[THE CONVENER opened the meeting at 10:01]

Subordinate Legislation

Provision of School Lunches (Disapplication of the Requirement to Charge) (Scotland) Order 2008 (Draft)

The Convener (Karen Whitefield): Good morning. I open the 27th meeting of the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee in 2008. I remind all those present that mobile phones and BlackBerrys should be switched off for the duration of the meeting.

The first item on the agenda is consideration of subordinate legislation relating to the provision of free school meals. This is the third of the committee's oral evidence-taking sessions on the draft Provision of School Lunches (Disapplication of the Requirement to Charge) (Scotland) Order 2008. It is my pleasure to welcome Councillor Kirsty West, the lead councillor for education with Aberdeen City Council; Robin Gourlay, head of facilities management at East Ayrshire Council; Albert Henderson, head of schools at Inverclyde Council; and Lynn Mirley, head of business services at Scottish Borders Council. Thank you for attending the committee and agreeing to give oral evidence. Thank you also for your written evidence to the committee in advance of your appearance here today.

We will move straight to questions. I will start by asking about finance. How local authorities will be able to afford to pay for the extension of free school meals to primary 1, 2 and 3 children has been a vexed question. Free school meal provision will actually be extended in August next year, when those children whose families are in receipt of working tax credit will qualify for free school meals. Are your local authorities budgeting for that? Have they anticipated the additional costs?

Lynn Mirley (Scottish Borders Council): Scottish Borders Council has started to consider the amount of money that is available to cover free school meal eligibility under the settlement, including the amount for the following year. There is not full clarity about the extent to which eligibility will shift upwards. We need to work out exactly how many extra pupils will be eligible.

We have proceeded on the basis that we will get about 2 per cent of the annual settlement to local authorities, as is normal, which for us would mean about £400,000. We believe that about 1,600 extra children, from primary 1 through to the end of secondary school, will be eligible for free school meals. However, a household can only earn up to approximately £32,000 to be eligible for the educational maintenance allowance. That is about the top end of eligibility for the working tax credit. About 25 per cent of our secondary 5 and 6 pupils are eligible for EMAs, so we probably have more than the 1,600 for which we have worked out financing. There is a lack of clarity around exact eligibility at the moment, which means that we must work on the premise that the eligibility criterion is not yet finalised—I understand that it will not be finalised fully until February. Therefore, in our estimates for next year, we have allocated £400,000 under the current process.

Councillor Kirsty West (Aberdeen City Council): We have not gone through our budget process for next year yet. Subject to successful passage of the legislation, Aberdeen City Council will be extending free school meal entitlement to all primary and secondary school pupils and families in receipt of the maximum child tax credit and working tax credit from August 2009.

The Convener: Councillor West, I am not sure whether you know that the changes that will be introduced in August will not need legislation. The legislation that the Government has proposed that we are considering today will apply only to primary 1 to 3 children and not beyond.

Albert Henderson (Inverclyde Council): We are currently in the middle of our budget process. As you know, Inverclyde Council was not part of the pilot, but we have considered our position in respect of P1 to P3 pupils.

The council welcomed the removal of ring fencing and having the ability to control efficiencies and redirect money through the single outcome agreement. Our difficulty is that our education budget does not have any uncommitted money at the moment. For us to redirect cash, we will have to realign the education budgets, which will lead to pressures in other areas, which we have highlighted in our written submission.

From the pilot, it seems that we will be looking at an estimated 75 per cent increase in the number of P1 to P3 pupils who receive free school meals, which will require an additional £189,000. We will also see a loss in income of £179,000. That is a total loss of £368,000 for P1 to P3. However, obviously the council will fulfil any statutory requirement on free school meal entitlement for P1 to P3.

Robin Gourlay (East Ayrshire Council): My answer is straightforward. East Ayrshire Council has considered the extension to those in receipt of tax credit, which will allow more children to qualify for free school meals. That will be built into the budget exercise. Likewise, we are familiar with the costs that might arise from the extension of free school meals to children in primary 1 to 3.

The Convener: I have a question specifically for Councillor West. You said that Aberdeen City Council would implement the concordat agreement, but your written submission to the committee says that the council would prefer to offer breakfasts through a network of breakfast clubs. Is the council's policy to offer breakfast as the free meal, or will it offer a meal in the middle of the day?

Councillor West: The council would ideally like to provide a free school breakfast and lunch. For that, we would like to use funding from the Scottish Government, private enterprise and the council itself.

The Convener: Are you confident that the council will have sufficient money to do both?

Councillor West: Yes.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): It is interesting that some of the submissions appear to be diametrically opposed to the others. For example, East Ayrshire Council welcomes the proposals and

"believes that it would be a welcome opportunity to ensure that younger pupils have an increased awareness of foodstuff".

It goes on to say that

"the pilot exercise ... delivered very positive results in terms of pupil uptake"

and

"This also resulted in improved eating habits as younger pupils are encouraged and assisted by their older peers and were taught the ... correct use of cutlery. Overall, pupils had a positive dining experience, sitting with their friends and interacting in a positive environment that promoted good eating habits."

On the other hand, I have to say that Inverclyde Council's assessment is more doom and gloom. Its submission talks about "tokenism" and having to make "significant savings" to implement the policy. It also says:

"On a further point of policy, given the paucity of resources in the future the Council is not best convinced that the way to deal with limited resources is to allocate free school meals".

My understanding is that, through the concordat, the Scottish Government made resources available to the tune of £460,000. The council's calculations suggest that it would cost £368,000 excluding additional staff or equipment costs to

implement the policy. Albert Henderson said that the council's budget was fully committed, but the policy was in the concordat, so did the council not prepare for it and put resources away so that it could implement free school meals?

Albert Henderson: As I said earlier, we were not involved in the pilot but I read the evaluation. The council was pleased to see positive outcomes on uptake. I am sorry if our submission came across as doom and gloom, because it was not intended to be like that. Before I respond in detail, I reaffirm our commitment to implementing the policy, particularly if it is to be a legislative requirement on the council.

As I said, we have no uncommitted money. Reading the other submissions, I see that we are not alone in feeling the effects of the unforeseen change in the economic climate. Our gas, electricity and oil costs have increased, and we have increased the money for oil in the education budget by about £250,000 and expect to pay that amount. If you add to that the salary increases and budgetary impact of single status, you can see that the economic context is different from when the concordat was first drawn up, so any money that we had put aside for free school meals is going to deal with other pressures. The council is looking at a funding gap of £9.5 million over the next two years—I think that that is in the public domain now—approximately £4 million of which will hit the education budget. You can see the pressures that we are under.

