



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

EDUCATION AND CULTURE COMMITTEE

Tuesday 25 February 2014

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EDUCATION AND CULTURE COMMITTEE

5th Meeting 2014, Session 4

CONVENER

*Stewart Maxwell (West Scotland) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*George Adam (Paisley) (SNP)
*Clare Adamson (Central Scotland) (SNP)
*Jayne Baxter (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
*Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
*Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP)
*Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD)
*Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Dr Alasdair Allan (Minister for Learning, Science and Scotland's Languages)
Dr Janet Brown (Scottish Qualifications Authority)
Larry Flanagan (Educational Institute of Scotland)
Richard Goring (Scottish Secondary Teachers Association)
Graeme Logan (Education Scotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Terry Shevlin

LOCATION

Committee Room 1

Scottish Parliament

Education and Culture Committee

Tuesday 25 February 2014

[The Convener *opened the meeting at 10:00*]

Subordinate Legislation

Designation of Regional Colleges (Scotland) Order 2014 (SSI 2014/22)

Protection of Vulnerable Groups (Scotland) Act 2007 (Miscellaneous Provisions) Amendment Order 2014 (SSI 2014/33)

The Convener (Stewart Maxwell): Good morning and welcome to the fifth meeting of the Education and Culture Committee in 2014. I remind all those who are present to ensure that all electronic devices are switched off, particularly mobile phones, as they interfere with the broadcasting system.

Our first agenda item is consideration of two negative Scottish statutory instruments. If members do not have any comments to make on either of them, does the committee agree to make no recommendation to the Parliament on the instruments?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Curriculum for Excellence (National Qualifications)

10:01

The Convener: Agenda item 2 is evidence on the curriculum for excellence national qualifications. I welcome our first panel of witnesses to the meeting. We have with us Graeme Logan from Education Scotland, Larry Flanagan from the Educational Institute of Scotland, Richard Goring from the Scottish Secondary Teachers Association and Dr Janet Brown from the Scottish Qualifications Authority. Thank you all for your attendance and for supplying written evidence in advance.

The committee recognises that there have been concerns about the new qualifications, which is why we are holding this evidence session. The aim is to seek assurances that the new qualifications will be delivered as intended and to the benefit of both pupils and their families and that parents and pupils are well prepared and reassured that everything and everybody is in place for the qualifications. Neil Bibby will begin our questioning.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): Good morning, everybody. I read your written evidence over the weekend. The EIS and SSTA have raised serious concerns about the implementation of the senior phase of curriculum for excellence. That follows on from a number of surveys that you have carried out over the past year or so. Contrary to that, we have heard the Scottish Government and other agencies offer reassurances. How aware are the implementation group, Education Scotland and the Scottish ministers of the workload pressures that have been raised? Do they recognise those pressures as a potential barrier to the successful and on-going implementation of curriculum for excellence?

Larry Flanagan (Educational Institute of Scotland): Our submission adopts the same position as the SSTA. Our key priority at this stage is to ensure that the first diet is a successful one for the young people who are currently in secondary 4. Teachers across Scotland are working extremely hard to ensure that, irrespective of the hurdles that have existed throughout the year, the new national 4 and national 5 diet delivers for young people and their families.

Workload has been one of the key barriers. The EIS has not for a considerable time witnessed as much feedback about workload as we have had in the past year. There is always workload pressure in teaching, and some of the current workload is natural because we have a new set of qualifications with new challenges. However, the

issue has been compounded by the fact that some aspects of the process have been frustrating for teachers. For example, the value of some of the additional mechanisms, such as the SQA verification procedures, has not been apparent. We understand that those mechanisms are a quality assurance instrument, but they have become a real workload pressure.

When effort is seen to be being expended on things that are not essential learning and teaching aspects of the school experience, that becomes frustrating, because people want to concentrate on learning and teaching. We are at a crucial stage in relation to national 5, which is an external exam, because at this stage in the year people really want to focus on exam skills, exam practice and getting young people ready for the national exam on which the qualification will be graded. Therefore, workload has been a key issue.

We have raised the workload issue on a number of occasions and there have been attempts to address it. The curriculum for excellence working group on tackling bureaucracy was a very useful forum in which to explore it, and that group's document came out in November and arrived in schools in February. However, I highlight the fact that the group concluded its work in November and, by the time the document was printed and distributed to schools, it was two or three months further on. By the time they get a chance to look at it, there will have been another period of time. That is one of the issues. Although something has been published on a website, that does not mean that it has been put into practice in schools. That has been one of the difficulties, but that work has addressed or will, I hope, address some of the workload issues.

Once we get past this diet, we will be keen to look back over the first year of the senior phase to review the processes that have operated and try to streamline them, because the level of workload is unsustainable as we move towards the new highs next year. We must review the process, see what we can strip out to make the bureaucracy or paperwork a bit leaner, and ensure that the focus is where it should be: on the classroom and the teaching and learning process.

Richard Goring (Scottish Secondary Teachers Association): I agree with everything that Larry Flanagan has said. Around three weeks ago, we surveyed our members electronically and had an unprecedented response from our members in schools. A huge number of comments were made, and the workload was mentioned in a huge number of them. Many teachers said that they were working way in excess of their contractual hours: people often mentioned working 50 or 60 hours, and some were working even more than that. Probably 50 per cent of

respondents—if not more—talked about workload being a major issue.

As Larry Flanagan said, the problem is that we are keen that pupils achieve well this year. We want CFE to work and are fully supportive of the whole idea of it, but we simply feel that there is not enough time to think about or evaluate what we have done. There are real concerns about the transition between national 5 and higher, because many people have not had time to look at the higher courses yet to prepare and plan, and there is no time at the end of this session to look back at national 4 and national 5 to try to amend, improve and move on. The workload issue is therefore a major one.

Working time agreements are linked to that. As members will know, working time agreements in schools, which are agreements between the management and staff of schools that are signed off by the union and others, try to create a workload limit for teachers, but they are totally inadequate. There is no way that they meet needs and that really needs to be looked at in trying to manage the workload.

The Convener: Okay. Thank you.

Graeme Logan (Education Scotland): Good morning, everyone. We are very aware of what is happening through our visits to schools. We have been in 92 secondary schools since the end of September, for example, to support teachers, work directly alongside senior management teams, and provide as much tailored help and support as we can. We must all acknowledge that the introduction anywhere in the world of a new curriculum and a new system of qualifications is likely to increase teacher workload and levels of anxiety, because teachers want to get it right and do the best for the pupils they work with.

Working with teachers, we have produced an extensive range of course materials and materials for other teachers. I agree with Larry Flanagan on the report of the curriculum for excellence working group on tackling bureaucracy, which we are ensuring that we follow through. For example, school inspectors have been fully briefed on it, and we will follow up the recommendations in discussion with schools. We are continually reinforcing the need for streamlined approaches to assessment and planning and the importance of teachers spending their time on teaching and learning and assessment, not on paperwork that is not necessary.

Our course materials for N4 and N5 have been extensively used by the profession, and there have been approximately 60,000 hits on the website to access material, which is very positive. Our teams are in schools every day, throughout the country, reassuring practitioners, working

alongside them, ensuring that they have access to the materials that they need, and providing any tailored support that is required, and we continue to offer further tailored support to any department or school that feels that it needs it.

We are seeing some very positive evidence of the impact of teachers' efforts; for example, since September 2011, 90 per cent of inspected schools have had a key strength around young people's attributes, such as motivation and confidence. So, we are seeing real evidence of the effort that teachers have been putting into transforming learning and teaching through curriculum for excellence.

Yesterday, we had around 200 secondary heads and deputies at an event with the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland, School Leaders Scotland and the Scottish Qualifications Authority, and we saw some outstanding examples of how senior phase models are transforming opportunities for young people in Scotland and enabling them to get the best blend of qualifications, skills and achievements to meet their needs. We are seeing the benefits of that beginning to be realised for young people. We need to continue to work together. We continue to listen and work closely with the EIS, SSTA and others to ensure that when we intervene, we provide the best possible support for teachers.

Dr Janet Brown (Scottish Qualifications Authority): One of the things that we have been doing over the past several months is very much focusing on the engagement that we have with teachers and with the professions to really understand the challenge associated with the introduction of the new qualifications. The teachers are absolutely focused on ensuring that they take the best advantage of curriculum for excellence, and the qualifications play an important part in that. The SQA's responsibility is to ensure that we maintain the standards of the qualifications, so a lot of the things that we are doing are about trying to ensure that we balance the amount of activity that we ask teachers to undertake with the necessary requirement to maintain standards.

