

EDUCATION, LIFELONG LEARNING AND CULTURE COMMITTEE

Wednesday 19 November 2008

Session 3

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CONTENTS

Wednesday 19 November 2008

	Col.
SUBORDINATE LEGISLATION	1673
Provision of School Lunches (Disapplication of the Requirement to Charge) (Scotland) Order 2008 (Draft)	1673
PETITION	1711
Foreign Languages Policy (PE1022).....	1711

EDUCATION, LIFELONG LEARNING AND CULTURE COMMITTEE

28th 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:

David Cowan (Scottish Government Schools Directorate)
Adam Ingram (Minister for Children and Early Years)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Eugene Windsor

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Nick Hawthorne

ASSISTANT CLERK

Andrew Proudfoot

LOCATION

Committee Room 1

Scottish Parliament

Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee

Wednesday 19 November 2008

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 10:00*]

Subordinate Legislation

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

The Convener (Karen Whitefield): I open this meeting of the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee and welcome those who are attending. I remind everyone that mobile phones and BlackBerrys should be switched off for the duration of the meeting.

The first agenda item is consideration of an item of subordinate legislation. This is our final oral evidence-taking session on the draft order. I welcome representatives of the Scottish Government. We are joined by Adam Ingram, the Minister for Children and Early Years; Mike Gibson, deputy director in the support for learning division; David Cowan, policy manager in the support for learning division; and Joanne Briggs, economic adviser in the education analytical services division. I understand that the minister wishes to make a brief opening statement.

The Minister for Children and Early Years (Adam Ingram): Good morning, colleagues. I will re-emphasise why we want to provide free nutritious school lunches to primary 1 to 3 pupils. If we are to realise our central purpose of creating a more successful nation in which we can all flourish through increasing sustainable economic growth, we must improve Scotland's poor health record. As a nation, we must improve our diet. Providing free nutritious school lunches to primary 1 to 3 pupils will get our children off to a good start by establishing healthy eating habits at an early age.

As I said when we debated the issue last year, there is plenty of evidence that a healthier diet leads to longer-term health benefits. A recent School Food Trust review found that children's early exposure to a wider range of food maximises the probability of a healthy diet. That was the basis for the hungry for success programme which, since its launch in 2003, has not only revolutionised school meals in Scotland but inspired emulation beyond our borders. However, to achieve maximum impact, many more pupils will need access to the benefits. We want to build

on the exemplary work in schools by offering healthy school lunches for free to our youngest pupils, so that they benefit from the transformation in food quality that has been brought about by hungry for success. A universal approach is required, because obesity is a growing problem throughout the population. Targeting a minority will not bring about the culture change in eating habits that we are looking for. The policy needs to be inclusive.

As members know, with the agreement of the committee, we conducted a trial to see what impact the free school meals initiative would have. I am pleased to say that the trial was a great success and that, if rolled out, about 118,000 children stand to benefit. Pupils and teachers as well as council and catering staff were all positive about the trial. Importantly, there is encouraging evidence that some pupils tried and enjoyed new foods, talked to their parents about food more often and asked for healthier options at home. The trial was extremely popular with parents, not just because it eased pressures on the family budget, but because it made it easier for some parents to serve healthier food at home and gave them new ideas for healthy recipes.

Of course, the free school meal policy will also help to alleviate poverty. As John Dickie noted in his evidence to the committee, a family with two young children in early primary could be living below the recognised poverty line but still be excluded from free school meal entitlement. Families like that will be £18 a week better off because of the policy. Unfortunately, with the economic downturn, many more families are likely to become hard pressed, so this initiative will be a boon to them.

One of the main reasons why we conducted the trial was to assess the practicalities of a nationwide roll-out. The principal conclusion of the independent evaluation was that implementation of the trial was relatively straightforward. There were no unexpected impacts, and roll-out should not be problematic.

The Convention of Scottish Local Authorities is fully behind us in this, although I know that some councils have nonetheless expressed apprehension. However, it is a normal part of the planning process to identify potential costs and difficulties with implementation. The trial authorities anticipated similar challenges, but in reality many did not arise or they were relatively easy to overcome. For our part, we will work with COSLA to encourage local authorities to learn lessons from the trial and each other to facilitate a smooth roll-out.

The trial of free school meals for primary 1 to 3 pupils was a great success. The order that is before the committee will enable councils to roll

out the policy. Conversely, failing to support the order will deny councils that opportunity. I therefore urge the committee to support it.

The Convener: Thank you, minister, for that opening statement. I am sure that the committee has a number of questions for you. I will start by asking whether you can explain what the order will require local authorities to do. If the committee agrees to the motion on the order today, will an obligation be placed on local authorities to provide free school meals?

Adam Ingram: No. The order will enable councils to disapply the need to charge for school meals.

The Convener: Is the Government's approach today somewhat different from that taken for the trial, when the pilot local authorities were required to provide a free lunch? The order will just mean that local authorities will no longer be required to charge if children's parents are not in receipt of benefits.

Adam Ingram: No. If you recall, convener, we introduced a similar order last year to conduct the trial. Basically, it allowed the five pilot local authorities to provide school meals free of charge. We went about that by inviting local authorities that wanted to take part in the trial to apply to us, then we chose the five local authorities on the basis of a number of factors. For example, we wanted to include a rural authority, Glasgow City Council—which does not have any comparators—and areas where we knew there were significant levels of deprivation. That is how we chose the pilot authorities. Last year's order was virtually the same as the current order, except that this one applies to all local authorities, not just the five pilots.

The Convener: I think that some money was attached to last year's order, but no money is attached to the current order.

Adam Ingram: No money was attached to the order per se. Money was set aside to conduct the pilot. Similarly, money has been included in the financial settlement for local authorities to provide the roll-out of free school meals for primary 1 to 3 pupils from August 2010.

The Convener: If the order is approved today, local authorities will no longer have to charge if they choose not to. How will you ensure that local authorities implement the Government's aspiration to provide free school meals to primary 1 to 3 children?

Adam Ingram: As you know, we have a new relationship with our local authorities.

The Convener: You forgot to say that it is historic.

Adam Ingram: Through our historic concordat with local authorities, we are engaged in a partnership between national Government and local government. We have agreed that, in return for the financial settlement that we have provided, local authorities will meet commitments in the concordat. One of those commitments was to roll out free school meals, if the pilot was successful.

The Convener: I am well aware of the details of the historic concordat, which is referred to regularly not only at committee meetings but in the chamber. If a local authority decides that it cannot provide free school meals, in spite of the committee and the Parliament having approved the order, how will the Government respond? Will it impose sanctions on that local authority?

Adam Ingram: I emphasise that the nature of the relationship between national Government and local authorities has changed. It is no longer a question of the central dictating to the local. We have engaged freely in an agreement to which I am sure local authorities are committed. So far, there has been no backsliding by local authorities, and I do not expect there to be. If some local authorities have difficulties implementing the policy, we will engage with them and discuss the matter but, based on the feedback that we have received, we do not anticipate that such difficulties will arise. No local authority has refused to roll out the initiative.

The Convener: No local authority has had to roll it out. Every local authority has said that it wants to extend the provision of free school meals, but the order that is before the committee will place no obligation on them to provide free school meals to children in primaries 1 to 3. How will the Government ensure that its policy is delivered if local authorities decide that, no matter how much they would like to implement it, they are unable to do so?

Adam Ingram: I go back to my first answer—this is an enabling order that will enable local authorities to meet the commitment to provide free school meals into which they have entered freely with national Government. I do not anticipate any problems on that front. There may be exceptional pressures that were not anticipated when the concordat was agreed, for example the committee has received from local authorities evidence of increasing costs, especially power and fuel costs, but there is a mechanism in the concordat for parties to discuss such issues.

The Convener: Given the additional pressures that you acknowledge may exist for local authorities, how confident are you that the attempt to meet the requirements of the historic concordat in relation to school meals will not lead to cuts in other front-line education services? The committee has received evidence from some local authorities

that they are happy to implement the policy, but they may have to cut services such as breakfast clubs to resource the provision of free school meals.

Adam Ingram: I do not understand that, because the policy is fully funded. I do not anticipate front-line education services being cut.

10:15

The Convener: You say that you do not anticipate that. Are you confident that there will be no cuts to front-line services as a result of the implementation of the policy?

Adam Ingram: Absolutely.

Elizabeth Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): The Scottish National Party manifesto was very clear—as is the concordat—that, assuming that the legislation is passed, local authorities will provide free school meals for all pupils in primaries 1 to 3 from August 2010. That is a straightforward, clear commitment. In evidence to the committee, five councils agreed that they could competently put the policy into operation, five councils said that the policy was not a priority for them and 14 councils said that they liked the idea in principle but could not deliver it because of constraints. As the convener pointed out, that might mean cutbacks or problems with some councils doing things that others cannot do. Four councils expressed grave concern that the policy will help many children whose parents could well afford to pay. Are you convinced that councils will be able to fulfil their obligation to spend scarce resources adequately and to best effect in their area, given that the policy will end up helping many children who do not need help?

Adam Ingram: On the first point, the policy is fully funded, so there ought to be no cutbacks whatsoever on the basis of its introduction.

Secondly, on the notion that some children will benefit more than others so we ought to introduce targeting, I explained in my opening statement that we are taking a whole-population approach to changing our eating habits. We cannot bring that about by narrowly targeting a minority of children. We need to get all parents and children engaged in the effort. By bringing peer support and peer pressure to bear, we can make it cool to eat, for example, broccoli rather than chips. That is why we have adopted this approach.