You commented that our submission was diametrically opposed to others. Last night, I had a meeting with our leaders forum, which has members of different political views. The council's strong view is that it would welcome universal entitlement to free school meals if the money was available. However, given current finances and the socioeconomic context in Inverclyde—it is the local authority area with the third-highest level of entitlement to free school meals—entitlement must be based on need. That is where our call for a targeted approach came from.

I hope that that covers some of your points.

Kenneth Gibson: I understand your concerns about inflation, but it looks like inflation will decline substantially. I am sure that you accept that the predictions for inflation next August, when the policy must be rolled out, are significantly below the Government's 2 per cent target, so you may be in a much healthier financial position than you currently are with inflation at 5 per cent.

I am concerned about the accuracy of some of the figures in your submission. It says:

"during the three years, the amount of eating in schools will be 570 meals out of a total 3,285 meals. This is less than 6% of the total."

I am not sure what that relates to, because children do not spend 3,285 days in school unless they stay in school for about 17 or 18 years. Moreover, 570 is about 17 per cent of 3,285, not 6 per cent. Perhaps I have got it wrong. Will you explain those figures?

Albert Henderson: You have certainly got it right. My apologies for the arithmetic; the sums were not mine. I think that 17 per cent is the correct figure. The calculation assumes that a child eats three meals a day every day of the year and takes the 190 days a year on which the child will be at school and assumes that they will eat one meal a day—the lunch-time meal—there. That accounts for the difference. The percentage is 17 per cent; 6 per cent is not accurate.

Kenneth Gibson: Aye. So you do not think that it is tokenism, then.

Albert Henderson: No, I do not.

10:15

Kenneth Gibson: Okay—that is fine.

Your submission says:

“The Council will have to find significant savings in the next two years and Education will be responsible for 2/3rds of these savings.”

However, you have just said that the amount for which education will be responsible will be £4 million out of £9.5 million, which is slightly over 40 per cent, so surely education services will not have to achieve two thirds of the savings.

Albert Henderson: A rough calculation is that we would be expected to find £4 million out of the £9.5 million.

Kenneth Gibson: Why is the education budget taking such a big savings hit? Is it because it forms a large proportion of the budget?

Albert Henderson: It is because of the proportion of Inverclyde Council's budget that education forms.

Elizabeth Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Councillor West, will you clarify an answer that you gave the convener? Are you saying that, in an ideal world, Aberdeen City Council would like to extend its breakfast provision, which involves 29 breakfast clubs, as well as provide free school meals for all primary 1 to 3 children?

Councillor West: Yes. Aberdeen City Council provides 29 breakfast clubs for 885 pupils. Ideally, we would like to provide free school breakfasts and free school lunches. I stress that we would use funding from the Government, private enterprise and the council.

Elizabeth Smith: I will pursue private enterprise involvement in a minute.

The summary in your submission says:

“Aberdeen City Council remains unconvinced that the introduction of free lunches to all Primary 1-3 children adds public value or improves the outcomes for children.”

That does not sit well with what you said about free provision across the board.

Councillor West: The submission contains officer recommendations and is an officer report. I am here to present the council's policy position.

Do you mind if I give a wee anecdote? At one point, every schoolchild received free school milk, but that was phased out. I know somebody who was then the only child in his school who did not receive free school milk in primary 3. He used to take milk to school so that he could be the same as everybody else. If provision is targeted, it will create inequalities among groups of children. The added bureaucracy of implementing a two-tier approach to free school meals will be costly and undesirable.

Elizabeth Smith: I appreciate your anecdote, which I am sure is true for many individuals. However, I am trying to get at Aberdeen City Council's policy. You say that, in an ideal world, you would like to extend the provision of breakfast and lunch, but the council also says that it is not convinced of the merits of that. Given that budgets are extremely tight, as we have heard from Inverclyde Council, are you convinced that that policy strategy helps the children who are most in need?

Councillor West: As I said, the submission is an officer report. I am here to present the policy position.

Elizabeth Smith: I am asking you as the leader with responsibility for education whether you are convinced that the strategy is right.

Councillor West: I am convinced that targeting will create inequalities among groups of children. That would not be fair. The approach must be across the board.

Elizabeth Smith: How will you finance that?

Councillor West: It is difficult for me to project the budget in 2010-11, when most of the costs will kick in, but the council has worked hard to stabilise the budget and I am convinced that it will be back on a firm financial footing following the next budget round. Council officers are factoring free school meals into the projections for the 2010-11 budget.

Elizabeth Smith: How does private enterprise fit into that?

Councillor West: Involving private enterprise is an option that we would really like to consider, particularly in relation to breakfasts.

Elizabeth Smith: How would that work?

Councillor West: The arrangement has worked in other local authority areas where private enterprise has been involved. At the moment, that is an idea—it is not fully worked up. Once it is fully worked up, I will be more than happy to provide the committee with details.

Elizabeth Smith: The point is important, because we are near decision time on the matter. As I said, budgets are incredibly tight. Parents are waiting to find out some of the answers. I do not disagree with the principle of involving private enterprise, but we must be firm about the amount of money that will be available. We have set resources. The council has projected the number of children who will be involved. There is—dare I say it?—a moral responsibility to say a bit more about how any such provision would work. That is an important theme. With an extremely tight budget, as I said, the council faces an ethical dilemma about whether to proceed with the policy on a universal basis or whether it would be better to target the children who are most in need.

Councillor West: On your first point, on involving private enterprise, once we have the detail I will be more than happy to provide it to the committee, as I said, but I do not have it at present. On your point about whether the provision should be universal or targeted, I feel that targeting would create inequalities. Aberdeen City Council will continue to communicate with the Government and will abide by its decisions on the proposals.

Elizabeth Smith: I have a final question for all the witnesses. Last week, we took evidence from representatives of Barnardo's and the Aberlour Child Care Trust, both of whom said that the work on healthy diets and eating should perhaps be focused on younger age groups. By the time the primary 1 to 3 policy starts, there is already an issue. Has that issue with the younger generation been aired in council policy discussions?