Over the past few weeks, we have looked at the verification results that we have just had, and a series of messages have been given to us as a result of that process. We learned that the nature of the assessment that curriculum for excellence is moving towards is a journey on which teachers are travelling. Some teachers have really excellent examples, which we have seen in the verification process, of different approaches that they can take to assessment when they are assessing multiple different outcomes within one particular assessment. Other teachers are finding it more difficult to move towards that and, as a result,

have probably undertaken a lot of assessment on individual outcomes that has resulted in their feeling that they have had to do a significantly increasing amount of assessment.

One of the things that we have learned from that is about making sure that we respond to teachers' concerns and work with them to share the information that we have from other teachers on how assessment is able to capture multiple different things within one assessment. We are looking at developing mechanisms by which we can share that in a broader sense. However, over the past few weeks, we have been delivering subject-specific, continuous professional development events for teachers to share practice and information, so that we can allow teachers to adjust their workload by taking a different approach to assessment. Therefore, we are very aware of that issue.

Another aspect of the workload issue is the amount of material that is available to teachers to enable them to share knowledge of what is going on with the new qualifications. We have tried to ensure that we make it easier for teachers to find out how things have changed, what has changed and what they need to look for to be able to implement the different approaches to the qualifications that we are taking right now.

Teachers are passionate about ensuring that they do the right thing, and it is the SQA's job to ensure that we make that as easy for them as possible while maintaining standards. We have had several meetings with the teachers' unions and with individual teachers. We have a liaison group that goes across the country and that is specifically dedicated to going into schools to find out from teachers what their concerns are and get their questions. We not only seek to answer those questions on the day, but we publish the questions and answers so that teachers can get access to them. Therefore, we are trying to address things as quickly and efficiently as possible and to get the information from teachers and professional organisations to understand what challenges the teachers are facing and how we can respond to that. It is about communication, a shared understanding of where we are going and recognising that we all need to play a part in ensuring that the qualifications that the students get in the summer are valuable, valid and supportive of where they want to go in future.

10:15

Neil Bibby: I put on record my appreciation for the dedicated work of teachers and staff in what has clearly been a very busy time, when they have had to prepare and implement new national courses 3, 4 and 5, prepare for new higher courses in June and evaluate broad general

education courses. My follow-up question to the unions is: have the Scottish Government and other agencies underestimated the amount of work that is needed with such a comprehensive curriculum change? My follow-up question to Education Scotland and the SQA is: when did you first recognise the workload issues that teachers were experiencing?

Richard Goring: We have known for a long time that workload is an issue—it has always been an issue. Teachers tend not to be very good at changing what they are doing when they are not sure where they are going. That means that many teachers have been holding on to the things that they know and are comfortable with, although that does not necessarily fit with what CFE is about. It is almost as though there needs to be a change of mindset in teaching because CFE is so different but, because there is so much accountability for results, with league tables and whatever, teachers feel that they need to have something that they can hold on to. The idea of having assessments that measure different things is new to them, so they need to be trained on that and taught how to do it.

It is inevitable that the workload is huge just now, and I am quite sure that people are doing too much. There needs to be reassurance, and the best way of providing that is through things such as templates and exemplars, so that people can see how the process works. To me, it is clear that the real shortage of such things has produced the extra workload. If there is only one exemplar of an exam for pupils on the SQA website, for example, it is difficult for teachers to move away from that. Similarly, if there is one exemplar of an assessment unit, what happens if pupils have to resit?

For someone in a department with three different subjects, that issue will multiply. For example, many people in business education will be doing administration and business as well as possibly economics, computing and information technology—all those courses will be running in the same small department. So, generally, there is a huge workload. There is something almost like panic among some teachers, because they just do not feel that they are coping at all. The thought of next year moving on to something else new in all those areas is really daunting and is worrying an awful lot of teachers.

Larry Flanagan: The short answer is yes, the timescale for the work has been grossly underestimated. Without revisiting previous discussions, I have sat in the committee before and said that the EIS was clear that we wanted a one-year delay in the introduction of the qualifications so that there was a more effective timeline for schools to prepare. I say frankly,

without being cheeky, that you guys are all complicit in that, because not one political party supported the idea of a one-year delay. We argued strongly that, for schools to assimilate the changes and prepare for the senior phase, time had to be created in school.

I am sure that Richard Goring will agree that the issue with all the changes is the time. We cannot invent time, but people need time to assimilate what has happened or what should be happening in for example the broad general education in secondary 3.

One of the difficulties that we have now is that too many schools have not implemented year 3 of the broad general education effectively and some schools have gone for what is, in a sense, the least difficult option: they have replaced the standard grade exams in S4 with the new national 4 and national 5. However, if, at the end of this, all we have done is replace the exams, and we have not changed the pedagogical approach in schools or what year youngsters make their future choices, we will not have achieved curriculum for excellence.

CFE is much bigger than just a switch from standard grade to national 4 and 5. Far too many kids in S4 are doing national 4 exams. The target for CFE was that at the end of S3, the majority of pupils would be at CFE level 4. If they are at CFE level 4 in S3, they should not be doing national 4—they should be nowhere near it.

The target was to maintain breadth across the senior phase. You can really only do that if you plan your courses over S4 and S5. If you try to run seven courses in a year, you are squeezing the teaching time. Janet Brown might come back in on that. These courses are notionally 160 hours. In a school timetable, there is no such thing as a notional allocation of time. If it says 160 hours on the SQA website, your principal teacher of maths will want 160 hours. You cannot timetable seven times 160 hours into a school year, so the time that is available for teaching and learning gets squeezed. However, if you plan the courses over S4 and S5 and bypass lower-level exams—which was the big picture of CFE—you can maintain six or seven subject choices. You can also maintain the college link-up, which is another big part of the senior phase, which is just sitting at the side at the moment, and you can maintain the breadth and the balance between academic subjects and skills.

The time has been underestimated. We are where we are now and we are committed to getting through this year. However, we need to step back and think about what the bigger aims are of the senior phase. If we do not refocus on those bigger aims, we will end up with what is effectively the default model this year, which will become the norm. In my view, that would be a

betrayal of the bigger picture of CFE. We need to ensure that we realign our targets for the senior phase.

Dr Brown: You asked specifically when we recognised the issue of teacher workload. We have been working with teachers and teachers' representatives throughout CFE and we have tried to respond to the specific challenges that they raised. We have introduced additional support throughout the course of the implementation of the new qualifications to allow teachers to understand the areas of change and the areas of stability between the standard grade and the new qualification, and to get back their confidence that this is not all brand new. Some parts of the courses are where they were before. We have set out the areas of change and the areas of the skills introduction to allow teachers to understand better the level of change in the particular courses that we were talking about.

Larry Flanagan touched on the whole philosophy of CFE, which is about giving teachers back the professionalism to teach what they know and their excellence in their ability to teach students. It allows teaching to go back to teachers, as opposed to the prescriptive philosophy that might have been there in the past.

However, what comes along with that is the great uncertainty that Richard Goring has talked about. It is a difficult place for teachers to move to. As Larry Flanagan said, we need to ensure that we do not just replace the existing controls with new controls. It is about a balance between the level of exemplification—the examples that we provide—and supporting teachers to take on the role that they have been wanting and allowing them to develop their own assessments and expertise in terms of being able to judge the standard for their students. That is a very difficult blend of support and provision, which I think we have tried to balance.

On some occasions, there have been issues on which we have put additional support in place. We have talked to teachers and provided additional CPD events and events that allow teachers to ask questions about national 4 and national 5. We ran such events throughout last year and we are doing similar things for the new highs this year. It is critical for us to allow that engagement to ensure that we can respond to the workload. However, the change in the philosophy towards that of CFE is about allowing teachers to do what they do best, which is to teach the value of the subject and assess the capability of their students.

The role of the SQA is to attest to that ability through the qualifications that we provide, hence the blend of internal and external assessment, which truly allows students to be able to get credit for what they can do.

Graeme Logan: The timescales for the national qualifications were agreed through the curriculum for excellence management board four years ago. Since then, we have continued to work to that timescale and to deliver support materials, either ahead of time or on time.