The policy will also have a significant impact on alleviating poverty. As the committee heard in John Dickie's evidence a fortnight ago, one in four of our children are living in poverty—a scandalous figure—yet only 15 per cent are eligible for free school meals, and only 11 per cent actually get them. We will deal with that problem at a stroke by

introducing free school meals for all P1 to P3 pupils.

Elizabeth Smith: I am absolutely convinced of the evidence that the policy will help those who are most in need—that is not a problem—but, along with the 14 councils that expressed concern, I have grave difficulty in accepting that, especially within a tight budget settlement during an economic downturn, the £40 million is best spent on a universal benefit that will end up helping some children who, quite frankly, do not need that help. That is a major concern. Some councils would prefer to spend that money in other ways that would target children who are in need in different educational circumstances. If councils are doing their job properly—the SNP Government would like to think that that is enshrined in the concordat—they must provide best value for money. Are you convinced that the policy provides best value for money?

Adam Ingram: Absolutely. Incidentally, the policy will cost £30 million, not £40 million. The £40 million comes into play if we add on the increased numbers from extending eligibility across the piece. In a full year, we are talking about £30 million to fund the policy of rolling out free school meals to all P1 to P3 pupils.

You mentioned that the policy was in our manifesto and that we laid out clearly in front of the Scottish people what we intended to do. In addition, we engaged with local authorities and their COSLA representatives on the policy and they freely agreed to the commitment. Indeed, a lot of the evidence that you have received from local authorities shows that they agree in principle with the policy—one of them called it noble—so there is widespread support for it. There are obviously concerns about the financial pressures on local authorities, but they do not come from the initiative, which is fully funded; they come from the exceptional pressures from increasing fuel costs and power charges, which I mentioned to the convener. Local authorities will have that problem anyway, but the free school meals initiative is fully funded and will not increase the pressure on them.

Elizabeth Smith: I assume that that is why you said—rather deterministically—that local authorities will provide free school meals for primaries 1 to 3. In fact, that is not true, because the order, if approved, will not impose a duty on councils but will give them a power to use if they choose to provide free school meals. Therefore, and given what many councils have said, it is highly unlikely that there will be universal free school meals provision for primary 1 to 3 pupils. However, that is what many parents and, probably, many teachers expect, so do you not feel that you are letting them down?

Adam Ingram: No. As I pointed out, the order is an enabling instrument, and we are engaged with local authorities differently from the way that Government engaged previously. Ours is very much a partnership approach, so I am confident that local authorities will roll out the commitment that they have freely made to deliver the policy and I trust them to do so. I see a lot of commitment among them to do exactly that.

Elizabeth Smith: As with class sizes, the question is why, if you believe that, you will not enshrine it in legislation so that it is a duty, rather than simply give councils a power.

Adam Ingram: It is not necessary to enshrine it in legislation in the way that you suggest because we are confident that local authorities will fulfil the commitment.

Elizabeth Smith: Even if you let some people down? Some councils are clearly saying that they will not deliver it because they cannot.

Adam Ingram: With respect, some councils are not saying that.

Elizabeth Smith: I think that they are, minister. They clearly say that, given current resources, they cannot deliver the policy. We have taken evidence to that effect from several local authorities. You have the material to hand.

Adam Ingram: With respect, I do not think that they are saying that. They are flagging up their concerns about affordability in the context of the financial pressures that they face, but I have yet to hear a local authority say that it will not implement the policy.

Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD): I will ask about the cost of the policy, minister. We have received written evidence from a majority of councils and we proceed on the basis that we can trust the evidence that we are given—that does not always work, but most of the time it does. In that evidence, a number of different approaches seem to have been taken towards costing the policy. Councils are not necessarily trying to be difficult, but some have included staffing costs and some have included capital costs. Obviously, the councils that have been part of the pilot have already received some funding towards the capital costs, for example.

You have said that the definitive cost is £30 million. If I have it right, you also said that it will be £40 million when free school meal provision kicks in next year for children whose parents receive the maximum tax credits. I assume that that is going to happen and we are talking about £40 million as the definitive cost of the policy.

Adam Ingram: Yes, in a full year, once all the policies have been implemented.

Margaret Smith: To pick up on what Elizabeth Smith said, the evidence from councils has given us a mixed picture. Some say that they are happy with the policy in principle, but they are concerned about how they will deliver it. To some extent, I take on board what you said about significant pressures, but you also said that part of the new historic concordat is that councils will be able to come back to you and enter into an historic dialogue about this sort of thing and the realities of life. Do you or the Administration intend to reconsider the money that is available to councils to implement the policy, given the realities of the new and significant cost pressures to which you have alluded?

Adam Ingram: No. We have to separate out the policy and the exceptional pressures. It was unfortunate, shall we say, that our policy intention was announced at the very time when local authorities were feeling those cost pressures. From my perspective, the two collided rather unfortunately.

Local authorities have raised concerns about the implementation and costs of the policy, but that is not new. Local authorities expressed the same concerns when hungry for success was initiated. They asked questions about dining facilities, staggering lunchtimes and queuing, for example, and how they would impact on schools. They have had the benefit of £120 million over the past five years to address such issues and to raise the quality of the food. The trial proved that people's initial concerns were unfounded and that there were no problems that could not be overcome. I anticipate that that situation will repeat itself once we start rolling out the policy.

Margaret Smith: One thing that came out in the evidence that we received was the fact that there had been some practical difficulties, but a number of them were, for the most part, dealt with. That builds on the work that was done previously.

You said that you want to take a whole-population approach, but you are not actually doing so, because you are targeting P1 to P3 pupils. The situation for families that have two children in P4 and that are just outwith the benefits system will not change.

In addition, we have heard from Children 1st and others that there is evidence that eating habits are established before P1, and some councils have said that the policy might affect their breakfast clubs and nurseries. Are you convinced that P1 to P3 children are the optimum age group to tackle? Do you accept that you are targeting certain children and not providing a universal benefit?

10:30

Adam Ingram: We are providing a universal benefit to all children in the P1 to P3 cohort. Certainly, the early years are important, and in due course we will announce our early years framework, of which nutrition is a key feature. Nutrition goes right back to maternal nutrition during pregnancy, breastfeeding and early infant nutrition and goes right through life. As members know, we have nutritional guidelines for pre-school and nursery. The problem with focusing on pre-school is that provision is rather fragmented, so there is no comprehensive opportunity to provide meals.

It is not too late to effect change in children's eating habits in P1 to P3. You have heard evidence to that effect—children are still developing their palate and tastes at that time. However, the early years is the time when school education can have the maximum impact. I hope that that gives some reassurance. Concern about nutrition in the early years is not about an either/or situation, and we will focus on that in the early years framework.

Margaret Smith: Several people who gave us evidence raised the long-term impact of the policy. It is notable that Ipsos MORI was not asked to examine that. Much of what we hear about the policy focuses on its being of benefit in the longer term, although that aspect was not part of the pilot or its evaluation. Some people have said that, given the short length of the pilot, that aspect cannot be considered. Whether I agree with the policy or not, if it goes ahead, do you intend to carry out on-going research into the effects and impacts of the policy change, starting with a baseline of year 1?

Adam Ingram: Yes, we will have an on-going evaluation of the policy, not least through the inspectorate system.

As regards commissioning additional research, you will be aware that a lot of research is going on through the School Food Trust, our health department and the two-year pilot that has been announced for England by the UK Government. Incidentally, local authorities in England already have the power to deliver free school meals if they so wish. A lot of research is going on, and although we will look to evaluate our policy, we do not want to duplicate research that is going on elsewhere. With any research that we commission we will look to where we can add value to existing research.

Margaret Smith: Lastly, although I have some concerns about the policy, most of which come down to prioritisation and finance, I put it on record that I would be 100 per cent supportive of your campaign to make it cool to eat broccoli. I

sometimes question whether Scottish Government ministers can do everything that they say they will do. You are probably overstressing yourself slightly on that one.

Adam Ingram: But we are on the side of the angels; that is what matters.

Margaret Smith: Angels who eat their greens.

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): My questions are about the statement that the policy is fully funded. As has been highlighted, there is variation among local authorities over how much they think the policy will cost them. As the fully funded policy has not been ring fenced or identified in the overall settlement, it is difficult to earmark how much money there is and how much of it goes to each local authority. When I looked back at previous evidence, I found that the minister had described the pilot as genuine and said that its outcome would determine whether the Government would roll out the policy. One of the indicators would be whether uptake rose or fell. Is that correct? Do you believe that the pilot was genuine and that it will influence the roll-out?

Adam Ingram: Yes. We looked for three things from the pilot. First, we wanted to find out about the practicalities of roll-out and what the pilots would throw up about constraints to that. Secondly, we wanted to measure the impact on the uptake of school meals, not just in the target group, but more widely. Thirdly, we wanted to get an early indication of the health benefits that would accrue from introducing the policy. We had positive results on all three issues. We found that roll-out should be straightforward—the pilot was relatively straightforward, even considering that local authorities were given very little time to set up and get rolling. The increase in uptake was terrific; it was something like 41 to 69 per cent—a 28 percentage point increase—among children who did not previously take school meals. We found evidence that children were willing to try new healthy choices and that they went home with that attitude. Parents even came to schools to seek recipes to provide at home. That is exactly what we need if we are to improve diet and have a long-term health impact. We were very pleased with the pilot.