Albert Henderson: The agenda on healthy diets and health-promoting educational establishments is at the heart of all our education provision in Inverclyde Council. Youngsters are provided with healthy meals at the early years stage. There is a big commitment to the socialisation aspects and everything around that. That is Inverclyde's policy approach.

Robin Gourlay: Children in nurseries in East Ayrshire are provided with meals as required. In the primary 1 to 3 pilot, I saw a huge improvement in children's attitudes towards the social aspects of food, as well as the nutritional aspects. They were

willing to try a much wider range of food. Therefore, the focus on primary 1 to 3 is the right approach.

Lynn Mirley: In the Scottish Borders, most of the nurseries in which children get meals are in the private or voluntary sector. Although our work through the child care strategy promotes healthy eating, we are not in control as fully as we are of the school meals agenda. The local authority nurseries provide healthy snacks, but not meals, although, through wraparound care, children can access school meals. I reiterate the view from East Ayrshire. We saw a definite benefit in the Borders, especially if children sat together, irrespective of their meal choices. They took the opportunity to try different things, which is definitely a big benefit for that younger age group.

The Convener: Several members want to ask questions and I have them all on a list. However, before we move on, it would be helpful for the committee to have clarity on the written evidence that Aberdeen City Council submitted. Councillor West, who chairs your community planning partnership?

Councillor West: The community planning partnership is chaired by Councillor John Stewart.

The Convener: Right. Are there members of the council on your community planning partnership?

Councillor West: There are.

The Convener: If that is the case, and given that the final paragraph of your written submission states that it gives the view of

"Aberdeen City Council and its Community Planning Partners",

that suggests that there must have been political input into the writing of the paper. Why are you now telling us that a policy of Aberdeen City Council is different from what the submission states? If the policy is different, is it normal practice for Aberdeen City Council to allow its community planning partners and officers to speak on its behalf without its councillors having a say? Your council official who is here might help you out with that.

Councillor West: I apologise for the lack of clarity of that sentence. When it talks about community planning partners, it is referring to discussions that council officers had with national health service officials, rather than with the community planning partnership. The sentence is not very clear, so I apologise for that.

The Convener: It does not really matter whom you consulted. The question is: is it common practice in Aberdeen City Council for officials to take part in consultations and make policy submissions on behalf of the council that are not

signed off by elected members? That is what you are suggesting, Councillor West—that your policy aspirations are at odds with what is stated in the submission. If so, why did Aberdeen City Council not write to the committee to say that it disagreed with the officers' submission and that the views were those of officers?

Councillor West: My apologies for that. As we were given the opportunity to give oral evidence, I did not think to write in and clarify the point. In hindsight, I should have.

The Convener: So the submission gives the views of officials, and at no point were the councillors of Aberdeen City Council asked to input to it.

Councillor West: The report was produced by officials, and it does not detail the policy.

The Convener: Did it go before the council's education committee before it was sent to this committee?

Councillor West: No, it did not. There was a tight timescale for submitting the report.

Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD): I do not want to labour the point, but I must say that I am left with a lack of clarity on your policy. We have to take what we are given: we ask for written submissions; we are given them; and we have to accept their provenance and that they explain the position.

The report says that the council

"remains unconvinced that the introduction of free lunches ... adds public value or improves the outcomes for children"

and that it believes that the breakfast club route would be more effective. That is an interesting argument that I would like you to expand on. What research have you done in Aberdeen on the effectiveness of the breakfast clubs that has led you to believe that their use is preferable to the extension of free school lunches?

I want also to return to the question of clarity. I want to nail this down: are you saying that Aberdeen City Council will provide free school meals and breakfast clubs universally and without targeting? Given your comments about the iniquitous nature of targeting and given that you said that you will provide not only breakfast clubs but free school meals, will you give us clarity on the age range and any targeting involved in either provision? We want to be absolutely clear.

Councillor West: The commitment to provide free school meals for pupils in P1 to P3 is part of the concordat, and we are committed to fulfilling our concordat obligations. That is the absolute policy from Aberdeen City Council. Ideally, the council would like to provide both a free school breakfast and a free school lunch. We will

continue to communicate with the Government, and we will abide by its decisions on the proposals.

Margaret Smith: You are saying that free school meals for P1 to P3 are in the concordat, so that is a ticked box, but ideally you would also like to provide free school meals and breakfast clubs over and above that. To whom? Would that provision be universal, to pupils in P4 to P7, or targeted in any way? We still do not have clarity from what you have said.

Councillor West: Apologies for that. We will provide free school meals under the concordat and the Government's decisions. We would like to provide free school breakfasts to pupils in P1 to P3. Where that provision would go in future is open ended, but we would like to provide it for P1 to P3.

Margaret Smith: So you are really talking about targeting P1 to P3.

Councillor West: Yes.

10:30

Margaret Smith: That is despite what you said earlier about targeting. It can be argued, as people have said to the committee, and as one of my colleagues mentioned, that the early years are important. Your actions might also be viewed as being discriminatory towards pupils in classes from P4 upwards. The committee is focused on getting a clear steer that you will provide free school meals for P1 to P3, and that you would, in an ideal world in which any funding that you might require would be available, also want breakfast clubs for all P1 to P3 pupils.

Councillor West: That is correct.

Margaret Smith: Could you answer my other question about why you think—or, certainly, why your written submission says—that breakfast clubs might be preferable to free school meals in terms of health and education outcomes? As a committee, we have to make a decision on that.

Councillor West: We ran a pilot on free school breakfasts. The committee should have a copy of the pilot evaluation—if it does not, I can provide you with one. The pilot ran from Easter until summer 2008, which is a fairly short timescale, but there was clear evidence that it produced social and educational benefits for the children who were involved. At the beginning of the pilot, 8 per cent of pupils said that they never ate breakfast, but by the end, that figure had dropped to 1 per cent.

With regard to your point about targeting, if the scheme is targeted at P1 to P3 pupils, every child in those years will get the free meals, so no one child in a class will feel left out. If it was targeted

on another basis, such as some sort of tax issue or income, a small number of children in individual classes might be excluded—or it might be that only a small number of children would be included. Inequalities would therefore be created on that basis.

Margaret Smith: Something that came out in a number of the reports that we received from local councils, and which the Scottish Borders Council representative mentioned in passing, is that the impact on capital budgets will be greater for some councils than for others. It is obvious that the councils that were involved in the pilot had to adapt to changes such as staggered lunch breaks, or children not eating free school meals alongside those who had packed lunches. What will the impact be on your councils' capital budgets, and how can you mitigate that impact?