Going back to the question about when we first recognised the workload issues, we have been working towards curriculum for excellence over the past 10 years and, for some teachers, depending on their approach to implementation at local level, workload has been higher at some times than it has been at others. For some secondary teachers, the workload has been higher this year than in previous years, given the introduction this year of N4 and N5. It depends on their own local arrangements for implementation. We keep in close contact with each local authority through our area lead officer network, and we provide support in accordance with local authorities' plans to implement curriculum for excellence so as to suit their local needs.

On the point about the vision for the senior phase, we are currently engaged in a programme of events to meet every secondary headteacher in Scotland. The first such event took place yesterday in Edinburgh and involved around 200 headteachers. The purpose of that is to look again at the rationale for the senior phase, to share some of the outstanding models that are emerging in schools across Scotland and to equip young people with a blend of skills, qualifications and achievements that is better than what they have ever had before.

Different models are emerging, with courses being planned over two years so that we avoid the two-term dash to higher, to which Larry Flanagan referred. That practice is emerging, and we see it as our job to share that across the system, to provide materials to support it and to bring schools together to enable them to learn from one another.

The Convener: Mr Bibby has a supplementary question. I ask the witnesses to try and make their answers a little briefer. I have been relaxed about the extensive answers at the start, but I now ask for them to be cut down in length. Otherwise, time will escape, and I want to get through quite a lot today. Members should cut down the length of their questions, and witnesses should cut down on their answers, if they do not mind.

Neil Bibby: In some local authority areas, it is difficult to get supply teachers to cover for teachers undertaking development work. I know that the pressures have resulted in some teachers undertaking a full timetable and covering for absent colleagues, due to a lack of supply teachers, and students undertaking national 4 courses when they would previously have been on exam leave.

What impact has the supply teaching issue had on workload and the implementation of the curriculum for excellence senior phase?

Larry Flanagan: In response to requests for additional support, the SQA recently made additional support conferences available to local authorities. The SQA did not have the funding to pay for supply teachers, and neither did local authorities—or they had difficulties getting supply in any case. Therefore, the additional support was offered as twilight support to schools. The difficulty is that schools are already fully committed with post-pupil-day activities. People were being asked to access additional support in their own time in effect. That all revolves around the difficulty with getting supply. Some local authorities responded differently and found resources to allow day release. However, the issue of supply has existed throughout the period.

The bigger question until the recent announcement has been the funding of supply. It has not been a key factor that people have not been able to go out to schools. For one-day courses in the secondary sector, people would normally be released and covered internally anyway. The bigger issue for supply applies in the primary sector, where schools cannot really cover classes.

I know that you want me to hurry up, convener, but I wish to throw in a wee side ball. There are a number of significant issues in the primary sector that require to be addressed. Although there is a focus on the high stakes around national 4 and national 5, I would caution that the full implementation of CFE is not a done deal in the primary sector at this stage.

The Convener: How would you respond to that, Janet?

Dr Brown: As Larry Flanagan has pointed out, we have staged a significant number of events and a significant number of teachers have come to those events. For instance, almost 7,500 teachers have attended events that we have run for national 1 to 5. We have done full sessions at the existing and additional events that we run to support teachers. It is for local authorities to decide whether it is feasible to allow teachers to come out of school to attend those events.

10:30

The Convener: Do you have anything to add, Richard?

Richard Goring: Our survey and our experience in the office suggest that more and more teachers are off through absence, and a lot of that is related to workload and to stress. The provision of cover in appropriate subjects by

getting a subject specialist in is becoming increasingly difficult and often does not happen.

Graeme Logan: We have to acknowledge that teachers work in a whole variety of different creative ways to enable them to have time and space to work together. Often, they will work their collegiate hours to enable that. We have done a number of successful events with the EIS, including conferences that take place on Saturdays, which some teachers choose to engage in. There is a variety of different ways in which teachers can come together, and their commitment is such that they will often work flexibly to enable that to happen. The Scottish Government announcement of further financial support for additional time and space will enable a lot of local creative solutions and create ways of bringing teachers together to work flexibly.

Clare Adamson (Central Scotland) (SNP): Mr Goring, you mentioned that you had had an unprecedented response to your recent survey. I would like to ask you and each of the union representatives how many secondary school teachers you represent and what percentage of them responded to each of the surveys that you have done.

Richard Goring: The Scottish Secondary Teachers Association has approximately 8,000 members who are practising teachers. We received more than 2,000 responses within eight days, of which about 1,500 included written statements as well.

Larry Flanagan: I think that the EIS represents around 24,000 secondary teachers—or maybe I just made that up. *[Laughter.]*

The Convener: Mr Flanagan, that is not really acceptable.

Larry Flanagan: It is something of that order. Our last full membership survey had a response rate of around 35 per cent. The more recent survey was from our branches; our branch structure is based on the 32 local authorities, and 28 of them responded indicating that members had raised various issues, all of which we passed on to the SQA and are being addressed.

Recently, a lot of the subject responses have been very detailed, not simply a generic response about workload. People have been raising specific issues around various units for national 5 physics, for example, and we tend to pass on responses containing that level of detail to the SQA for a professional response to the issues that have been raised.

Clare Adamson: It is difficult. Would you say that the surveys are almost self-selecting, in that there are not many responses saying that

everything is great but it is the people who have a problem who tend to respond?

Larry Flanagan: One of the issues with our feedback is that a lot of the detailed responses that I referred to have come from principal teachers, who are primarily involved with implementation on a subject basis. You could almost take it as read that such a response represents what the department is thinking. The detailed responses have been professional responses to the issues around implementation, rather than being about broader political concerns around workload.

If the implication behind the question was to ask whether it is just a minority who are complaining, the answer would be no. It is a widespread scenario across all subjects in all schools, although particular issues have been raised in relation to some subjects.

Richard Goring: Our survey was done electronically, so it was sent only to those for whom we have email addresses, who numbered just less than 5,000. In fact, that was quite a high proportion of responses. Again, it is not just activists who are responding; it is everybody, from deputy heads and principal teachers, to classroom teachers. There were some positive responses. People who were trained as verifiers said that, once they had gone through that training, they felt much more competent and able to do what they were expected to do. I think that it is people who have not had that kind of contact who have more problems and issues.

Clare Adamson: Mr Flanagan, you said that you were here about a year ago when the possible delay was being discussed. At that time, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning offered support at local authority level and to headteachers, principal teachers and individual teachers. Have we any information about how that offer was taken up across Scotland?

Larry Flanagan: Over the course of the year, the cabinet secretary has responded with support on a number of occasions as issues have emerged. Last week, we had the new package with the £5 million of support around the qualifications. All that is very welcome. There is no change in terms of the money that has been committed, and it has all been taken up.

The £1 million that was offered for textbooks has been distributed on a per capita basis to schools. Again, that is very welcome, but we are getting feedback from some subject areas that their share of that is not enough to buy a set of textbooks. The money is welcome, but it has not resolved the difficulties.

To be honest, if a year ago we had been where we are now in terms of the levels of support, everyone would be a lot more relaxed and looking forward to the first year of implementation. The £5 million that was announced last week is very welcome, but it will not have a major impact on national 4 and national 5, because we are only six school weeks away from the deadline for those qualifications. The money will have a bigger impact on the higher next year, which is obviously a high-stakes issue as well.

The new support has been welcomed, but it is almost after the fact. We would have preferred to have had the support as part of the planning process rather than as a response to the concerns.

The Convener: I appreciate that, but I want to move on to the next area of questioning as we have a lot of stuff to cover this morning.

Joan McAlpine (South Scotland) (SNP): I want to look in particular at the issue of documentation, which has come up repeatedly in the course of the implementation of CFE. The EIS submission refers to

"Inadequate materials; lack of exemplification; unexplained changes in assessment approach".

I want to ask the EIS a bit more about that and particularly about the professional focus papers that were published by Education Scotland as part of the agreement with the Scottish Government. Have those materials lived up to expectations?

Larry Flanagan: The professional focus papers were a useful contribution. We collaborated with Education Scotland on them in looking at the content and key messages. Janet Brown referred to the new skills-based approach to unit assessment, which differs from intermediate unit assessment, which was largely a traditional test on content. We support that change, which is an important aspect of CFE.