Claire Baker: The Government claims that the policy is fully funded and that the money is part of the local authority settlement, but if the pilot had been negative and you were not convinced about the merits of the scheme, would the money have been spent on something else? The Government claims that the money is identifiable, but would it still have been available if the pilot had been unsuccessful?

Adam Ingram: I dare say that that would have given us a problem, but we anticipated that the

pilot would be successful so, prudently, we budgeted for that.

Claire Baker: Looking back on the previous evidence, the minister said that he hoped that the pilot that was to be run in the five local authorities would be rolled out in those areas at the end of the pilot period, so that the scheme would continue there until the other local authorities started in 2010. Can you give an update on that situation? Have the pilots continued?

Adam Ingram: We extended the pilot period by three months to the end of the school term, as we hoped not to disrupt schools and parents. However, the period and the budget for the pilot were fixed, so we discontinued it after that.

Claire Baker: As I asked last week of the local authority witnesses, has any monitoring been done on the effect of stopping the pilot for primary 1 to 3 children?

Adam Ingram: The feedback that you received last week from local authorities that were engaged in the pilot was interesting. Take-up fell back when free school meals were no longer available, but it fell back to a higher level than it had been before the pilot. Children had got a taste for the new healthy choices and asked to continue going to school meals—obviously, parents were allowing them to do so by giving them money.

Claire Baker: In considering the figures on the fallback in take-up, do you intend to consider differences between families who are not eligible for free school meals and those who are? Do you intend to consider whether the take-up drops more quickly or more slowly among different age groups and who benefits most from the change in policy?

Adam Ingram: The evaluation of the pilot indicated that there was little difference in the take-up rates between various socioeconomic groups. Those who fell back more might have come from families with less disposable income, but we have not conducted research to determine that.

Claire Baker: I think that some members of the committee still have reservations about whether universality is the best way of tackling poverty issues. However, the minister has stated clearly that he regards the universal provision of free school meals as part of a healthy living agenda and that tackling obesity is one of the key aims. The research that was conducted on the trial could not provide evidence—because of the length of the pilot scheme, I think—on whether we are tackling obesity successfully. Was specific evidence gathered for a group of children who fall in to the obesity category?

Adam Ingram: No. You are right that the timeframe for the pilot would not allow definitive

answers to come through on obesity. However, as I indicated, other research has been done. For example, the School Food Trust's recent review highlighted that the probability of children adopting healthy diets increases when they are exposed to more healthy choices earlier on. In terms of long-term impacts, all the evidence points in the right direction. Clearly, if we want to produce empirical evidence, we will need to have a long time-series study to consider the impact of the provision of free school meals.

Claire Baker: When the policy was introduced, it was claimed that it would tackle poverty and change health attitudes. I had concerns that it would not fully achieve either of those aims. I felt that, to achieve them fully, changing diet was not the only way to go, particularly for tackling obesity. I am aware of the obesity strategy. However, are there other policies around the free school meals policy that would help to address obesity among children?

Adam Ingram: A number of policies dovetail well with the free school meals policy. For example, the curriculum for excellence has been introduced in schools and we are focusing on skills for life. The health and wellbeing outcomes and experiences are very much tied in as well. The free school meals policy is a demonstration to youngsters that will help to reinforce the messages that they get through the curriculum for excellence. In addition, the Schools (Health Promotion and Nutrition) (Scotland) Act 2007 is obviously engaged in the healthy living message. We have the national food policy as well, which sends out messages to consumers and producers about what we are looking for in the long term to change our diet and make it much healthier. There is a convergence, therefore, of policies. The free school meals element will reinforce the messages and demonstrate to children the benefits and that what they hear in the classroom is being delivered to them, which is important.

Claire Baker: How about the commitment to physical education hours in school? How well will that work with the free school meals policy?

Adam Ingram: Clearly, good diet is only one aspect of healthy living. We must also ensure that physical activity is a key part of the bigger package.

The Convener: There is a commitment that every child will have two hours of PE a week. However, a number of local authorities are concerned that, because the initiative will increase the number of children who take school meals, that will mean that dining halls will be used for a longer time for lunches. In some schools, though not all, the dining hall doubles up as the school gymnasium. The concern is that the PE policy might therefore be undermined. Are you confident

that that will not be the case and that every child will be able to have two hours of PE tuition?

10:45

Adam Ingram: Yes, I am. You are right that the issue caused some concern among people who were not involved in the pilot. It had caused concern initially among some of the people who were involved in the pilot, but they worked through it. I noticed in the evidence that there has been a trend to reduce the time that is allowed for lunch at school, which is not necessarily a good thing. We would obviously encourage children to have a good lunch, but we would also encourage them to get outside and play. I know that that does not relate to the two hours of PE, but it relates to Claire Baker's point that we have to have active, as well as well-fed, children. I am confident that the PE commitment can be met.

Christina McKelvie (Central Scotland) (SNP): Good morning, minister. Some people have described as "churlish negativity" the argument that there are not adequate resources in place to deliver the policy. Pat Watters of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities is on record as saying:

"I have made it clear that I believe the resources for this provision are included in the overall settlement and that agreement to the settlement was made in the full knowledge that free school meals was part of that financial provision."

Last week, my colleague Kenny Gibson successfully challenged the figures that Inverclyde Council had provided to the committee; the figures were completely wrong and the council retracted them.

Will you expand on some of the positive comments on the resourcing of the policy that have come from across the board—from local authorities and other organisations?

Adam Ingram: Absolutely. We have had a great deal of support across the piece, particularly from organisations that are concerned with tackling child poverty, such as the Child Poverty Action Group and the Poverty Alliance. A host of organisations is keen to see the policy through, including the Association of Headteachers and Deputies in Scotland. I said in a parliamentary exchange with Mr Macintosh that the popularity of the scheme was certainly something that I had not experienced before.

As the minister, I have the privilege of going around a lot of the schools, particularly in the pilot areas and I have got a terrific response from all concerned. Catering staff were thrilled about the policy; they realised that they had an important role to play in children's education and they were pleased about the investment that was going in. Headteachers highlighted the improvement to the

learning environment, which we have not touched on today. Research from the Hull pilot, for example, indicates that classrooms were a calmer environment and that cognition and concentration levels improved when the children were well fed.

Support for the policy has been overwhelming.

Christina McKelvie: One of the barriers to tackling poverty is that there is often stigma. One of the really pleasing things that came out of the evaluation was the impact that the free meals had on tackling that. Let us not use spin to describe means testing as targeting; let us just call it means testing and move on from that. The evidence from the evaluation demonstrated clearly that the impact of the meals on tackling stigma was positive. Will you explain the effect of the universality of the policy in that regard?

Adam Ingram: It is self-evident that stigma will be eradicated in the group that we are talking about. With a universal approach to the provision of free school meals, there will be no stigma. The Child Poverty Action Group has highlighted the fact that there is a considerable gap between the number of children who live in poverty and the number of those who register for free school meals. That gap will be totally bridged in the target group that we are talking about, which is a major step forward.

Christina McKelvie: I have managed to dig up some figures on this, although the latest that I could find were from 2006. Across South and North Lanarkshire, approximately 22,000 pupils in P1 to P3 would benefit from the universal provision of free school meals. As both of those local authorities are in the area that I represent, I would welcome that commitment. That figure is from 2006, and the policy may have an even greater impact in the context of the current recession, with more people having to claim tax credits and falling into the target group. Do you agree that it would be a shame if those 22,000 children in North and South Lanarkshire did not have access to free school meals?

Adam Ingram: I totally agree with you. As I said, we are talking about 118,000 children in P1 to P3 having access to free school meals. That is a major step forward.

Aileen Campbell (South of Scotland) (SNP): Good morning, minister. The other week, Jamie Oliver spoke to the House of Commons Health Committee about the idea of providing free school meals. He said:

"I think what Scotland is doing at the moment is very interesting. The first three years of primary education is good."

He thinks that using money in this way for primary schools provides value for money, which is encouraging. Christina McKelvie has spoken of

the positive support that the policy has received; therefore, it is disappointing to hear so many negative comments being made about this social democratic policy.

Last week, we heard from Scottish Borders Council that there has been broad success in getting parents engaged with the provision of free school meals, which is a form of education. Do you think that the Government could do more to encourage that further?

Adam Ingram: Yes. I was interested in the evidence from Scottish Borders Council, which targeted 10 schools in which it wanted to engage with parents. In our early-years framework, we are focusing on building the capacity of communities to support children and families. The local school tends to be the heart of the community. If we can engage parents more effectively on an issue such as nutrition and healthy food, that will have wider benefits. I hope that we can engage with parents more widely, to improve parenting skills such as the promotion of healthy eating at home. That is exactly what we want to encourage, but each local authority will have its own ideas and can respond to local needs and circumstances. In this instance, it is a case of letting a thousand flowers bloom.

Aileen Campbell: You are aware that we took evidence from anti-poverty groups and children's organisations a couple of weeks back. They suggested that a six-month trial is not long enough to assess the health impacts of the policy. What future measures will the Government take to monitor the impact of the policy if the order is approved and the policy is rolled out across the country? Do you have in mind any ways in which to keep a check on whether the policy is having the desired impact?

Adam Ingram: Margaret Smith asked a similar question earlier. Yes, we need to monitor the impact of the policy as it is rolled out. When we are looking at issues such as obesity, there is a long-term need to monitor the situation.