Lynn Mirley: We spent about £140,000 of our grant for the pilot on equipment such as crockery, tables and chairs—in some cases, we had to buy ovens and dishwashers. We did not use the grant for any major capital projects such as refurbishing dining rooms or adapting spaces. We narrowed the scheme down, partly because it was a pilot and we did not know whether it would continue, and partly because we had a short window in which to implement the pilot, from the time that the schools went back until the end of October.

We did the absolute minimum that we had to do to deliver the capacity increase. That was a significant change for us, as there was a low level of uptake in many of our schools before we started the pilot. In submitting our views about the future, we have assumed that we are not going to change our capital structures, although we acknowledge that changing some of the current formats for producing meals would help us to bring down the on-going costs.

Currently in the Borders, in about a third of primary schools every meal course is produced on site from ingredients. In another third, a frozen meals service is used, but soups and puddings are made in the kitchens. The final third have dining centres, to which meals are delivered from another kitchen, which duplicates work, because someone must be in one place making the food and someone must be in another place serving it.

We know that if we changed some of the models of production, we would reduce the cost of producing food in the kitchens. However, we did not deal with that issue as part of the pilot and we have not included it in our submission. The costs that we incurred were just to do with getting the equipment that we needed to enable us to produce the required volume of meals. Is that helpful?

Margaret Smith: Yes.

Lynn Mirley: We had to do quite a lot to mitigate the impact. We have quite a lot of small halls, and the dining facilities in many of our small schools are used for curricular activities. It was quite a challenge to work with schools to ensure that the space that was available, especially for physical education, did not diminish. The schools rose to the challenge well.

A reason why labour costs were high during the pilot is that we had to provide additional supervision to manage putting people through in chunks, because the whole school could not be served at once. Also, extra supervision was needed because there were more younger children in dining rooms.

In some larger schools, where there are significant capacity issues, we had to split up children and put the ones who brought packed lunches into other parts of the school, which had an impact on socialisation. The researchers from Ipsos MORI Scotland said that it was easier to deal with issues in smaller schools than it was in larger schools, and we also found that it was more difficult in schools that are bursting at the seams, where space is constrained.

Albert Henderson: We were not involved in the pilot, as I said. It is not our intention to invest heavily in a capital programme of canteen refurbishment or extension. I read the submissions from the pilot authorities, and given that West Dunbartonshire Council covers an area that is similar in size to the area that Inverclyde Council covers, and has a similar number of pupils from similar socioeconomic backgrounds, we think that our investment in equipment would be around £35,000, as was the case in West Dunbartonshire. That is a guesstimate, of course.

I conducted a survey of primary headteachers before I came to the committee, and it is interesting that their comments echoed those of the witness from Scottish Borders Council. Of course, the headteachers were talking without having had experience of raising uptake of school meals. Most schools have shortened lunch breaks in an attempt to improve order and discipline, so a number of headteachers are worried about whether they can cope with an increased number of children taking school meals. Capacity of dining halls will also be an issue if there are to be no extensions to halls as part of the capital programme. In many schools, the dining hall doubles up as a gymnasium, so staggered lunch breaks could reduce availability of the gym. Other concerns are about the need for increased supervision and space for packed-lunch pupils. Those are the issues that our headteachers raised, but we would not envisage having to go down the route of major capital investment.

Robin Gourlay: In East Ayrshire, we did not spend capital money for the pilot—because it was a pilot, after all. However, one school in the area would need a new dining room, and other schools would need adaptations to their dining rooms, which would have to be built into the five-year capital programme. In the final analysis, the pilot scheme was successful and worked well, so nothing would inhibit introduction in 2010.

Councillor West: In the majority—if not all—of our primary schools, children eat in the dining room whether they have a packed lunch or a school meal, and we do not have the problem of needing to extend dining rooms. There would, however, need to be some capital spend on equipment, particularly because not all of our primary schools have a kitchen—currently, other schools cook for them.

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): Mr Henderson, without going into questions of blame, your submission suggests that the implementation of the policy that we are discussing will mean cuts in other parts of your budget, which could result in a reduction in the number of staff who are available for teaching, further contractions in support staff and a requirement to make savings in school transport. Could you comment further on that?

Albert Henderson: As I said earlier, because of pressures that have crept in, no money is committed to the implementation of the policy. We guarantee that the policy will be implemented, but that will require a realignment of our budget.

We came up with estimated costs of around £368,000, which is equal to the pay of around 10 teachers. We will be faced with stark choices, one of which might be whether to reduce the number of teaching and support staff. However, there are some contradictions in that. For example, the introduction of free school meals might mean that there is an increase in supervision requirements at lunch time, which might be difficult to achieve if we have reduced the number of support staff.

We mentioned the transport issue because we are currently considering raising the mileage allowance for children travelling to school.

We are considering various issues as part of our budget deliberations. The school meals policy would simply be an additional one to consider, and something else would have to go in order to pay for it.

Ken Macintosh: In your submission, you say that you are enthusiastic about expanding the provision of free school meals on a targeted basis, and certainly for those who qualify for the maximum working families tax credit, but that the practical implementation of the Government's policy will lead to education cuts. You say that you

will, obviously, implement the policy, but question whether it should be a priority.

Albert Henderson: The council's view—which, having met with the leaders forum, I think is a political view—is that we would welcome universal coverage of free school meals. However, as I said earlier, given the current financial climate and the social and economic situation in Inverclyde, we would prefer to target free school meals so that our budget could be more flexible.

Ken Macintosh: Councillor West, I am not convinced that there is much to be gained from clarifying this point, but I will have a stab anyway.

Your submission is accurate with regard to your policy on free breakfasts. You have evaluated it, and the council has agreed in principle to the introduction of a free breakfast service. That is fine but, at the moment, we are concerned only with the policy of providing free school meals for children in primary 1 to primary 3.

The summary of the submission that you have given us says:

“Aberdeen City Council remains unconvinced that the introduction of free lunches to all Primary 1-3 children adds public value or improves the outcomes for children.”

Are you suggesting today that it does provide value and improve outcomes?

Councillor West: Having read the evaluation, I think that it improves outcomes and provides value.

Ken Macintosh: The summary then says that

“The national trial was able to successfully examine the operational aspects of implementing the policy”

but that it

“was weak at evidencing improved outcomes for children.”