However, an example of what happened when the units arrived in schools is that teachers looked at a skills-focused unit assessment in mathematics and said, "There is no marking grid for these assignments." The reason why there was no marking grid was that the unit was meant to have a skills focus, so it was about assessing skills rather than having a test that would allow someone to get a mark out of 30, for example, that meant that they had passed. However, somewhere along the line that key change had not been effectively communicated to schools, so teachers just thought, "Well, we used to have unit assessments for intermediate. Now we've got them for this," and they spent a lot of time making up marking grids so that they could assess the skills.

That was a waste of time because that is not what the units are about, but it is a good example of how a key message around the changed nature of assessment had not been communicated to teachers and schools and how they therefore responded to what was being offered in a different way.

That has created difficulties because in mathematics, for example, they now have what are called hashtag questions, which are key skills. If you do not pass those questions, you do not pass the assessment. What happened in a lot of schools was that kids were getting asked to sit a whole new assessment instead of being reassessed on that particular skill.

It all mounts up to a lack of communication and people not being sure what the change actually is, which brings us back to what we have been discussing. I know that we have been putting the SQA in the dock a little bit, but much of the additional workload has come about because schools have not been certain about what is being asked and have therefore overprepared in case there is a knock at the door or in case Graeme Logan gets involved—and, you know, an inspector calls. Many schools have generated workload to reassure themselves that they are getting things right, and clearer messages would have stopped a lot of that.

Take the verification procedure. Verification is not new, but it has become a cottage industry around national 4 because people felt that they had to do everything in order to meet the standards—and, of course, teachers in schools are really keen to meet the standards. No one wants to be seen to be falling short in that respect. It is an issue where, as I have said, we need to step back and review what has happened, because a lot of what I would call poor practice this year could be stripped out if people had a clearer focus on what in the changes is important and what is less important.

Joan McAlpine: What needs to be done to communicate those messages more clearly to schools?

Larry Flanagan: For example, with regard to the unit assessment around national 4 and national 5, the qualifications management board was keen to reduce the number of assessments that pupils had to go through and looked at a single combined assessment that covered all the skills for a key unit. Most subjects have three units but, instead of having three assessments, a single combined assessment would cover everything, which would reduce the assessment focus in schools. Although those units are in place, they came out after the individual unit assessments and, because of time pressures, people had already started working on the individual unit

assessments. Most schools simply did not look at the combined assessment, and a key message that we could send to schools would be, “Consider using the combined assessment next year. If you use it in this way, you will cover the skills.”

We have not achieved the intended reduction in the number and level of assessments for S4 pupils. Given that that was a key aim of curriculum for excellence, we have to ask why we have not achieved it and get the key messages out there about how it can be achieved.

Joan McAlpine: Could Janet Brown and Graeme Logan respond to that?

Dr Brown: As I said earlier, we found that, with regard to verification, people were overassessing—in other words, they were assessing each individual component—and we were going back to reinforce the message that is out there that one assessment can be used to assess multiple aspects. That activity is critical. However, we have also seen excellent examples of teachers doing that through the verification process, and we are sharing those examples with schools to reinforce the message that Larry Flanagan has highlighted.

The other critical issue is to recognise that this should be happening throughout schools. As pupils go through the school, their assessments build up and the new approach to assessment should be learned through teachers’ application of it during the broad general education phase to ensure that when pupils reach the senior phase they find the process very natural.

As we have said, there is the additional pressure of qualifications, which become an end point that everyone gets focused on, and it is important for the SQA to reinforce the message to teachers that we are here, that we support the approaches in curriculum for excellence and that we are absolutely behind the idea of using a minimum number of assessments in order to assess multiple things. The fact that we have examples that we can share, our reinforcing of the message that we will not be knocking on people’s doors, looking for an individual assessment for each aspect, and that we now have existence proofs should give teachers a lot of reassurance.

10:45

Graeme Logan: Teacher judgment is a very important part of the approach to assessment within curriculum for excellence, and we are confident that, because of the work we have been doing in Scotland on assessment for a number of years, the capacity of our teachers to use on-going approaches to assessment is strong and is growing and that assessment is a natural part of teaching and learning. Where teachers see

assessment as being about improving children's learning, not proving it, we see strong practice.

We must remember that we decided to provide broad national guidance, not prescription through marking keys and so on, in order to acknowledge teachers' professional judgment, and that having a variety of approaches to assessment is critical. I agree that, in some cases, through teachers wanting to get it right, we see some degree of overassessment. It is our job to keep reassuring them and reinforcing some clear messages that we have been giving about assessment. One approach is our making good assessment decisions programme, which exemplifies and shares smart, streamlined approaches to assessment that do not add to the workload burden or distract children from the teaching and learning, which is what we are all about.

Clare Adamson: The picture that we are getting is that there have been issues with the documentation along the line, which has meant redrafts and changes along the way. Do you see those problems being repeated next year or are they specific to this year of implementation, with lessons being learned as we go along? Could those problems be repeated in future years?

Larry Flanagan: That is one of the reasons why we think that there should be a review of the first year. I understand Graeme Logan's point that part of the whole framework is to allow schools more decision making, but I think that that stick has been bent too far in the first year of implementation. We could have had a greater degree and direction of leadership in some key areas.

One of the challenges for schools next year will be how they review their S4 programme at the same time as they introduce the new higher in S5. Although a degree of discretion has been allowed, most schools and most subjects will implement the new higher. It is a difficulty of timing: how will schools consolidate the previous year's experience while they introduce the higher and continue to deliver broad general education, health and wellbeing, literacy and numeracy? If we had a national review to look at the key messages that we want to get out and to create a focus on them, that might circumvent another workload issue in schools, which is asking every school to look at it.

I take Janet Brown's point that there is a lot of good practice in schools, and you will find a lot of good practice on the websites of Education Scotland and the SQA. As the SSTA says in its submission, however, there is a lot on those websites and the difficulty often is finding the thing that will make the difference. If we are confronted with a website that is difficult to navigate—I will not say which is more difficult to navigate—there can be a problem with finding the key information. It

would be useful for the key parties to step back, look at what has happened this year and try to fashion some key messages around a review process for schools.

Graeme Logan: I will pick up that point directly. We have launched a new key curriculum support website that sits above all the online content and gets you to what you need through a tailored search function. We are continually listening and improving our online service and its navigation.

Another example of that is the route maps that we are producing in partnership with the SQA—a sequenced list of key documents that aims to make it simple and straightforward for teachers to access what they need when they need it. We are continually looking for new tools and new ways of improving access and support in response to questions and feedback from teachers.

I am not sure whether Larry Flanagan has got that on the EIS website—have you?

Larry Flanagan: We have got a link.

Graeme Logan: We know from feedback that when people go on to websites, they want to find what they need as quickly as possible. That is why we have introduced the new key curriculum support page that searches all the content. The NQ website has been very popular—it has had more 60,000 hits—and we are continually refining and improving the online service so that when teachers access it during the precious time that they have, they are getting the material that they need.

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): There has been a lot of talk about the communication of information to teachers and the back and forth of that. The Government has responded with support, such as the £4.75 million that was announced last week.

I ask Graeme Logan and Dr Brown what support has been made available so far. I ask Larry Flanagan and Richard Goring what further support they believe that they need at this stage. I ask so that I can get the answers into my own head.

The Convener: Again, I ask for brevity if at all possible.

Dr Brown: As you know, we put out all the documentation on time and, in some cases, we pulled in the publication dates. That documentation is things like assessment support, unit support, the course documents, and so on. All that will continue to come out on time, which is critical. In addition, we have taken feedback from professionals and understood what we need to be doing, so we have added additional documentation.

Part of the challenge, as we are asked for more and more information, is to be clear about how to navigate through it, because there is an awful lot of information out there. As I said, we have run a significant number of events and, at the moment, 18,552 teachers are registered for those events, so there is very strong engagement with that initiative.

The website is the main way in which we engage with teachers and give them access to the information. There have been something like 1 million individual downloads of the documentation that supports teachers across the piece.

It is important for us to continue to listen to what teachers need and, as we are doing that, for us to put in place the appropriate signposts to the right level of detail that they need at any particular point in time.

However, engagement with teachers should not and cannot be just electronic. For the past several years, we have been running an important liaison group. It meets teachers and parents to try to answer their questions and bring back their feedback so that we can incorporate changes in our documentation. As we go forward into next year, it is important for us to look at the improvements that we have made this year and make sure that they are embedded in how we do things next year. That is critical.