We have a time-series study called the growing up in Scotland study. It should enable us to identify trends over time, but we will not get quick results from it, because the impact of the policy will unfold over a long period of time.

Aileen Campbell: Last week, we heard from some of the councils that they did not know whether they had raised their concerns with COSLA when they signed the concordat or at the regular meetings that COSLA has with the cabinet secretary. That is a bit disappointing, because that would be the proper mechanism for councils to use to raise their concerns. Have many councils followed that procedure? Has that left some disappointment that has turned into a negative approach to the free school meals policy?

Adam Ingram: To some extent, the measure possibly caught councils on the hop. They had not anticipated that we would introduce the order now. One reason for our doing that was to allow local authorities plenty of time to plan for the implementation of the policy, investigate their value-for-money options and look round and see how other authorities, especially the pilot authorities, have implemented the policy. The measure was a surprise to some extent but, as I indicated, the councils' reaction is perhaps more of a response to the exceptional pressures that they were feeling. The measure was the straw that broke the camel's back, if you want to use that expression.

Aileen Campbell: Somebody said that this reminds them of the time, about 40 years ago, when Thatcher was called a milk snatcher and was accused of taking away milk from children over seven. The Labour education spokesperson at the time said that taking away the milk was

"the meanest and most unworthy thing."

Not implementing the free school meals policy would be mean and certainly unworthy. What would your fears be if the proposal was not implemented as a social leveller, a social democratic policy and a measure to tackle poor health and deprivation?

Adam Ingram: I would be extremely disappointed if local authorities were not allowed to roll out the policy. It would be somewhat ironic if our neighbours down south were to implement the policy in a year or two while we were left rueing the missed opportunity that we had had to effect a transformational change in the diet of our youngsters and the health of the nation.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): In Christina McKelvie's questions and your responses, reference was made to a number of organisations in civic Scotland that support the policy. I have a list of more than 100 in front of me, including not only the ones that have been mentioned but NCH Scotland, One Plus, the Poverty Alliance, the Scottish local government forum against poverty, Unison and so on. In your engagement with civic Scotland, did any of those organisations express opposition to the policy or to its universal delivery to children in P1 to P3?

Adam Ingram: No, not at all. If anything, they were looking for us to expand the policy. As I have explained, we feel that the maximum impact that we can derive from the policy is in the early years—P1 to P3.

Kenneth Gibson: Liz Smith talked about concerns regarding the enabling measure. Have any councils informed you that they are opposed to it?

Adam Ingram: None.

11:00

Kenneth Gibson: If the order is not approved, will local authorities that are enthusiastic about rolling out the policy, such as East Ayrshire Council, be prevented from doing so?

Adam Ingram: That is correct.

Kenneth Gibson: When you discussed the concordat with local authorities, did any of them express opposition to the policy or concerns about its funding?

Adam Ingram: You will understand that I was not directly engaged in the negotiations with COSLA, but as far as I am aware, no particular concern was raised at the time.

Kenneth Gibson: Is it the case that, on 7 February, when the Parliament approved the Local Government Finance (Scotland) Order 2008, which allowed local authority budgets to be rolled out for the current financial year, the order was supported not only by the SNP but by Labour and Conservative members? Was there not acquiescence with the budgetary provision? The Liberal Democrats abstained, but everyone else accepted the budget, which included all the measures that are included in the concordat.

Adam Ingram: That is a good point.

Kenneth Gibson: Inflation is already on the downturn and might be as low as 1 per cent, or less, next year. Does that encourage you, given that affordability will be less of an issue in the run-up to August 2010 than it is at present?

Adam Ingram: Yes. There are concerns about deflation and, perhaps most of all, concerns about growing unemployment and a potential increase in poverty, and the policy will help to mitigate the impact of those things.

Kenneth Gibson: Thank you.

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): Thank you, minister, for your answers to some very taxing and challenging questions from my colleagues.

The draft order is an enabling measure. The obligation on local authorities is included in the concordat. Like my colleagues, I should know everything that there is to know about the historic concordat. I do not anticipate that things will go wrong, but does the concordat contain an enforcement mechanism that can be used if councils fail to meet their obligation?

Adam Ingram: No.

Ken Macintosh: I think you said in your introductory remarks that 118,000 pupils will benefit from the measure. Is that correct? Will you expand on the figure and break it down? I have not heard it before.

Adam Ingram: That is the cohort of children in the P1 to P3 age range.

Ken Macintosh: How many of those are extra, or additional, if I may put it that way?

Adam Ingram: They are the additional pupils. We need to add on the number of children who are currently entitled to free school meals.

Ken Macintosh: So the 118,000 pupils are additional to those who currently receive free school meals. How many of those 118,000 pupils, who will receive free school meals under the policy, live in poverty?

Adam Ingram: Two weeks ago, Mr Dickie said that 25 per cent of our children live in poverty, that only 15 per cent of children are entitled to free school meals, and that only 11 per cent get them. Perhaps you could do the arithmetic, Mr Macintosh.

Ken Macintosh: I hesitate to do that, particularly as Mr Gibson picks everybody up on their arithmetic.

Adam Ingram: It is a significant number—that is for sure.

Ken Macintosh: Perhaps it would be fair to say that the vast majority of the 118,000 children do not live in poverty. Is that correct? I would welcome a figure from you. The measure is designed primarily to improve health, but you claim that it will also tackle poverty. We should know how many of Scotland's children will benefit in that sense. Every member of the Parliament has signed up to abolishing child poverty in Scotland and in the UK as a whole.

Adam Ingram: We know that one child in four in the P1 to P3 cohort lives in poverty. All those children will benefit from the policy.

Ken Macintosh: The number of additional children who will receive free school meals is 118,000. Let us say that an additional—

Adam Ingram: Mr Dickie indicated that less than half the children who live in poverty currently benefit from free school meals. That may help you in your questioning.

Ken Macintosh: I am not trying to be difficult. You claim that the policy will improve the health of Scotland's children. The committee heard little evidence to support that claim, but the pilot was short and the policy is still to be implemented. You also claim that the measure will tackle poverty, so it is fair for me to ask how many children it will benefit who live in poverty. Very roughly, it appears that of the additional 118,000 children who will receive free school meals, 18,000 live in poverty and 100,000 do not. Is that a fair observation? Am I wildly off?

Adam Ingram: David Cowan may be able to provide us with some figures.

David Cowan (Scottish Government Schools Directorate): It is difficult to extract from the figure of 118,000 the number of children living in poverty who will benefit from the policy because the figures are not compiled in a comparable way. We will need to do some more number crunching and to get back to the member on the issue.

Adam Ingram: We would not like to hazard a guess, but I expect that the number will be significantly more than 18,000.

Ken Macintosh: The word “significantly” is used a lot these days.

Christina McKelvie: Even by you.

Ken Macintosh: Exactly. I look forward to hearing from you, minister, and your officials exactly how many of the additional children who will receive free school meals are living in poverty, as that is an important question.

You made the point that the policy is fully funded. On what basis did you calculate funding for the policy?

Adam Ingram: The calculation was based on what provision of free school meals would cost and was included in the financial settlement.

Ken Macintosh: The pilot was run for a reason—as you said, it was a genuine pilot. It produced a lot of evidence on the costs of providing free school meals. The committee has also received a lot of evidence on those costs from local authorities. Will you revisit your calculations in light of the evidence that is now before you?

Adam Ingram: No. The financial settlement is fixed and was agreed with COSLA.

Ken Macintosh: The pilot has produced hard figures and the committee has received a lot of evidence on costs. I raise the issue because if you extrapolate the cost of the policy from the figures that local authorities have given to the committee it comes to a lot more than £30 million. You say that the policy is fully funded, but the evidence that has been generated through the pilot and the committee's observations suggest that it is inadequately funded.

Adam Ingram: I do not extract that conclusion from any of the evidence that the committee has received. The witness from Scottish Borders Council who gave evidence to the committee last week made the point that, because the scheme was a pilot and was introduced at short notice, Scottish Borders Council took steps to ensure that it would be implemented properly. For example, the council took on more staff than it would have taken on if it had had more time to plan the scheme. Experience of the pilot indicated that the

council did not need as many staff as it took on; the same applies to set-up costs and the like.

The point of bringing the order to Parliament now was to give local authorities the opportunity to plan well in advance of implementation of the policy—for example, they will be able to look for contracts with suppliers that provide good value for money and to consider the practicalities of how to roll out implementation. As Scottish Borders Council said last week, that will allow more efficient and effective planning than occurred during the trial.

Ken Macintosh: I certainly hope so. You have previously said—and you have just confirmed—that one reason for running the pilot was to consider the practicalities. The evidence that the committee has heard suggests that one practicality is the impact on other education services. We have received costings for the policy, on which you will also have received information. Are you suggesting that you will not revisit your calculations, despite that hard evidence?

Adam Ingram: The costs of the pilots were in line with our estimates. We have no evidence to suggest that our costings for the full roll-out are in any way erroneous.

Ken Macintosh: The committee has heard evidence from several local authorities that they worry that, in practice, they will have to make cuts in other services to pay for the policy.

Adam Ingram: I heard that, but I have made it plain that the policy is fully funded. COSLA has accepted that. You are conflating with the policy local authorities' concerns about the need to find cost savings to deal with the exceptional pressures on them. Cost savings are required not because of the policy's introduction, but across the board, because of the increased costs that local authorities face.