Are you saying that it was strong in that regard?

Councillor West: I think that it showed that there were improved outcomes.

Ken Macintosh: Can you tell me what they were?

Councillor West: In relation to the uptake of school meals, there is prior general research evidence to suggest that eating healthy meals every day encourages a healthy lifestyle. The trial showed that there was an uptake of free school meals, which, obviously, improves the health of children and young people.

Ken Macintosh: Aberdeen City Council's submission states that the evaluation

“reports that teachers did not report improvements in pupil behaviour.”

Are you suggesting that it did not?

10:45

Councillor West: I am not suggesting that. I am sorry, but I do not have that level of detail with me.

Ken Macintosh: I am referring to the submission. If we put the breakfast clubs to one side, is there anything in the submission that we can accept, or should we ignore it altogether?

Councillor West: The statement that I made earlier is that the council's policy is to provide free school meals for P1 to P3. That policy is part of the concordat and we are committed to fulfilling it. Ideally, we would also like to provide a free school breakfast service for P1 to P3. That is the council's policy on the issue.

Ken Macintosh: I accept that that is the council's policy. The committee is trying to assess the impact of the trials and to take evidence from councils such as Aberdeen City Council on what the trials will mean in practice. If it is a nationally agreed policy and it becomes legislation, of course you will implement it—we would expect that—but the committee is trying to assess whether it should approve the legislation. It is all very well saying that you will agree to implement the legislation, but will it have any effect? I am trying to work out what evidence you have that the legislation would lead to healthy outcomes for children, and what other evidence you have to support any conclusions that we come to. At the moment, it is a bit sketchy, to put it mildly.

Councillor West: I did not write the research paper for the Government's evaluation. I understand that you have questioned Ipsos MORI about that. If you are asking me for my opinion, I can give you that, but I am not a statistician and I am afraid that I cannot give you a detailed analysis of the evaluation paper.

Ken Macintosh: Thank you, Councillor West. There is not much point in asking further questions.

Aileen Campbell (South of Scotland) (SNP): At the start, Inverclyde Council said that it welcomed the removal of ring fencing. Why does the cost of free school meals have to come from the education budget? Could it come from elsewhere?

Albert Henderson: I welcome that support in dealing with the financial services in Inverclyde. It is expected that the funding will come from the education services budget, which is why we have given those figures from the budget.

Aileen Campbell: Have you raised your concerns with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, given that it meets the cabinet secretary fairly regularly?

Albert Henderson: I am sorry, but I cannot answer that. I do not know whether our representatives have raised that issue with COSLA. The leader of our council has been on national television, expressing Inverclyde's views on the implementation of the legislation. I do not know whether he said the same at a meeting of COSLA.

Aileen Campbell: Would raising your concerns through COSLA not be the appropriate way to deal with the issue?

Albert Henderson: I do not know whether that has been done, but I agree that that would be appropriate.

Aileen Campbell: Did your council leader raise those concerns at the time of signing the concordat?

Albert Henderson: I cannot speak for him. As I said earlier, it is in the concordat that the policy is to be carried through by councils. The economic climate and the inflationary situation in councils have changed quite considerably since the concordat was signed. I do not think that that could have been foreseen, so the issue may not have been raised at the time.

Aileen Campbell: I think that there is scope within the concordat to allow discussion to happen if issues arise post-signing. I am still at a loss as to why Inverclyde does not appear to have taken that route.

Albert Henderson: I am not sure whether we have done so politically, but I agree that that is the correct route to take, and I welcome the flexibility that would allow such discussions to take place in COSLA.

Aileen Campbell: I have a question for Lynn Mirley. Scottish Borders Council has discussed additional spending on equipment. In your submission, you say that catering equipment would cost £5,000 but, further on, under the heading "Total on-going additional cost", the figure for equipment for 2010-11 is £14,000 and the figure for 2011-12 is £22,000. Why the difference? And why do you need to buy additional equipment?

Lynn Mirley: We were asked specifically about set-up costs. Our pilot started in October 2007 and the project will restart in August 2010. We therefore included a small set-up provision to cover the costs of restarting. The on-going figures allow for the fact that the equipment that we bought in October 2007 will be used and will wear out. It will continually need to be repaired and will ultimately need to be replaced. We wanted to include a realistic and sensible provision for that.

Uptake has almost doubled. At the moment, we have a budget of about £35,000 or £40,000 a year

for replacing equipment and addressing equipment problems. As we move on and double the volume permanently, £22,000 will be required for recurring maintenance and renewal.

Aileen Campbell: So the figure does not cover replacement only.

Lynn Mirley: Once the first month was past and the pilot was up and running, we did not buy any more equipment. If we are to restart, we will have to do certain things, but they will be on a low level, which explains the £5,000. The figures described as on-going are to deal with continual refreshment of equipment, to keep everything at the quality standard that is required of a catering facility.

I am not sure whether I have answered your question properly.

Aileen Campbell: That is fine, thank you.

From the evaluation of the trial, the cost for each additional meal in the Borders was £4.65. Did that figure fall during the trial?

Lynn Mirley: The second phase of the trial came after March 2008. By then, we had already taken the big hit of spending £140,000 on equipment. That was a one-off cost, but it was included in the cost per meal. Subsequently, we did not have that cost of £140,000 to include. The evaluation shows how much that equates to for each meal.

Aileen Campbell: So the cost of meals subsequently would not include any additional set-up costs.

Lynn Mirley: Yes—and those costs represented a big chunk. However, one element remained: to make the pilot work, to provide a successful social experience for children, and to get the maximum benefits possible, we felt that we had to retain a supervision element. That is what made the amount higher for us than for other pilot authorities.

Aileen Campbell: Your submission says that the estimated cost of extending eligibility in 2009 is £420,000. However, the figure for 2010 is only £249,000.

Lynn Mirley: The submission shows that the £420,000 is additionality. In 2009-10, there is £20 million nationally, and in 2010-11, there is a further £20 million. The full-year cost is the first £420,000 plus the £249,000. However, as I said in my first answer during this evidence session, we are not fully clear on what the eligibility criteria will be. Our figures are based on an estimate of the amount of money that we think is in the settlement. Because we do not know the eligibility criteria, we do not know the effect on pupil numbers. If the number of additional eligible pupils decreases, there will be

more money left to deal with the pilot, and vice versa—if that makes sense.