Graeme Logan: We provide, in a way similar to what Janet Brown described, a blend of online material and face-to-face support. Learning and teaching advice, professional focus papers and the course materials for national 4 and 5 were all completed by April. Learning and teaching advice for broad areas covering all units at national 1 and 2 were published by December. Around 50 per cent of that material was published early.

Higher course materials will be completed by the end of March this year, and more than 50 per cent of those have been published already.

As I mentioned earlier, our visits to schools and direct engagement with staff have been important. We will have visited 108 secondary schools by the end of March, and we will extend that offer to all 369 secondary schools during this year. The feedback that we are getting is that head teachers and others enjoy meeting our staff face to face, talking about what is available, and engaging with our senior education officers, teams and inspectors through those support visits and discussion. We will continue to offer that support to all the professions through the online materials, and we will also offer to visit each secondary school and to engage in dialogue with them because we know that that is making a difference.

Richard Goring: We get reports of success in subject area groups where departments get

together and work together locally. That seems to be well received because it allows dialogue to take place and allows people to work collegiately. I would like to see much more of that being allowed to happen, but the only way it can happen is if cover is provided or if local authorities take on the task of making it happen. It happens in some areas but not in others and in some subjects but not in others. It is a positive, so we need to target it. It links in with teachers working together.

Larry Flanagan: One of the key issues around national 5 is that people need practice papers. I highlighted that in my submission. Commercial companies, which quite often fill a gap in this area, have been slow and have delayed publication because of late changes.

For national 5 there are no past papers, because it is a new qualification. We have said that in every subject area there should be three practice papers, because the young people will sit their exams in two months' time. Although there is skills focus as part of curriculum for excellence, young people still need to be good at exam practice; they need to know how to cope with an exam paper. One of the ways they can do that is by doing practice papers. Such papers do not exist at the moment; schools are trying to develop them.

I used to be a higher examiner for SQA. I know that it has a contingency arrangement whereby it has a paper available in every subject area. I ask it to release those papers into schools now. If a contingency paper is needed, a team should be working on one. Schools really need to have that focus so that young people can develop their exam technique before May.

Janet Brown highlighted the fact that there is now good practice around the national assessment banks. People have asked consistently for exemplification of the standards, so that they have a benchmark reference for the assessments, which would be useful.

On next year's higher, the £5 million that was announced last week will be useful in terms of creating time. Schools will need to restock their higher cupboards, because their current higher course books in a lot of subjects, such as physics and chemistry—the key content subjects—will be redundant. One million pounds was made available on a per capita basis for national 4 and national 5. There might not be quite the same level of demand for higher materials, because there will be a reduced number of students, but schools will need to have course materials for the higher next year.

The Convener: I will ask Janet Brown to respond to those comments.

Dr Brown: On the point about NABs, the SQA has been offering a pre-verification service for all

assessments developed by teachers. Through that, we give feedback to the teachers as to whether an assessment is valid. In the course of that process, we ask teachers whether we can use the assessments as exemplars. Not all teachers say yes, so we would like to encourage teachers to allow us to use the assessments that we have verified as exemplars, so that we can share them with other teachers. It would be really good if teachers gave us permission to do that.

The back-up paper that we have every year is an essential component of maintaining the integrity of the qualification system. To try to address the issue of example papers we have provided a comparator between the standard grades and the intermediates to allow teachers to see, through examples of specific questions, whether a question is applicable or whether it should be modified. That enables teachers to build their own exemplification, as they did in the past through the development of preliminary papers for the existing qualifications. That is the direction of travel that we have taken in that space.

Jayne Baxter (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):

What we are hearing this morning is starkly different perspectives of where we are as we implement the national qualifications. We are hearing a lot about activity, information and communication, but we are also hearing from the unions about specific issues and concerns.

Do the witnesses think that enough has been done to close the gap and to get teachers feeling more comfortable and confident about where they are in the process? Will the additional funding that was announced last week help to fill the gap?

11:00

Larry Flanagan: The additional funding will certainly help. I do not know the full details, but I understand that it is largely intended to allow local authorities to provide cover so that teachers can be released. That will give teachers time to talk to one another.

Janet Brown made a point about identifying previous questions, which relates to the immediate focus on national 4 and 5. The difficulty is that people are being asked to construct a practice paper on the basis of advice that has yet to be issued. We need practice papers in schools.

The kids will go off for a two-week spring break so, after next week, there will be six teaching weeks before the exams. If any members have had a relative go through qualifications, they will know that most young people discover a new spirit of endeavour in the run-up to exams and demand a set of past papers that will allow them to practise assiduously before the exams. That practice

material is not available for young people. Getting it is our priority.

Richard Goring: We often hear that this is a process of evolution and that it will take several years to get it to where we all want it to be. That is a brand new idea for teachers. When new qualifications were introduced in the past, teachers were provided with curriculum notes, sample papers and national assessment bank items to start with, which provided a firm foundation on which to build. At the moment, a lot of teachers feel that there are no firm foundations that they understand. I suggest that that is a big problem.

Graeme Logan: I re-emphasise that we have been working towards curriculum for excellence over the past 10 years. We have continually reassured teachers that, if they use the curriculum content—the experiences and outcomes in each curriculum area—to underpin their planning and their approaches to learning and teaching, they will work naturally towards the qualifications.

Qualifications are only one part of the story. It is understandable that they are dominating the debate, but we must not lose sight of what we are all collectively trying to achieve. We need to hold the line that the curriculum content will naturally lead to the qualifications, as one part of the overall package of achievement for young people.

Where we find the contrast that Jayne Baxter talked about, we are providing tailored support and going into schools to work alongside teachers. The position varies from school to school and from area to area, which is why it is important that support is tailored and responds to teachers' needs locally. It is also important that we work with teachers to ensure that parents and young people are reassured and supported as they move through the next phase of curriculum for excellence.

Dr Brown: As Larry Flanagan and Richard Goring have said, a lot of the feedback to the unions as a result of their surveys is associated with subject-specific questions. We absolutely must communicate and engage on that. As a result of some of the feedback that we have received, we have set up specific continuous professional development events for teachers of specific subjects, to which teachers have been coming.

At those events, teachers can ask questions and get engaged and we can respond to specific aspects. When we get questions, we answer them and share the answers with all teachers on the subject-specific pages on the SQA website, so they can look at the questions that other teachers are asking and which they are probably also asking.

We must look at the broader aspects of assessment as well as focusing on the specific issues in specific subjects. That goes back to looking at what has changed, what is new and what are points of stability for subjects.

Jayne Baxter: Can I ask a wee follow-up question, convener?

The Convener: If you do so quickly.

Jayne Baxter: Does Education Scotland stand by its key message from the secondary schools inspection programme that teachers are putting themselves under pressure because they are aiming for the highest possible professional standards? Is that message still valid?

Graeme Logan: Undoubtedly, all teachers want to get it right. In some cases, they spend a lot of time trying to achieve high standards, and a level of anxiety exists in the system as a result.

To some extent, that anxiety would be expected when a new qualifications system is introduced. The key thing is therefore to enable the collaboration between teachers, local authorities and Education Scotland, as Janet Brown described. A strong example of that is our work with science teachers who needed further support in response to the publication of biology, chemistry, physics, science and environmental science course materials. We worked with ADES, local authorities and the SQA to arrange a series of events. The local authorities involved shared their materials and we did, too. We got really positive feedback about that collaborative effort nationally, locally and from groups of teachers, and we were able to reassure them and enable the courses, programmes and assessment to come together.

Jayne Baxter: And does that reduce the pressure?

Graeme Logan: It depends on how individuals react, but the support provided aims to reduce the pressure by providing materials, reassurance and so on.

The Convener: Joan McAlpine has a brief supplementary.

Joan McAlpine: I want to ask about additional practice papers. I have a teenager who is sitting highers, and Larry Flanagan's point makes perfect sense to me—indeed, I think that it would make perfect sense to most parents. I am sure that you are doing other work and holding meetings with headteachers and teachers, but that does not get away from the simple straightforward point, which most parents understand, that teenagers need to practise in the run-up to their exams. Are you saying that the practice papers will not appear and that we will not be physically able to get them?

Dr Brown: I am saying that we must maintain the system's integrity, so Larry Flanagan's suggestion that we use the back-up paper is not valid. If we do as he suggests, we will not have a point of security for the future.