Ken Macintosh: All that I am saying is that you claim that the policy is fully funded, but we have heard evidence to the contrary. I would have thought that you would revisit the costings, given that evidence.

Adam Ingram: I challenge your claim that the evidence that you have heard suggests that our costings are out and that the policy will cause cuts to other services. I have seen no such evidence.

Ken Macintosh: The committee has heard such evidence. We have received written and verbal evidence that the practical effect of the policy could mean cuts to other services. Everybody around the table has heard that evidence, which is in the *Official Report*.

I understand that you say that the policy is fully funded with £30 million for free school meals for P1 to P3 and £10 million to extend free school

meals to all children of parents who receive full tax credits. Is the policy of smaller class sizes fully funded?

Adam Ingram: That is irrelevant to the order.

Ken Macintosh: I will explain why the question is relevant. You claim that the free school meals policy is fully funded. I am trying to work out what other commitments that you have imposed on local government are fully funded. Is the policy of smaller class sizes fully funded?

Adam Ingram: I am saying that the free school meals policy is fully funded. We are here to discuss the order on free school meals.

Ken Macintosh: Local authorities have told us that the Government has placed several obligations on them but has not fully funded them to deliver all those policies. You suggest that the free school meals policy is fully funded. Local authorities say that that is debatable. Unless that policy is fully funded, something else will be cut to ensure that it is delivered. That is what local authorities tell us will be the practical effect of the policy.

Adam Ingram: I am sorry, but I think that the financial settlement to which COSLA and local authorities have signed up has been misunderstood.

Ken Macintosh: I am not misunderstanding that; I am just repeating the evidence. You are suggesting that the school meals policy is fully funded and you can point to the figures. Can you point to any other policy in the concordat that affects education—smaller class sizes or access to a nursery teacher or a specialist PE teacher and two hours of PE—that is fully funded?

11:15

Adam Ingram: This particular policy is fully funded and we have revealed the figures that were included in the grant settlement that we agreed with COSLA.

Ken Macintosh: I agree that you have said that this policy is fully funded, but is any other policy fully funded? Local authorities will have to decide between implementing this policy and implementing a range of other commitments to which they have signed up.

Adam Ingram: Local authorities signed up to the concordat and believed that the commitments within it could be delivered within the financial settlement that was agreed between the Scottish Government and COSLA.

Ken Macintosh: The committee has a dilemma. It is interesting that you are defending the school meals policy by arguing that it is fully funded, but that you are not prepared to use that argument in

defence of any of your other policies. Is the implication that that policy is more important than the others?

Adam Ingram: No, I take issue with that. The Scottish Government and COSLA negotiated a financial settlement and we agreed that a number of commitments in the concordat will be delivered by local government. I do not see the problem that you are trying to highlight.

Ken Macintosh: The problem is a stark one, and I am surprised that you have not picked up on it already. It has leapt out of the evidence that we have heard that, when it comes to the crunch, local authorities will have to choose between funding free school meals for P1 to P3 pupils and many other education services. They are saying to us that that is the practical effect of the commitment to the policy and that they would like to implement the policy, if it is fully funded, but they are worried.

Perhaps you can advise me. If it is a choice between pupil support or additional support for learning and free school meals, which should the local authorities opt for?

Adam Ingram: Local authorities should make decisions based on their local needs and circumstances, and, for the first time, they are being allowed to make those decisions. We are trusting local authorities to make the appropriate decision for their local communities. The whole point of removing ring fencing was so that local authorities could respond flexibly and appropriately to local needs and circumstances, and we are proud that we are able to do that. We are engaged in partnership with local authorities to deliver all the benefits of what we have agreed with them, and that it is a major step forward.

Ken Macintosh: If a local authority had to choose between funding a breakfast club or holiday meals provision and free school meals for P1 to P3 pupils, which should be given priority?

Adam Ingram: I am sorry, but you are basing your question on the false premise that local authorities will have to choose between the services that they deliver. We can have breakfast clubs and free school lunches; they are not mutually exclusive.

Ken Macintosh: I agree, but which is your priority? You are asking for them all to be delivered. Which is the priority?

Adam Ingram: The priorities are outlined in the concordat.

Ken Macintosh: For my information, which is the more important of the two strands of tackling poverty and improving health in Scotland that the policy seeks to address?

Adam Ingram: Again, that is a false choice. They are both very important and, of course, health inequalities and poverty are interlinked. It is a scandal that, in Scotland, with all the wealth and resources at its command, one in four children lives in poverty. We are determined to do something about that, and our policy will help in that regard.

Ken Macintosh: I agree that it is a scandal that one in four children lives in poverty in Scotland, but I am slightly at a loss in trying to understand how the answer to tackling poverty is for you to take an approach that will not direct money at poverty and which might mean diverting resources away from children who live in poverty and currently enjoy breakfast clubs or free meals through out-of-hours provision.

Adam Ingram: But we are extending eligibility for free school meals across the board to the children of all those in receipt of working tax credit or child tax credit.

Ken Macintosh: My party is wholly signed up to that anti-poverty measure—indeed, I think that the Scottish National Party simply copied it from our manifesto—but the policy that we are discussing does not strike me as focused. I am trying to work out whether it is an anti-poverty measure or a health measure.

Adam Ingram: It is an ambitious policy to tackle more than one thing at a time. We are trying to tackle the country's long-term unhealthy eating habits. As I said in my opening remarks, we are trying to effect a culture change to improve eating habits; in so doing, we will tackle the impact of poverty. Therefore, the policy is inclusive.

The Convener: Four members have indicated that they want to ask supplementary questions. We still have to debate the motion on the draft order, so I ask members to remember to ask questions, not make statements. I will cut you off if you make a statement, because we will have an opportunity to debate the motion later.

Margaret Smith: I want to return to the number of people who live in poverty. The minister said that it is generally believed that 25 per cent of children in Scotland live in poverty—obviously, that figure is disturbing—and that 15 per cent of children are registered for free school meals, albeit that only 11 per cent take them up. We welcome the further targeting of those in need to take in families who receive maximum tax credits—that policy will come in next autumn—but how many of the missing 10 per cent between the 15 per cent and the 25 per cent are likely to be caught by that measure? If the on-going cost is £40 million, how many children will be covered once that measure is out of the way?

Adam Ingram: We estimate that some 44,000 children will have their eligibility for free school meals brought online.

Margaret Smith: Okay, but that is across all age groups.

Adam Ingram: Yes. We are talking about probably less than half the gap, but it is a significant chunk.

Margaret Smith: Okay.

As a parent, I can comfortably afford to pay for my child's school meals. Why should those meals be paid for me while there is at least a possibility that other key services might be lost or impacted on as a result of the order? I am concerned about that.

Given what we have heard from Children in Scotland and others, do you accept that it appears that, in some areas at least, the uptake of free school meals by those who were not entitled to them before has been proportionately higher and that, over the piece, there seems to have been a much more modest increase in uptake by those who were previously eligible for them? Proportionately, the people who are most likely to benefit are therefore those who were not entitled to free school meals before, such as my family. Do you accept that the vast majority of people who will benefit from the order are not living in poverty, although something will be done for many of those who are?

Adam Ingram: Obviously, we know that one in four children lives in poverty, so a universal scheme will also benefit the majority who do not live in poverty. However, as I indicated, Scotland's poor health record is not solely found in the group of children who live in poverty; it is across the piece. If we want to change our habits and culture, we must do so on a universal basis. We cannot do that by just targeting a minority; we must take a whole population approach. Other universal services are in place, and universal provision of free school meals is an addition to their number.

Margaret Smith: We considered the issue of free school meals many years ago when I was convener of the former Health and Community Care Committee, and my recollection is that the issue of stigma had a high priority in our discussions on free school meals. I was pleasantly surprised, therefore, by the suggestion in Ipsos MORI's evaluation report on the pilot that stigma did not seem to play a part and was not an issue. Because the policy will be targeted only at P1 to P3 pupils, other children will not be reached, and there will be differences in each school dining hall. Do you believe that the measures that local authorities and schools have taken over the past few years have helped to reduce stigma in relation to free school meals?

Adam Ingram: Yes, I believe that they have. Making the provision of free school meals anonymous was a step forward. Certainly, universal provision for P1 to P3 pupils means that, by definition, there will be no opportunity for stigma to appear.

Claire Baker: Margaret Smith raised issues that are similar to those that I wanted to ask about, so I will be brief. Despite the extension of eligibility for free school meals to children whose parents receive the maximum working families tax credit, there will still be a gap between the number of children who have been identified as living in poverty and the number who will receive a free school meal, as the minister acknowledged. The rough calculation is that the number of children involved is about 50,000. What steps will the Government take to provide additional support for the group of children who, as the minister acknowledged, live in poverty but will not be helped either by the extension of free school meals to all primary 1 to 3 pupils or by the extension of eligibility for free school meals to children of parents who claim the maximum working families tax credit?

Adam Ingram: The Government will announce its anti-poverty framework in the near future, which will perhaps give you an idea of our thinking in that area. However, I would not like to pre-empt that at this stage.

Claire Baker: So there is no intention to extend universal provision to other groups.

Adam Ingram: Our commitment for this parliamentary session was to introduce universal free school meals for children in P1 to P3. We will need to look beyond the next spending review for future policy development.