Aileen Campbell: Yes, it does. Overall, did you find a lot of benefits in the trial? The Borders has particular issues, as it is a more rural area. What are your general thoughts on that?

Lynn Mirley: The period of planning and setting up the trial was quite stressful. The benefit for authorities now is that they know that the programme is starting in August 2010, so they have a lot longer to plan. The timescale for the pilot made their engagement with schools more concentrated on a period of a couple of months.

Since we got going with the pilot, parents have become much more engaged with our school meals. We have used the pilot as a launch pad for the other work that we are doing through the hungry for success programme. We are working with 10 primary schools on parental engagement in school meals, as that is an important part of getting children to take a school meal.

We found many benefits. It is impossible to say from nine months of experience whether we have changed behaviour, but there was an additional throughput of children. We got a lot of information about what we need to do with menus. We will be able to improve menu planning, so that the menus are attractive every day. We need to work on that—it will always be an iterative process. Parental involvement has been a major aspect, and children have been trying different things.

Aileen Campbell: It is to your credit that you managed to get things done so quickly. In 2010, it will be much easier for you.

The issue of parental engagement came up in the evidence that was provided by Ipsos MORI. East Ayrshire Council has a history of being proactive with its food policies. Do you have any ideas about how councils can engage with parents actively? Although the evaluation said that more parental engagement would be desirable, there was no suggestion of how that might happen. Do you practise anything at the moment in that regard? Can you highlight any best practice for us to consider?

Robin Gourlay: Food is getting higher on the education agenda and on the agenda of parents. My understanding from anecdotal evidence is that the service is very popular among parents, because they know that their children are safe and looked after. They know that they are being fed good food, and that they are mixing in a more social environment.

Aileen Campbell: Do you have anything to add, Councillor West? Aberdeen has a history of offering breakfasts. Have parents enjoyed that

service? Has there been increasing engagement with the schools that have offered that service?

Councillor West: Parents were enthusiastic about the pilot programme for breakfasts. The children were surveyed at the beginning of the pilot and then again at the end. The parents' attitudes came through in the answers that the children gave. At the beginning of the pilot, a child would typically say, "It'll be good, because I'll get to go to school and play with my friends and get breakfast." At the end, the children were saying, "It's good, because I get breakfast for free, and Mummy doesn't have to buy cereal." The parents' points of view were coming through and it was clear that parents were engaged and were talking to their children about it. I thought that that was really good.

The best way that we have found to communicate with parents, and the only way that works all the time, is by sending letters home in schoolbags. That is the best way to do things. If the children are involved and engaged, their views will pass on to their parents, and that is another excellent way to communicate with parents.

Aileen Campbell: I have another question relating to Inverclyde. I am not sure whether you listened to last week's evidence from children's groups and organisations, Mr Henderson. I understand that there are significant pressures in Inverclyde, which has higher levels of deprivation. John Dickie suggested that a greater proportion of children in more deprived areas are positively affected if a universal approach is taken in, for example, the provision of free school meals. He said that taking a universal approach has a big impact on those living in poverty. His comments can be found in the *Official Report* of last week's meeting.

11:00

Albert Henderson: I do not disagree with the comment. I reiterate Inverclyde Council's position on the matter: we welcome a universal approach being taken to the provision of free school meals. That approach helps in all kinds of ways, including, as the witness rightly said, in terms of the needier in society. Our use of cashless catering and smart cards reduces the stigma around free school meals provision and universality will help in that regard. As I said, I do not disagree with the evidence that the committee heard last week from the charities.

Kenneth Gibson: My question is for Scottish Borders Council. I understand what you said about the high cost of provision, but Dumfries and Galloway Council estimates its costs at £1.86 and Moray Council's estimate is a cost of between 78p and £1.31. Why are your overall costs—not only

those for equipment purchase—higher than those rural authorities' costs?

I turn to supervision. No authority other than Scottish Borders Council mentioned additional staff for supervision. They may have mentioned additional catering staff, but they mentioned no other category. Classroom assistants, teachers and lots of the other folk who are milling about in primary schools can look after children at meal times. Certainly, in my visits to schools, I noted no difficulties in supervising meal times. Why do you need to employ additional staff for supervision?

Lynn Mirley: There are several aspects to the question—

Kenneth Gibson: Sorry, I should have said that I was working in a school only two years ago.

Lynn Mirley: I cannot comment on how Moray Council and Dumfries and Galloway Council structure their costs. From our recent children's services review, I appreciate the difficulties in comparing costs and evaluating the cost basis. Our costs are based on the cost of the pilot and the cost of providing meals.

Implementing the new nutrition guidelines resulted in a dramatic increase in costs. We looked at the different ways in which we could provide fruit juice and milk throughout the school and found that it is best to do so at lunch time. That is also the most environmentally friendly time at which to do it, as juice and milk can be served in jugs, rather than individuals cartons. We were under pressure from Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education to make that provision in line with the hungry for success initiative and the subsequent legislation. We have increased substantially the value of the meals that we serve. Also, this year has seen a 10 per cent increase in our food costs.

In addition, our structure is such that without a large amount of capital investment we cannot change how we produce our school meals. Where we have dining centres, we produce food in a kitchen with one set of staff and have to employ another set of staff to serve it. Changing to production kitchens would involve significant investment. In some of our very small schools, we are producing food for only five to 10 children. We also have high transport costs.

I would like to know how Moray Council and Dumfries and Galloway Council produce meals at such low cost. Following the meeting, I might take the opportunity to talk to them. The cost that we gave is the cost that resulted from the pilot. We would not have estimated our cost at that level without having done the pilot. We are in a privileged position: having been part of the pilot, we understand the dynamics of universal provision.

Kenneth Gibson: The population in Dumfries and Galloway is about 50 per cent higher than that in the Scottish Borders Council area, but its figure for the first year is £881,000 whereas yours is £1.072 million. Despite having a similar population to the Scottish Borders Council area, Inverclyde Council's costs are about a third of your costs. Those comparisons raise questions about what is being delivered. Seven local authorities have produced estimates that are less even than the Scottish Government estimate. The committee has to wrestle with the differences in the figures with which we are being presented.