Joan McAlpine: Are you physically able to produce practice papers between now and the start of the study period?

Dr Brown: We are looking at the significant number of previous practice papers that are available and identifying what aspects of those papers are relevant to and valid for the current qualifications. That gives a very broad range of exemplars that teachers can use—as they have done so historically—to develop their own preliminary papers.

Joan McAlpine: I could be wrong, but I seem to remember that the last time that you were in front of the committee this subject came up. I am rather surprised that, at this stage in the game, we are still putting things together.

Dr Brown: Let us look at the CFE philosophy, the reason behind it and the history of how the senior phase has run. There was significant concern about the number of preliminary examinations that were set for S4 candidates—they were put through multiple tests associated with exam practice.

As part of the new qualifications, we have changed the blend of the relationship between the exam and the qualification. A significant amount of course work contributes to the qualifications, as well as the examination at the end of the period. We wanted to reduce the number of practice prelims that pupils were trying to go through. In some cases, we had heard of students undertaking two or three preliminary examinations, which would be a real challenge for them.

The Convener: I am very conscious of time and we must cover some other issues. I call Liz Smith.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I will pick up some themes that have developed about the unit assessments for national 5. As I understand it from the survey results, there are two significant problems.

First, in some subjects—in biology, for example—units 1 to 3 are taught in sequence. In other words, pupils finish one unit before they go on to the next unit and it is possible for a teacher to give a pass or fail at each stage. However, in other subjects—some of the languages and drama, I think—pupils are taught concurrently, so it is not possible for teachers to give a pass or fail mark at each stage. There have been concerns that some heads of department have been dropped from the verification process because

they have not been able to ascribe a pass or a fail at that stage.

The second problem is that in some subjects, chemistry being one, pupils have to score 50 per cent as an average of the whole thing—so a pupil could do badly in two of the learning outcomes but still get 50 per cent overall and pass—whereas in other areas pupils have to get at least 50 per cent in all the learning outcomes. What are the criteria by which you would justify the academic robustness of that to parents? There are quite considerable differences.

Larry Flanagan: One of the key things to remember about national 5 is that the final grade that a pupil gets is 100 per cent based on the external exam or externally marked coursework. Part of the thinking around the new approach to NABs—the skills base—was that that would complement rather than duplicate the assessment. In the current intermediate exams, the unit assessments are basically mini-tests; they are just a shorter version of the external exam.

Liz Smith: Yes, but is it not the case that teachers have had to go through an awful lot of additional assessment in the process of trying to justify the units, or the actual learning outcomes, as well as having to go to—

Larry Flanagan: That has been the difficulty. The change in the unit assessments has not been fully taken on board in the way in which schools are approaching the assessments. If you think about it as a skills assessment, it is much more feasible to have a holistic approach. One of the key aims of the curriculum for excellence was to broaden out the skills base so that the system was not just about the ability to pass an exam—pupils would have a skills base as a foundation.

It has always been the case that certain subjects tend to have end-of-unit assessment. I refer particularly to content-driven subjects as opposed to English, for example, in which there is an integrated approach to assessment.

I understand the point that you make. I just think that that is one of the issues where the key messaging has not communicated itself to schools, and therefore some of the practice has involved more than would be required if we were focusing on the key issue.

Liz Smith: Dr Brown, how is that being justified to parents who are asking, “Does that mean that you have to get 50 per cent across the board in this subject, whereas in others it is just an average?” Are there any differences in the verification process?

Dr Brown: The verification is there to make sure that the teachers are assessing to standard. We are taking into account the fact that some

subjects are very different from others, so we will be doing that during the courses—

Liz Smith: But there will be the same robustness.

Dr Brown: Yes. If we think about how we manage standards in the Scottish system, we can see that it is positive, in that teachers want to participate in maintaining standards as well.

A point was made earlier about teachers who have been involved as verifiers during the process. They have learned an awful lot from that. We have had hugely positive feedback about what they have learned. They take that back into the system and cascade it down through the schools so that other teachers understand the standards.

The purpose of the verification is to ensure that that happens, because the teachers are a component of ensuring the standard of the qualifications. We are responsible for verifying those standards, but the teachers are a key component of that work and they are passionately focused on it.

Liz Smith: I have a final question on a different issue. I ask for your opinion, Dr Brown, on what happens in the case of a request to review the marking. There has been considerable confusion about that, and the Scottish Government was unable to clarify the situation at education question time last week. *The Courier* ran a significant article just last week about the fact that, when it asked the question of Perth and Kinross Council, Fife Council and Stirling Council, they came up with three different answers. There is a lack of clarity on the matter.

Can you clarify who will pick up the tab for the fee—in non-exceptional circumstances—when there is a request to review marking? Will it be individual schools or the local authority?

Dr Brown: The SQA makes charges by candidate, and how local authorities choose to pay is up to them. Some local authorities pay the full fee structure for every candidate who is sitting an examination, so they pay us directly, whereas others devolve that to the schools. The same applies to any fees that we charge for post-result services. It will be based on how the local authority chooses to pay.

11:15

Liz Smith: Will that not cause considerable problems for some local authorities, particularly if more schools are likely to request a review? Does that not put considerable pressure on the budgets of some schools?

Dr Brown: Each local authority currently decides how it pays us—whether it devolves the

payment down to the school or pays it at local authority level.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): The working group on tackling bureaucracy's report that was issued in November 2013 made a number of recommendations about efficiency and eliminating bureaucracy. What progress has been made in implementing those recommendations? Can the panel specifically refer to the more efficient or proportionate way to do verification and to how that could be or has been improved?

Larry Flanagan: As I said, although the working group concluded its meeting cycle in November, the report is only now filtering into schools. Education Scotland delivered a copy of the report to every teacher over the first two weeks of February, and we have advised all our members to have a school branch meeting to discuss its contents.

The report asked for an immediate review of working time agreements and school improvement plans to identify issues that could be set aside to create additional space. It also asked local authorities to review, for example, report formats in relation to inappropriate reporting on experiences and outcomes, and it asked schools to look at their forward-planning processes.

It is a very good report with very strong recommendations, but the litmus test will be whether it has any impact on the way in which schools operate. In short, it is too early in schools' consideration of the report for it to have had any immediate impact, although a number of schools have identified a few areas where they have set aside objectives to create a bit of space. We envisage the report having a longer-term impact from next term, when people put together their school improvement plans for next year. If they are going to review their reporting system, that in itself takes time and they cannot switch to a different system overnight. There is a slightly longer burn on implementing some of the important recommendations in the report.

Richard Goring: I agree 100 per cent with Larry Flanagan, and we are taking the same actions. It is about next year's working time agreement and the practices for the year ahead. I think that the report will be valuable.

Graeme Logan: As Larry Flanagan said, we have enabled every teacher in Scotland to have a copy of the report. Important groups such as school inspectors will discuss the issue and follow up. When they see excessive approaches to planning and assessment, they will challenge them. That is a really important message, because they have sometimes been accused of creating paperwork. It is an important step forward.

When we find schools that are streamlining approaches to planning and assessment, we are showcasing them. We hope to develop case studies based on schools that have taken the report's recommendations forward and have streamlined their approaches to free up more time for teaching and learning. It is a work in progress and it will continue to be a priority for us. New support materials that we develop will all be quality assured to ensure that they are in line with the report's recommendations and that we are not increasing the requirement for paperwork.

Dr Brown: I will respond specifically to the verification component of the question. We have used the information that we have gained so far in the first two rounds of verification to gain assurance that teachers understand the standard and are teaching to it. As a result, we have looked at how we need to run verification in the future.

We have decided that the first round of verification, which happens in the autumn, will focus on supporting teachers to understand the standard and will be about engaging with them. The first round will cover a lot of the things that we have talked about, such as taking an approach that reduces the assessment burden by allowing teachers to understand the changes to assessment methodology and the fact that one assessment can assess multiple things.

All of that will also be covered within the first round of verification. The second round will then focus on ensuring that the unit assessment is still being assessed to standard. The third round of verification, which we are also introducing this cycle, will focus only on the course verification—the internally assessed course components.

By doing that, we continue to ensure that the standards are embedded in the school sector. That allows us to reinforce the direction in which we want to go on assessment as part of curriculum for excellence, to maintain the standards, and absolutely to ensure that students get what they deserve at the end of the qualification.