Elizabeth Smith: In light of the answers that you gave to Mr Macintosh and Margaret Smith, and given the importance that you feel the policy has for the areas of health and poverty, why have you chosen not to make the provision of free school meals a statutory obligation on councils?

Adam Ingram: Because we have a different way of operating with councils now. It is no longer a question of our dictating, stipulating, legislating or making statutory provision; we are trying to work in partnership with councils. Although we have passed a lot of legislation in the Parliament, where we have perhaps had a problem is in fully and properly implementing it. We need to engage with people and win their hearts and minds at grass-roots level to deliver policies such as this one. We start from that basis.

11:30

Kenneth Gibson: Has the Scottish Government considered the cost of means testing, were that to be introduced, as opposed to the costs involved with a universal benefit?

Adam Ingram: With regard to what?

Kenneth Gibson: There has been discussion among committee members about whether the policy should be more targeted at the 40,000 children concerned. John Dickie gave the committee that figure for the number of children in poverty who would be helped by the measure. Is there any indication as to how much it would cost if all P1 to P3 children were to be means tested, as opposed to rolling out a universal benefit to all children?

Adam Ingram: I am afraid that I do not have any figures to hand for that. Obviously, there is a bureaucracy involved in means testing. I am afraid that we will have to introduce some bureaucracy when we extend the eligibility rules, but if we reduce some in the early years, we will come out even.

Kenneth Gibson: The issue is always between targeting and universality. I hear what colleagues such as Margaret Smith and Claire Baker have said, but I would point out that we have universal child benefit, for example, which helps children regardless of the economic circumstances of their parents. I take it that that is the sort of philosophy that you had behind the policy when you were considering the roll-out for P1 to P3.

Adam Ingram: Yes. If we wish to effect a transformational or cultural change, we must take a whole-population approach. If we want to make it cool to eat healthily, we need to get everyone engaged in that. We need peer support and peer pressures to apply. If only one identifiable group of people is being given the provision and it does not apply to the wider population, we lose the power of the approach that I have described.

Kenneth Gibson: There has been a lot of talk about whether local authorities have been fully funded. Is it not the case that a number of local authorities—for example, East Ayrshire, Moray and Inverclyde—have estimated the cost of the policy to be lower than the Scottish Government's own estimates? If anything, authorities should have some money left over from what they might have budgeted for implementation of the policy.

Adam Ingram: That is true. I have noted that. Some local authorities might get together when sourcing some of the material that they require, be it equipment or food. We are considering a Scotland-wide initiative on power supplies. There is considerable scope in such approaches. That is why we wanted to have a long lead-in time before

local authorities need to implement the policy. That will allow various cost-saving opportunities to be taken.

The Convener: That concludes our questions to the minister.

Item 2 is our continued consideration of the draft Provision of School Lunches (Disapplication of the Requirement to Charge) (Scotland) Order. I invite the minister to move motion S3M-2765.

Adam Ingram: Before I do so, would it be possible to have a short break?

The Convener: Absolutely. We intended to have a short break after item 2 but, given that up to 90 minutes is allowed for debating the motion, and just in case the committee wishes to take that time, we will suspend the meeting until 11.40.

11:34

Meeting suspended.

11:41

On resuming—

The Convener: I invite the minister to move motion S3M-2765.

Motion moved,

That the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee recommends that the draft Provision of School Lunches (Disapplication of the Requirement to Charge) (Scotland) Order 2008 be approved.—[*Adam Ingram.*]

The Convener: We now have up to 90 minutes to debate the order, although we do not have to take 90 minutes. I ask members to keep their points short and succinct. The minister will have an opportunity to respond to the debate. The opportunity to question the minister has passed, so members' contributions to the debate should be to make points following the evidence that they have heard in today's meeting and in previous meetings in relation to the item.

Ken Macintosh: I thank the minister for moving the motion and for presenting his arguments today. I do not disagree with his desire to tackle poverty in Scotland and improve health outcomes for our young people. I am sure that that desire is shared by all members of the committee. However, I worry about the effectiveness of the proposed measure in achieving either of those outcomes.

There is whole-hearted support for the anti-poverty measure—the extension of free school meals to pupils whose parents are in receipt of the maximum working families tax credits. I look forward to the implementation of that policy next year. Nevertheless, the committee has received very little evidence that the policy will deliver the

health improvements that we would all like to see. We have certainly not received any evidence to suggest that the policy will deliver no health benefits—the case has not been disproved—but we are all disappointed that there is no firm evidence of what it will deliver.

The pilot contrasts with a project that has been tried by several local authorities, including East Renfrewshire Council, which is the one with which I am familiar. The project sought to extend the provision of free school meals to young people during the school holidays. That was done by East Renfrewshire Council at its own cost, without any support from national Government. The benefits were measured and the project was found to have a tremendous effect on the young people's behaviour, health and educational attainment. That was out of school, during the summer holidays, but it was a tremendous success, and it was targeted at those who are most in need, although it had benefits all round.

11:45

If we want to make a difference to Scotland's children, when resources are scarce, they should be targeted at proven schemes such as that one, which are not funded centrally and which could be put in place throughout Scotland. That would make a real difference to Scotland's young people. However, although the minister could not give us firm figures, it seems that, at a minimum, three out of four of the children who will benefit from extending free school meals to all those in primary 1 to 3 will not be living in poverty. I am not saying that they will not benefit; the point is that they are not living in poverty. I question whether that should be our priority, given the pressing need to tackle poverty and improve the health of the poorest people in Scotland as well as all our children's health.

I have a concern about the wisdom or effectiveness of the policy, although I do not doubt the intent and desire behind it. My biggest fear is about the practical outcomes. It is up to the Government to make policy choices—that is its prerogative as the Executive. However, I worry that introducing the policy, even with the best of intentions, could have a negative effect. The evidence that we have heard suggests that the practical decisions that local authorities will take could be regressive—we could see cuts. When cuts happen in education services, they are always made to services that affect the most vulnerable children, such as pupil support and transport for disabled children. Cuts might also affect other anti-poverty measures such as breakfast clubs, which have been flagged up as being at risk.

I was rather disappointed by the minister's information on the costings and funding—I had hoped that he would have more information on that. I am sure that the minister is aware of my regard for the concordat. I do not disagree with the Government's desire to set local authorities free, as you call it, but I worry about the Government using the concordat as an excuse to hide behind, which I think is what is happening in this case. Difficult decisions will be taken by people other than ministers, and the fear is that those decisions will affect our children. That might not happen, but local authorities have flagged it up as something that could happen. It is not sufficient just to say that the policy is fully funded and that, on estimates that were made beforehand, local authorities can definitely deliver it. I want the minister to give a proactive and on-going commitment to the policy to ensure that, if or when it is introduced, it has no negative effect and that every effort is made to ensure that other budgets are not raided and classrooms are not affected.

I have several reservations, although I do not disagree with the general policy of improving health and tackling poverty.

Kenneth Gibson: I am not 100 per cent sure whether Ken Macintosh supports the motion, given his comments, but I certainly support it, for several reasons. First, I believe that the policy has been fully funded—that is what COSLA says and I have no reason to disagree. If it were not fully funded, local authorities and their representatives at COSLA would not have signed up to it, under the concordat. The Child Poverty Action Group has made it clear that about 40,000 children will benefit directly from the policy. As the minister pointed out, the universality will impact on the culture and health of other children, just as other universal benefits such as child benefit do. I understand that, in Mr Macintosh's constituency, 2,999 children in P1 to P3 will benefit from the policy.

Funding for the measure, as part of the local government settlement, was agreed by the three major parties in the Parliament on 7 February, under the Local Government Finance (Scotland) Order 2008, so it seems a bit churlish for members to raise concerns about it now. We have heard that all organisations in civic Scotland are wholeheartedly behind the policy. Given that we are a representative democracy, it is extremely important that we take on board the views of those organisations when developing and rolling out policy.

We have heard about a number of the benefits that the measure will have, such as its impact on the behaviour and cognition of children and the fact that it will enable children to explore new foods. Given that Mr Macintosh does not want to

be seen as the Grinch who stole Christmas, I am sure that, ultimately, the committee will rally behind the policy. As the minister pointed out, no local authority is opposed to our approving the order today. It is merely an enabling order, and we should roll forward with it.

I understand the points that one or two members, including Mr Macintosh, have made about funding issues. Money that was allocated in May may have been used for other purposes in the interim. It is good that I haven't given Mr Macintosh a fiver to go out and buy a loaf and pint of milk, because he might come back with a sack of spuds and say, "I spent the money on something else, but can I have another fiver so that I can go out and get your loaf and pint of milk?" That is a mundane analogy, but it makes the point that, although local authorities may have decided to spend money on other things, the commitment to delivery the free school meals policy remains. Given that no local authorities have told us that they will not deliver the policy, we should do all that we can to enable them—especially authorities such as East Ayrshire Council, which are enthusiastic about it—to do so.

Margaret Smith: We have received quite mixed evidence throughout the process. Generally, councils do not have a problem with the free school meals policy, as there is merit in what is proposed; I cannot argue against the minister's point that no council has written to say that it does not want to implement the policy because it has a fundamental problem with it. However, it is undoubtedly the case that a number of councils have expressed concerns about the funding implications of the measure. Although those concerns may be a result not just of the free school meals policy but of other pressures that they face at present, that is the real world in which councils live—issues must be dealt with.