I would like to change tack a wee bit. I am sorry to return to Inverclyde Council, but I would like clarification on the figures. I refer to the 3,285 meals that are mentioned in your submission. I estimate that a person who goes to school for 12 years and attends for 190 days a year will have 2,280 meals at school. Do you agree that if pupils in primaries 1 to 3 received 570 free meals, the 6 per cent figure that is given in your submission should be 25 per cent?

Albert Henderson: I am not doing the mental arithmetic in my head. I will stand corrected on the figure.

Kenneth Gibson: I was called "Statto" in the first parliamentary session. It was said in "Gregory's Girl" that boys think in numbers; I think I am one such boy.

I want to clarify Inverclyde Council's argument. Is it basically in favour of the policy, but concerned about funding it?

Albert Henderson: Yes.

Kenneth Gibson: That is it in a nutshell. If you thought that you had the money to implement the policy, you would be happy to do so.

Albert Henderson: Yes. We favour a universal policy.

Kenneth Gibson: In the final paragraph of your submission, you state:

"A further consideration is that those working in schools report that there is a significant amount of waste from children in primaries 1-3 who currently receive a free school meal."

Is there significantly more waste by those children, compared with children who do not receive free school meals? The pilot scheme showed that there was no difference in wastage by those who received free meals who had not done so before.

Albert Henderson: I should qualify who the target audience for that comment was. The issue relates to a number of things that have been said around the table. I have considered the pilot scheme and its evaluation. The pilot authorities have seen a significant increase in the number of

pupils who take school meals, and an increase in the number of pupils who take free school meals. I think the study shows that the jury is still out on converting those pupils to healthy eating.

I was involved in a survey with headteachers. The wastage that has been talked about is wastage of free school meals by pupils in primaries 1 to 3; I am sorry that I cannot quantify it. I return to the point about introducing proper meals early. We have commented on snack flexibility. Things that are easy for youngsters to eat will be wasted less. Inverclyde Council may have submitted a photograph on wastage. Some heads were concerned about the food that young pupils would leave if there were universal free school meals. An article on a counter evaluation was published a couple of weeks ago in *The Sunday Times*. Pupils who ate vegetable soup dunked—excuse the west of Scotland word; "dipped" may be used—their bread in it, took all the liquid and left the vegetables. Heads have expressed concern about such things. Perhaps younger pupils will waste more of more formal meals.

Kenneth Gibson: Last week, John Dickie of the Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland said:

"Parents in more deprived areas were more likely to report improved behaviour among their children in the home after school and at meal times, and they were more likely to say that their children were willing to try new foods, eating healthily and asking for healthier foods."—[*Official Report, Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee*, 5 November 2008; c 1627.]

That more or less contradicts what your submission says. It states that free school meals

"will not significantly affect the health of the population."

Albert Henderson: We did not take part in the pilot scheme; our report was based on local surveys that we carried out. I am encouraged by some of the findings in the evaluation and by some of the pilot authorities' comments on the healthy eating that the legislation might bring about, and I am particularly encouraged by the post-school conversations with parents about diet, which have been mentioned. A powerful point has been made.

Kenneth Gibson: Mr Dickie said on behalf of the Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland that 94,000 children are living in poverty—a number of those children will be in Inverclyde—and that 40,000 children in Scotland would benefit from the policy. He stated:

"increased access to healthy meals for those who were not entitled but are living in poverty ... is likely to improve health outcomes for children across the board."—[*Official Report, Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee*, 5 November 2008; c 1626.]

That is based on evidence from Hull and evidence from other countries. Do you agree with him?

Albert Henderson: Yes.

The Convener: We have concentrated on the financial implications of the policy, but I wonder whether councils have considered the knock-on effect that it might have on other policy commitments. Fourteen of the submissions from local authorities—more than half—highlight issues around staggered lunch times and extended use of dining halls, which often double as halls where PE instruction takes place. The commitment that every child should have two hours of PE instruction a week is the one that I am particularly concerned about. Have local authorities given any consideration to whether staggered lunch times would impact on schools' ability to fulfil that commitment?

Albert Henderson: As I said, North Lanarkshire Council has suggested that. I would have a worry in respect of time, so we would try to avoid staggered lunch hours whenever possible in smaller schools that have a single dining hall/gym facility. We would have to think about that approach because it would have an impact.

Going back to Mr Gibson's comments about support staff, in terms of annex E of "A Teaching Profession for the 21st Century", staggered lunch hours and removal of support staff, classroom assistants and so on could impact on support for teachers in the classroom, in that it might be diluted. We would have to consider the fact that if support staff were needed in the dining room for longer, they would not be in the classroom.

Off the top of my head, those are two policy areas that would be affected.

Robin Gourlay: Our experience of running the pilot was that it did not impinge much on the curriculum. At most, it allowed the younger children to eat five or 10 minutes earlier than they would have done previously. One view might be that the school lunch time has been continually reduced over time, so we need to question whether that is still the best way of doing things.

Councillor West: A number of our schools already have staggered lunch times, so I do not envisage its being a problem. As I have said, all the children already eat within the canteen or the dining room, so it would not be an issue for us.

Lynn Mirley: Most of our comments have already been made in respect of this. We found that, because we worked with the schools, the policy did not have as big an impact as we had expected, although it was challenging to manage. Mr Henderson's comment about annex E of "A Teaching Profession for the 21st Century" explains why we had to provide dining room supervision. We could not reduce the classroom assistant input because in the Borders the classroom assistant input is spread more thinly over a larger number of

schools. That is the one thing we had to deal with that we did not, when we accepted the pilot, realise was going to be such a big issue. We realised the importance of it only once we started talking to schools.

Kenneth Gibson: When I was at school, our PE classes were held outside—football for the boys, hockey for the girls, or whatever. It never did us any harm, as the saying goes.

The Convener: It is obvious that you do not represent Shotts. I would not advise schools there to hold PE classes outside, no matter how hardy the children of Shotts might be.

Christina McKelvie (Central Scotland) (SNP): Good morning. I draw your attention to the paragraph entitled "Free school meals" on page 5 of the concordat. It states:

"Providing nutritious free school meals for all P1 to P3 pupils in the pilot areas until the end of the current academic year (ie up to June 2008). The remainder of 2008-09 will be taken up with evaluation of the trials. In 2009-10, provided the evaluation of the trials is positive legislation will be introduced to allow extension of the nutritious free school meals to all pupils in P1 to P3. Assuming the legislation is passed, local authorities will provide—

I repeat, "will provide"—

free school meals to all P1 to P3 pupils from August 2010."