Colin Beattie: As a result of the EIS survey, there is a suggestion that phase 3 verification should be on an opt-in basis. Have there been any discussions, or has there been any progress, in that regard?

Dr Brown: Larry Flanagan and I met to discuss that a couple of weeks ago. We fully explored the nature of the concerns as it is really important to understand the fundamental basis of the concern that was raised. We have taken that conversation, as well as the one that we had with Richard Goring and his team, into the thinking about how we respond while maintaining standards in how we carry out verification.

Neil Bibby: I will ask about the implementation of the new higher courses. Do you have any evidence on the number of schools that are delaying the new higher in one subject or many? Is there a commonality in the complaints and issues that are raised by authorities in Scotland? If not, why have so many authorities decided not to implement the new higher or to implement them subject by subject?

Richard Goring: I must admit that that is a question that I, too, would like to be answered.

The cabinet secretary announced that there could be some delay in certain circumstances. Although we agree that the natural progression would be from national 5 into higher because of the methodologies involved, there are certain subjects in which there are serious difficulties. Computing science springs to mind as one in which teachers have to go through a huge new learning experience and there is a lack of available trainers to carry that out.

We are really concerned that some authorities have made a blanket decision that all subject departments in all their schools will go ahead with the new higher. No professional dialogue has been taking place or, if it has, the authority is overruling it.

Larry Flanagan: We would not expect any school unilaterally not to progress with higher across the board. We asked, and the cabinet secretary agreed, that the decision be left at a school level based on a professional dialogue between subject departments and the senior management team.

We have made it clear that, in local authorities in which a unilateral imposition of the new higher is the directorate's position, we will initially seek a professional grievance at school level and will be prepared to escalate that to a dispute, because we do not think that it is acceptable.

I contacted all 32 of our branches and asked them to give me feedback on whether I had to send a letter to the director indicating our position. I have had to send eight or nine letters because our branches are concerned that the directorate is not facilitating the cabinet secretary's position on professional dialogue as the basis for decision making. In the other authorities, the decision clearly has been allowed to devolve to a school level.

I would say that around 80 per cent of subject areas are proceeding with the new higher. It is clear that certain subjects are delaying the higher throughout the country. Physics, chemistry, biology and maths are key subjects that seem to be demanding a delay. Not surprisingly, those are the content-heavy subjects, so there are potentially bigger changes in course structures.

One point that has come up in physics is that, now that people have the shape of the new higher in their heads, they want to revisit their S3 courses to create a better grounding for pupils moving into the new higher. They feel that what they did in S3 for the current cohort is closer to the existing higher. That has been part of the discussion. Richard Goring mentioned computing science as another area in which there will be a big content change.

Generally speaking, most local authorities have supported the cabinet secretary's position and, in most schools where the dialogue has taken place, people are comfortable with where they are. In the eight or nine local authorities where there are on-going issues, we are seeking to break the deadlock and get directorates to agree that it is a school-based decision that is founded on pupils' best interests. Those who are closest to the school are in the strongest place to make the right decision.

The Convener: Do Graeme Logan or Janet Brown have any comment on that?

Graeme Logan: There will be a phased approach between the existing and the new higher. Young people will continue to sit higher, which, as we know, are a gold standard that are highly regarded internationally.

It is also true to say that a lot of teachers and departments have not yet decided. They will make that decision over the next few months based on their professional experience and what is in the best interests of young people, and in consultation with their parents.

If we found a school taking a blanket decision, we would challenge it. We are in touch with local authorities and schools, engaging in discussion on the issue all the time. It is too early to say definitively what the numbers will be—some have not yet decided.

Dr Brown: We will not know the numbers of entries into higher until the start of the next academic session.

Neil Bibby: When does Education Scotland expect to know the situation? Courses start in June. When will you have a picture of the number of subjects being taught at new higher and existing higher levels?

Graeme Logan: Through our area lead officer network we continue to have dialogue and to monitor that. We would expect most to have made the decision by the end of April. We will continue to monitor the situation, and we expect to gather a position around that time.

Colin Beattie: I am a bit concerned about some of the things that I am hearing. In its submission, the SSTA says that local authorities are making

the decision to go ahead with higher, regardless of what professional teachers are saying. By that, do you mean teachers' representatives and headteachers or individual teachers?

Richard Goring: I am sorry; I do not understand the question—

Larry Flanagan: It is individual teachers making the decision. We have the same position: we are not saying to people that they should delay the new higher; we are saying that it should be a professional judgment based on subject departments.

There is no union line on which higher should be used. We are basically saying that a professional dialogue must be facilitated at school level between the senior management team and subject departments, represented by the principal teacher. It is based on what teachers in schools feel is the best way forward.

The difficulty is where teachers in schools are not being allowed to make that choice because the director is saying that their authority is presenting for the new higher and that that is the end of the matter.

Colin Beattie: I guess that my concern is the consistency of approach. I presume that some local authorities are doing a good job on consultation and so on—on taking everybody with them. How many local authorities are taking a unilateral decision?

Larry Flanagan: Nine. I will send you the names.

Colin Beattie: We would be interested to hear them.

Is there any evidence that individual schools would wish to delay higher?

Richard Goring: There are one or two examples where school mergers are going on, and on top of everything else the new higher would provide for a heavy burden on school staff. There may also be places where, for example, a principal teacher or faculty head is not being appointed; in that case, the subject decision to delay would not necessarily be common with decisions anywhere else. Those are examples of where delays could happen.

Colin Beattie: This is a broad question: are any concerns coming out about advanced higher?

11:30

Larry Flanagan: Advanced higher? We have not had sight of them yet. That is what you are after next.

By and large, the advanced higher is the sixth year qualification. Part of the reason why some

people are still waiting on the higher, as Graeme Logan said, is that they want to have time to assess the higher materials. Some of the remedies that we are applying—or that I hope will apply—to national 4 and national 5 will be a big factor in people's decision on how comfortable they are with the higher. If we deal with verification, and if it is less of an issue for the higher, that might be a factor in the decision. Our evidence is that about 80 per cent of our members are content to proceed with the new higher, so we expect that most schools will use it.

The Convener: Mr Logan—briefly, please.

Graeme Logan: As I said, the new higher course materials will all be published by the end of March to assist with that decision, and more than 50 per cent have been published already. I should say that ADES has released a position statement on the new higher stating the expectation of progression but highlighting that decisions can be made at local level based on the best interests of young people and in consultation with their parents.

We are not aware that local authorities have made blanket decisions. It is important that we reinforce that the decision is made at school level, considering the young people whom the schools are working with and what is best for them, given their needs and interests. We will continue to have that dialogue at local authority level and at secondary school level, when we engage and visit.

The Convener: We will have one brief question from Liam McArthur—he assures me that it will be brief.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): I have a comment on the back of Mr Logan's statement about not being aware of local authorities taking a blanket approach. Mr Flanagan has said that he will provide the committee with names, but it might be opportune to provide Mr Logan with them, too, so that he can get a better understanding of the rationale.

Earlier, Mr Flanagan said that, if the interventions that have been made over the past 12 months had been made 12 months ago when we were discussing preparedness for the new qualifications, teachers would be approaching the process much more confidently. Looking ahead to the new higher, is there anything on which we should press the Minister for Learning, Science and Scotland's Languages that absolutely can and should be done now so that, 12 months hence, when we come to the implementation of the new higher—whether that is across the board or almost across it—that happens with the confidence that we all want?

Larry Flanagan: Most of the issues that we have discussed, such as the workload connected

with verification, apply to the higher, so all the lessons that we can learn from national 4 and national 5 will have purchase in relation to the new higher. Once we get past the diet in the month of June and we review what happened across S4 with national 4 and national 5, that will give us lessons for the new higher. For example, we might be able to streamline the verification procedures or get out important messages about the unit assessments. All of that will be important.

Of course, it would also be useful to ask the minister how much he is going to give us for books.

The Convener: I thank the witnesses for coming and for their evidence, which has been extremely useful and, I am sure, informative, and not just for members.

11:33

Meeting suspended.

11:37

On resuming—

The Convener: I welcome our second panel. We have Dr Alasdair Allan, who is the Minister for Learning, Science and Scotland's Languages, Alan Johnston, who is the deputy director of curriculum, assessment and Gaelic at the Scottish Government and—staying with us from our previous panel—Graeme Logan and Dr Janet Brown.