The evidence that we took from anti-poverty groups was also mixed. Unfortunately, I was not present at that session, but I have read the evidence that we received. Groups such as Aberlour Child Care Trust and Barnardo's Scotland expressed concerns about the measure. Barnardo's Scotland said that better evidence for the long-term health benefits of the policy was needed. I welcome the minister's commitment to look at carrying out on-going research into the measure, if it is implemented, as even those who support it noticed that such evidence was lacking. That may be understandable, given the length of time during which the pilot scheme was in operation, but the issue is worth picking up.

Some people support the measure because it is almost a motherhood-and-apple-pie issue. No one wants a single child to live in poverty, so if the Government says that this is a poverty-tackling

measure, it is unlikely that many people will put up their hands to say that they are against it.

As the minister indicated this morning, the extension next year of child tax credit eligibility will mean that many of the children who are most in need will receive free school meals, irrespective of this universal P1 to P3 measure.

A number of people, including those in my party, will question whether we should be spending such a substantial amount of public money—I believe that we settled on a figure of £40 million—on this policy. Indeed, the Aberlour Child Care Trust, for one, thought that the jury is still out on whether it represents the best use of funds.

I am in a dilemma today. I could abstain and leave it to others further down the road to decide whether to take things forward and to see whether councils can deliver this policy. However, the Liberal Democrats neither put forward the policy in their two terms in government nor made it a commitment in their manifesto. We certainly welcome and support any move to extend the provision to children who are most in need, and are committed to finding ways of putting more money back into the pockets of families in Scotland. Colleagues are always reminding us that we have to find money from somewhere. However, this is not like Mrs Thatcher taking something away. This provision is not yet in place, and we question whether this is the most effective way of helping Scottish families or kick-starting the Scottish economy at this time.

I am a little disconcerted by Kenny Gibson's argument that colleagues who might have been misguided enough to support a previous SNP budget have already acquiesced in the progress of something that they might not fully support. At the end of his remarks, he turned round and said, "I think you should pass this, as it is only an enabling order." Well, I do not want to enable something that I do not necessarily agree with and that my party does not believe represents the best use of funding.

I do not wish to sound churlish; I want to make it quite clear that this policy is not without merit. We want the provision to be expanded to those who are in real need, but we do not think that spending this money on universal free school meal provision for children in P1 to P3, which will proportionately be of more benefit to those who are not in need, is the best way forward.

The minister and I will just have to disagree on this issue. However, in the circumstances, it would be disingenuous of me and my party to acquiesce in what is going on by simply agreeing that the order is an enabling measure and letting it go through by abstaining. As a result, I will vote against the motion.

As I have said, I wish the minister good speed in taking forward his broccoli campaign. I know that the whole committee supports a number of issues that have been raised this morning, including the need to fight poverty and to tackle stigma, and I am convinced that next year's extension of tax credits, which will mean that those most in need receive free school meals, will be a very good move in the right direction. However, we are unable and unwilling to take the further step that the minister wishes because we do not believe that, at the moment, it is the best use of taxpayers' money.

12:00

Claire Baker: I recognise the strength of support for the policy and the belief that is held by some members that it has merit and will achieve its aims. That said, I remain to be convinced either that it will tackle poverty effectively or that it makes the best use of resources in that respect. I have said before that when this policy is introduced in 2010 my daughter will be starting primary school and I just do not think that targeting resources at the child of two MSPs is the best way of addressing Scotland's serious child poverty issues.

I am also concerned that the possible funding pressures that the policy will create, which were discussed when we took evidence from local authorities, might lead to the limiting or cancellation of breakfast clubs, and I would have liked the Government's policies to have recognised the difficulties that some families face during holidays and to have said something about holiday meals provision. Indeed, Ken Macintosh highlighted a good example of how effective that policy can be in reaching the children who need to be reached. There is scope for expansion in those areas and such a move would do more to tackle child poverty.

It is clear from this morning's evidence and indeed previous evidence that pupils higher than P3 who have been identified as living in poverty will be reached neither by the P1 to P3 policy nor by the extension of eligibility to the children of parents on maximum working families tax credit.

As a Mid Scotland and Fife MSP, I was uncomfortable when the universal provision pilot was launched in north-east Fife, which has some of the best health indicators in the country, but not in the Raploch in Stirling, which has some of the worst. Unfortunately, Stirling Council has not yet indicated to the committee whether it feels confident about implementing the policy. The funding pressures that have been highlighted are important, and the Government must work with local authorities to address their funding concerns.

The committee is being asked to allow local authorities not to charge, but that instruction will be given not by this order but by the concordat. However, that is another debate that I am sure the committee will return to.

Aileen Campbell: Members will not be surprised to learn that I think that the policy is excellent. I make no apology for making my support so explicit. First, given that Parliament does not have all the tools for eradicating poverty in Scotland, we should do all that we can to alleviate some of its symptoms: introducing free school meals is a measure that we can take in that respect. As John Dickie pointed out, people who live in deprivation and poverty benefit more from the universal approach. We can also learn from the Nordic countries which, as well as having lower levels of poverty, higher standards of living, longer life expectancy and all the rest, have a higher take-up of free school meals. We need to change attitudes to health. People, for example, benefit from eating and socialising together, and Children in Scotland has said that it wants to consider any long-term benefits of providing free school meals and any savings that the approach might make in the NHS.

The policy has attracted a number of supporters including, as Kenny Gibson said, civic society. Councils have indicated that parents not only support it but are actively engaged in school meals in a way that they might never have been before. That cannot be understated. Even Jamie Oliver, in evidence that he gave at Westminster, signalled his support for the policy and thinks that it should be rolled out elsewhere.

The policy's benefits can be backed up with evidence. For example, evidence from the Hull scheme suggests that free school meals improve children's health, their behaviour in school and their social relationships. Moreover, the School Food Trust has highlighted many of the benefits of the free school meals schemes that have been introduced in other countries, and Ipsos MORI has also indicated the policy's positive aspects.

My problem with Margaret Smith's comment about seeking more and more evidence is that if we hum and haw for as long as we like, we will end up simply doing nothing. Scotland's waistline is expanding and one in four children is living in poverty: something has to be done. The various evidence that we have received proves that the policy will work. We must take action now to solve some of the chronic problems.

The policy is a social leveller and a social democratic move that has been signed up to by all councils. As the minister made clear in response to members' questions, it is our duty to look after all children regardless of their background or income. After all, just because you suffer from

poor health does not necessarily mean that you come from a poor background.

If we can do stuff now to change palates and attitudes, we should grasp that opportunity with both hands. We should do all that we can to enable councils not to charge for their meals and to ensure that every child from primary 1 to primary 3 is entitled to a free school meal, which will give them the chance to benefit in the long term and make the country a healthier place in the future.

Elizabeth Smith: This has been a good debate and the evidence has been compelling. I am persuaded of two important things. First, I am persuaded of the extreme need to help those who are in poverty—we should have a policy that is targeted specifically at helping those people. I am also persuaded by councils' evidence that they feel uncomfortable about their ability to deliver the policy in difficult economic circumstances in which they will have to make compromises. I will be voting against the motion on the basis that I do not believe that the policy is designed to help those who are most in need.

Christina McKelvie: I will, rightly and confidently, support the measure. We have heard a lot of churlish negativity and scaremongering around this policy, so I will highlight some of the positives. We have seen an increase in uptake of school meals in primary 1 to primary 3 from 53 per cent to 75 per cent and an increase in uptake in primary 4 to primary 7, which is, I believe, because parents can afford to send an older child for a paid school meal. That is extremely positive and welcome.

My colleague Aileen Campbell mentioned the positive impact on attainment and concentration. One of the other benefits, which was mentioned in the Ipsos MORI research and some of the evidence that the committee took, as well as evidence from projects in other countries, is that behaviour in the classroom improved when free meals were provided. That would be extremely welcome throughout Scotland.

One of the other positives of the policy is that it is a catch-all for all young people who are in need. It might not pick up everybody, but it picks up the majority. The evidence from all the charities and children's groups we heard from was that that is extremely welcome.

I am not going to quote Pat Watters again, because there is no need to do so, but we heard from COSLA that the policy is fully funded and that it is a commitment in the "historic concordat", as we like to call it. When I questioned the four local authorities that gave evidence to the committee last week, they all agreed that they had signed up

to that part of the concordat and that they understood fully what the commitment meant.

One of the other really positive impacts of the policy is its dramatic effect on stigmatisation, which is always an issue in Scotland that we should address. The matter is topical—we will debate in Parliament this week issues around stigmatisation and how to end it, which some of the children's charities have been discussing. If the policy can help with that, it is welcome.

I have always been extremely proud of Scotland and of how we take the lead on lots of things. We obviously have not taken the lead on free school meals in a global sense, but we can learn from the countries that have. This country introduced free universal education; it is good that we are coming back to that position under this Government. I am extremely proud of that. We have a good record of making policy that puts children at the heart of a successful Scotland and the policy that we are discussing is one of the strands of that. It will not sort everything, but it is part of a fabric—a tartan, let us say—of policies that will address some of the inequalities in Scotland and bring through a really successful group of young people of whom we can be extremely proud.

The Convener: As we consider the order, we need to remember that if it is approved, it will give no guarantee that an additional free school meal will be provided to any child anywhere in Scotland. I get the sense that, perhaps, we will return to the debate about provision of free school meals on another day, should the committee choose to approve the order.