From this morning's evidence, I think the unanimous view is that the trials have been positive, except in Inverclyde, although Inverclyde Council can see the positive aspects of the trials in other local authorities.

Councillor Kirsty West has probably already done this, but can all the councillors sitting around the table confirm that the councils actually signed up to that commitment?

Witnesses indicated agreement.

The Convener: That was more of a statement than a question.

Christina McKelvie: It was a question and they all answered yes. That is enough.

11:15

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): That was quite helpful because I was going to ask a question about the concordat wording. Additional funding was given to support the pilot, and we are aware that the concordat says that if the pilot is successful, local authorities will implement the policy. I had understood a pilot to be a trial of whether something is going to be successful, but the concordat seems to argue that the money already exists. I am unclear about what local authorities planned to do with the money if the pilot had been unsuccessful and its outcomes had

not been positive. Local authorities are being questioned about whether they have the money, and Inverclyde Council has said that it would have to move the money from other budgets. Is it reasonable to expect councils to have allocated that money before the pilot was completed and we had the evidence?

Albert Henderson: To reiterate the point I made earlier, any available money in Inverclyde Council's education services budget has been sucked in to deal with pressures that I mentioned earlier. Money is not identified in our current budget to deal with free school meals.

Claire Baker: Did any of the local authorities identify that money for the 2010-11 budget before we had the evidence from the pilot? Did anyone think, "We need to lay that money aside in advance of knowing the outcomes?"

Robin Gourlay: We are in our budget process at the moment, so the cost of introducing free school meals for P1 to P3 pupils in August 2010 will be taken account of during it.

Claire Baker: I was confused because Inverclyde Council said that its money was already identified.

Albert Henderson: We have not kept any money at all in the current year. As East Ayrshire Council will do, when we know the decision, money will be put aside to cover it.

Claire Baker: My other question is for the pilot authorities. Scottish Borders Council has already mentioned that it faces difficulties because the pilot has stopped and there will be a gap before the scheme starts. East Ayrshire Council might also like to comment on that. Has there been a reduction in the amount of children taking school dinners since the pilot stopped? Has there been any response from parents on the gap facing the pilot authorities?

Lynn Mirley: We are just starting to get the data back in, and it takes a wee while to see a trend.

We are starting to examine what happened between August and October. Initially there was a decline of between 30 and 40 meals taken throughout the local authority, which does not sound like a lot when you think of the number of catering staff versus the base level that existed before the pilot scheme. After seven or eight weeks, we were starting to see the level going back up to normal. We do not know, but the decline was possibly due to the shock of paying £1.60 again. However, it is possible that £1.60 won versus making a packed lunch, or the children asking to go for school meals because they liked the things on the menu, sent the level back up.

We are not sure what caused the initial decline in August—we are examining that at the moment.

We were always quite concerned that there would be a significant drop-off at the end of the pilot, irrespective of whether it was successful. We were worried about the possible impact on our catering organisation, which had geared up for a large increase in daily meal sales. That is why we have taken the step of working with 10 primary schools that had lower uptake prior to the pilot scheme, and which are big enough schools that they will show a big difference if we engage and work with the parents.

Does that answer all your questions?

Claire Baker: Yes. I wondered about parental reaction, but you have touched on that.

Lynn Mirley: We have not had direct parental feedback. Throughout the pilot, most of our parental feedback was about the fact that we changed our process for ordering meals. We did that for two reasons. First, the significant change of the pilot meant that we needed to consider how we ordered meals. Secondly, we wanted to do something about stigma. We introduced a system in which all the meal choices were on an envelope. We had more parental feedback about that than about the pilot. Even the evaluation from Ipsos MORI suggested that the response to that change was mixed—some people really like it and some really hate it.

Robin Gourlay: In general, the reaction from catering staff, parents and teachers was that the system was working well and that it was a pity that it was going to stop. Local radio and the print media were interested in the fact that the pilot was stopping. I almost felt as though I was responsible for that.

Overall, uptake in East Ayrshire increased by 15 per cent. For the year to date, uptake has increased by about 5 per cent. After the pilot stopped, we lost about 10 percentage points, but we are still better off by 5 per cent. That shows that the service was good and was welcomed.

Claire Baker: I have a couple of questions for Inverclyde Council. We have identified the deprivation issues that the council is dealing with. Does the authority know how many children live in poverty in its area? Of that group, how many are entitled to free school meals? How many would benefit from the extension of free school meals to families that receive tax credits?

Albert Henderson: I am not sure whether I have with me information in such detail. I do not have in my notes the size of the overall school population, but I can obtain a breakdown of that information if the committee needs it. I think that 29 per cent of P1 to P3 children in Inverclyde are entitled to free school meals.

Claire Baker: Is that under the current entitlement system?

Albert Henderson: Yes.

Claire Baker: If entitlement were extended to children of families that receive maximum tax credits, how many additional children would that bring into the system?

Albert Henderson: I am sorry—I do not have that figure.

Claire Baker: That is fine.

We have talked about financial issues and authorities' ability to afford the policy. I accept that the authorities that are represented here today are committed to trying to implement the policy, which might mean that difficult decisions must be made. I have some difficulty with the fact that Aberdeen City Council is confident about its position. We know that that council has been under financial pressures to the extent that investigations have been undertaken, its budgets have been independently analysed and cuts have been made. Problems with the council's budgets have been well publicised. I am not convinced that introducing the policy will be simple or that the council will find doing so no more difficult than will other local authorities.

Councillor West: The city council has worked hard to stabilise the budget and I am convinced that the council will be back on a firm financial footing following the next budget round. Officers are already factoring in free school meals.

The Convener: Have officers factored in the provision of free breakfasts? At one point, you unequivocally committed Aberdeen City Council to providing free school breakfasts. You originally said that that was a policy aspiration, but you said later that the council would provide free breakfasts and that you were confident that you had the money, although you have not agreed the budget yet.

Councillor West: I said that the council would ideally like to provide free school breakfasts and free school lunches for primary 1 to 3 children. I was asked whether I felt that the resources would be available to do that and I said that I felt that they would. That may be what you are referring to.

The Convener: I think you committed the city council to providing breakfasts, although it has not yet agreed its budget. We will look with interest at whether that is delivered in the new financial year.

That concludes the committee's questions. I thank the witnesses for their attendance.

11:25

Meeting continued in private until 13:04.

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