I agree with the minister that we should allow local authorities to be able to respond to local needs. That is important; I certainly would not want to tie the hands of my colleagues in local government. However, it strikes me as being somewhat odd that the Government believes in allowing local authorities to determine such things, but tells them that they must provide free school meals to children in primaries 1, 2 and 3. We will see whether that happens.

In his opening statement, the minister was at great pains to stress that the policy is based on the aim of improving health. One frustration that I have encountered as a committee member has resulted from the fact that there is very little evidence that suggests that the policy will improve health. That is not to say that there are no merits in the policy, that tackling obesity is not a worthy aim, or that trying to improve our nation's long-term health outcomes is not important, but it is frustrating that evidence does not exist. Perhaps some people would have been more comfortable if more extensive evidence had been provided and a longer pilot scheme had been undertaken to provide evidence.

I am particularly concerned that the order is being promoted as a measure that will address poverty. It will not: it will ensure that all children in primaries 1 to 3 receive access to free school meals if their local authorities choose to deliver such meals. The Government has certainly not been as wedded to the principle of universality with the central heating initiative—perhaps universality is much more important in providing free school meals for children in primaries 1 to 3. The changes that will be introduced in August next year, which will ensure that families in receipt of maximum working families tax credits will be eligible for free school meals, will do far more to tackle poverty than will giving free school meals to every child in primaries 1 to 3.

The minister's evidence on the number of children who will benefit from the policy and the number of children who will be taken out of poverty was disappointing. It was also rather disappointing and unfortunate that, despite the fact that he had a number cruncher with him, he could not provide definitive figures: after all, the Government has considered the policy, which is undoubtedly one of its flagship policies, for more than a year. I am sure that we will return to many of the issues that I have mentioned.

We need to be mindful of what our colleagues in local government have said to us. They expressed serious concerns not about the desire to tackle poverty, but about the policies that will be affected as a result of their being forced to spend money in such a way. It is therefore important for the minister to reassure us that there will be an audit of education services, that we are given commitments that there will be no cuts in breakfast services throughout Scotland as a result of the policy, that there will be no reductions in PE tuition, and that the number of classroom assistants will not be cut. Those are only a few areas that may be affected by implementation of the Government's policy.

12:15

Irrespective of what happens today—unless we vote down the order—we will return to those issues in the future and will debate them again as local government grapples with the concordat and with the reality of having to deliver the policy. It may be fully funded, but the commitments on class sizes, PE and many others are not nearly as fully funded. It is now up to the minister to respond to all the points that have been made during the debate.

Adam Ingram: Thank you, convener. I will go through the points that most members have raised. The first was on the lack of evidence that the policy will have health benefits. I am disappointed that we have not managed to secure

support for the measure from Liz Smith and Margaret Smith and their respective parties. The benefit of universality would come through in respect of health—I note that Liz Smith is shaking her head. I quote Professor Mike Lean, who is the head of human nutrition at the University of Glasgow, who said:

“Children who have nutritionally balanced school meals will be in better health, will be able to grow and function and do a lot better. Part of children's upbringing should be for them to get free school meals”.

One of the country's top experts on nutrition suggests that great gains are to be made in respect of the nation's health through the provision of free school meals, and I fully subscribe to that view. That alone would be enough to convince me to implement the policy, but on top of that it will bring other benefits.

Secondly, tackling poverty is very important. The universal approach will ensure that all children who are living in poverty in the P1 to P3 age group will receive a proper nutritious meal in the middle of the day. One of the big problems that we have had is that a lot of poverty has been hidden from view. People have not been eligible for or have not registered for free school meals. The measure will deal with that head on and will ensure that that hidden poverty is tackled. Moreover, as I said in my opening remarks, we are going into a period of economic downturn in which lots of families will, unfortunately, face a great deal of difficulty. The policy is due to be introduced in 2010. I hope that we might be over the downturn by then, but if we are not, the policy will be of significant benefit to hard-pressed families, not all of whom have the benefit of our level of salaries. I suggest that that is another very good reason for supporting the policy.

Third, Ken Macintosh, Margaret Smith and Claire Baker suggested that this policy might be competing with other ones, but I disagree. The scheme that Ken Macintosh mentioned in East Renfrewshire, which gave pupils free meals during school holidays, was very good. I encourage local authorities to take forward such initiatives. Most local authorities run breakfast clubs, particularly in schools in deprived areas, and I would like to encourage continuation of that. I do not see any competition between the delivery of free school lunches and any of those initiatives; in fact, I see complementarity developing there.

Finally, exceptional pressures have caused local authorities to express their concerns about the policy: I acknowledge that. We appear to be moving into a period in which some food, fuel and energy costs will come down, so I hope that local authorities will not feel so much of that particular pain.

My final point is on how delivery of the commitments, including the provision of free school meals, will be monitored. The single outcome agreement process with local government stipulates that there will be an annual report on delivery of each of the commitments. We, as elected representatives, and the public will be able to study that. As you rightly pointed out, convener, we are not forcing local authorities to adopt the policy of free school meals for children in P1 to P3; rather, we are enabling councils that want to provide those meals to do so. I am confident that all local authorities in Scotland will respond positively to that opportunity.

I commend the policy to the committee.

The Convener: Thank you, minister. The question is, that motion S3M-2765 be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Convener: There will be a division.

FOR

Aileen Campbell (South of Scotland) (SNP)
Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP)
Christina McKelvie (Central Scotland) (SNP)

AGAINST

Elizabeth Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD)

ABSTENTIONS

Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab)
Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)

The Convener: The result of the division is: For 3, Against 2, Abstentions 3.

Motion agreed to.

[*Applause.*]

The Convener: I remind the committee that it is not normal practice for members to applaud anything that happens in our meetings—no matter how sycophantic or proud they may be.

That concludes the committee's consideration of the matter. I suspend the meeting briefly to allow the minister and his officials to leave.

12:22

Meeting suspended.

12:23

On resuming—

Petition

Foreign Languages Policy (PE1022)

The Convener: I reconvene the meeting and we move to item 3 on the agenda, which is consideration of petition PE1022, on modern languages. The committee has concluded its agreed work on the petition and we are now asked to consider what further action—if any—we want to take. It has been suggested that we may consider closing the petition. I seek members' views.

Ken Macintosh: I feel that this is a slightly unsatisfactory end to the petition. Although we do not get involved in processing curricular issues, when the petition was first presented to us we all agreed that it raised an important issue regarding language development policy in general. I think that we were hoping for something more positive than what has been delivered. The responses offer little for us to hold on to; there has been little advance in the priority that is given to languages.

I am reluctant to accept the response from the cabinet secretary as the final word. We had hoped that the report from the Scottish funding council might suggest a way of making progress and might offer a clear policy focus, but it does not. The report simply said that the issue is important and has to be balanced against other issues; it does not give any real priority to languages and it does not map a way forward.

The cabinet secretary's response referred to the new baccalaureate and the curriculum for excellence. That does not fill me with reassurance. The curriculum for excellence has been delayed for a year, and we have yet to see the baccalaureate.

Rather than being satisfied or encouraged, I feel that the petition is ending with a whimper rather than a bang. Instead of it ending here, would it be possible for us to write to the petitioner for his views on the responses? I am not saying that that would take us much further forward, but I do not want the petition to end on a down note. I would like to hear the petitioner's views on some of the positive suggestions that we could still pursue. We should delay closing the petition until after we have heard those views.

Elizabeth Smith: This issue is huge, but modern languages are just one aspect of the whole curriculum. The debate will be much broader. The Government is currently digesting the results of the consultation exercise on Scottish Qualifications Authority exams. The universities

are pitching in as well. There is still time to discuss the issue that is raised by the petition: Ken Macintosh was right to say that it would be interesting to hear the petitioner's views. However, the issue fits into a much broader context. I think the Government sees it that way, as well. Scope exists for discussions on the broader perspectives of the curriculum, how they measure up against the curriculum for excellence, and how they relate to the new Scottish Qualifications Authority exams and to what the universities and colleges are saying.

Such discussions will go on for some time yet. It would therefore be interesting to be a bit more focused about specific requests—such as the one that is made in the petition—rather than simply saying that we want a subject to be taught more and taught better. We need to know exactly what the Government is proposing, within the context of the proposals for SQA reform and the curriculum.

Margaret Smith: I associate myself with what has just been said. Discussions on the curriculum for excellence, and on how we make progress with qualifications, will probably be with us for a considerable time.

I have no problem with Ken Macintosh's suggestion that we ask the petitioner what he thinks of the responses that we have received. I would be content to have the petition left still on the stocks, so to speak. We know that we will come back to the issue that is raised by the petition during our discussions on wider issues such as the curriculum for excellence and qualifications. I would be uncomfortable about closing the petition. The debate will open in another way during the coming months, so I am happy to go along with Ken Macintosh's suggestion and to see where it takes us.

The Convener: No other member has asked to speak. It appears that the committee agrees that we should write to the petitioner to seek his views.

Liz Smith made the valid point that the committee will return to the wider issues. The petitioner's views will be factored in, although they will not be the only views that we will consider when we discuss the wider issues of delayed implementation of the curriculum for excellence and the introduction of the baccalaureate.

Does the committee agree to keep the petition open, to write to the petitioner enclosing copies of the responses that we have received, and to seek his views, which we will consider at a later date?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: That concludes our consideration of agenda item 3. I remind the committee that our next formal meeting will be on 3 December. However, we will meet informally

next week for a round-table discussion with voluntary organisations and charities about the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004.

Meeting closed at 12:31.

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