I reiterate what I said earlier: we are here to consider the concerns that have been raised by some people in relation to qualifications, and our aim today is to seek reassurance for parents and pupils that everything will be delivered as intended for the benefit of pupils and their families.

I believe that the minister wishes to give us an opening statement.

Dr Alasdair Allan (Minister for Learning, Science and Scotland's Languages): I welcome the opportunity to meet the committee today and to hear members' views at what is, as has been mentioned, an important point for curriculum for excellence. It is some time since the committee last discussed curriculum for excellence; your choosing to use one of your evidence sessions in this way is a helpful opportunity.

Quite rightly, the previous evidence session was about the needs of teachers and the important role that government has in listening to those needs. I wish to begin by focusing the discussion on what teachers are interested in, which is of course the interests of young people, and I will perhaps say something about why we are doing all this.

This is a critical year for delivery of CFE. The first learners are now in the senior phase, and many of them will be taking the new national qualifications, as the committee has heard. I recently had the pleasure of hearing from a group of S4 pupils at Dumbarton academy. They were positive and well prepared; they were clearly rising to the challenge and were excited to be at the forefront of what everybody so far has acknowledged is a time of change.

I am grateful for the opportunity to reassure the committee about the progress that has been made and the support that is available. I will be pleased to answer your questions. First, however, I wish to make a few remarks. We all share the vision that Scotland should be the best place to go to school. We all want each child to enjoy an education that encourages them to be as successful as they can be and which provides them with a full passport to the future.

We need to be clear about our vision and leadership—that includes national politicians of all parties, local authorities, schools and each individual teacher working in the classroom.

One of the great strengths of our approach is that, by and large, we have maintained consensus around the principles of curriculum for excellence, which was begun under the previous Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition and has been continued since 2007 by the Scottish National Party Government, with all major stakeholders being supportive of the general direction of travel, which puts us in a considerably stronger position than some other countries are in.

The curriculum for excellence is improving Scottish education, and it has received wide-ranging support over the 10 years since its inception. We are now almost at the point at which we can stop self-consciously badging it all as CFE; as of 2016, it will simply be how we deliver three-to-18 education in Scotland, and it will all be aligned with our approach to the early years, to getting it right for every child and, of course, to the Wood commission's recommendations.

I spend a lot of time travelling around Scotland and I regularly visit schools—I am sure that all members do that. Excellent work is going on, but it would obviously not be possible without the clear dedication of teachers. Therefore, we take very seriously any points that are raised around support and workload.

I also meet employers, parents, colleges and universities. We have worked closely with all those key stakeholders to help them to develop a greater understanding of the benefits of CFE.

As the first round of the new qualifications approaches, our engagement is increased in order to ensure awareness of all the changes. I

understand that some teachers have some anxiety as we move towards the end of secondary 4 and the assessments and examinations become real live activities. I believe that that is because we have—I stress this—an exceptional teaching profession in Scotland that cares deeply about the best outcomes for its young people. I acknowledge that that anxiety is born of teachers' commitment to doing the best they can and to ensuring that young people in S4 do the best they can.

I readily accept that change on such a scale—change was referred to a lot in the earlier part of the meeting—has represented considerable work for teachers, but we have never been complacent about the need to support teachers in doing that. We have been sensitive to the need to support teachers through the process, to listen to the views that they express and to act responsibly and responsively to them.

We have already put in place an unprecedented level of support nationally and locally. We value the close partnership with all directors of education that enables us to do all this, and we work closely with the EIS, the SSTA, School Leaders Scotland and the other professional associations to understand the questions that they raise and, more important, to do something about them.

All national support from the SQA and Education Scotland has been provided either on or before schedule. In response to teacher feedback, support has been fast-tracked in some cases. The SQA did that when it brought forward the first phase of assessment support materials. We have listened to teacher requests for even more support and we have put in place additional measures where that has been deemed appropriate. We have responded positively any time that we have been asked to respond.

Members will already have heard some of the detail, so I will not go into detail at this point, but I want to highlight three areas. First, the first of our important leadership events took place yesterday in Edinburgh. Those events—run by ADES, School Leaders Scotland, Education Scotland and the SQA—will bring together secondary headteachers from across Scotland to share best practice.

Secondly, we have made it abundantly clear that unnecessary bureaucracy and paperwork are unacceptable and that what is worse is that they get in the way of good teaching and learning. That is why I established the working group on tackling bureaucracy—whose report was welcomed by the trade unions—and why we have asked Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education's inspectors to be vigilant in respect of all that when they conduct their inspections.

Finally, we have heard much comment recently about the burden of assessment. The assessment process is not meant to be burdensome, and a key focus has been on the need to move away from unnecessary “teaching to the test”. To that end, the SQA's quality assurance process is designed to build teacher confidence. Members have heard that the SQA has clear evidence in many subjects and in many centres that there is a good understanding of the standards and the good assessment practices that are needed. That is why I announced a further package of support for secondary schools last week.

11:45

The package provides local authorities with funding to enable space and time to be bought—to put it crudely—for teachers so that they can come together to work through the assessment processes for the new qualifications. I believe that that will reinforce effective professional learning and have a positive impact on teachers' wellbeing and, of course, their ability to teach.

I hope that we can continue to move forward under the broad consensus that has been maintained until now. The curriculum for excellence is more important than ever for our young people and their parents and teachers. We want to see every young person achieve the best qualifications that they can. We will continue to work with partners to free teachers to concentrate on what they do best, which is delivery of teaching and learning.

I spend as much time as I can trying to get honest opinions from individual teachers; I do so to guard against the dangers of complacency. As I speak to teachers across Scotland, I detect that they feel more confident and that they are in a strong place to continue to do their best for our young people. Of course, we will continue to listen to feedback and to work with teachers, pupils and parents. I welcome this morning's discussion and I hope that we continue to work together on all these matters.

The Convener: Thank you, minister. If you do not mind, I will move straight to questions from committee members. We will start with Neil Bibby.

Neil Bibby: We have heard serious concerns this morning from the EIS and the SSTA about lack of confidence in national organisations, work overload, schools and education authorities reporting problems with assessment guidance, verification and preparation, and the clarity of national standards. Why do you think EIS and SSTA are raising such concerns?

Dr Allan: It is quite legitimate for the unions to raise issues, and we have responded to them. It is worth saying, of course, that since the surveys

were done I have announced a further package of measures that have been welcomed by both the EIS and the SSTA. That addresses the point that you made, which is the point that one physics teacher described to me as “the Dr Who question”: the question of space and time. It is about allowing teachers the space and time in which to prepare for and cope with change. There are also measures in the package that are designed to give teachers further confidence in that respect.

Can I ask whether other witnesses want to come in on the back of that as well, convener?

The Convener: I am quite happy for others to come in, but we have just heard from Dr Brown and Mr Logan. If they have anything to add, I am more than happy to listen to that.

Dr Allan: Okay. In that case, I am happy to continue.

Neil Bibby: Thank you for your answer, minister. It is important to understand why we have reached where we have reached. Obviously, I welcome the announcements that you made last week—they have also been welcomed by the teaching unions—and I hope that they will allay many of the concerns that we have heard. However, we have also heard this morning that there are only six teaching weeks until the new exams. Could the announcement that you made last week have been made earlier?

Dr Allan: It is very important to say that the announcement that was made in the past few days is not to be seen in isolation, because it is part of a series—not of interventions, because that is the wrong word, but responses to comment from not just the teaching profession but from young people and the wider educational community. It is crucial to make the point early that this has been a 10-year process. Iain Ellis of the national parent forum of Scotland made that point recently. The timescales and plans that we have set ourselves for implementation of curriculum for excellence have been on-going for four years. They have involved a series of activities that were designed to address the point to which you referred, which is to ensure that there is teacher confidence in the process.

I challenge the idea that the package of measures is to be seen in isolation or as a late response. I will indicate briefly what the package follows on from and how it fits in with what is going on just now. For instance, £3.5 million was allocated in 2012-13 to support teachers in their preparations for the new national qualifications, and £1 million to local authorities followed in 2013-14 to allow people to update their resources locally to cope with the new qualifications. There was also funding for the scholar programme.

For all national 4 and national 5 courses, it is important to say that professional focus papers and web-based course materials have already been produced by Education Scotland, in partnership with ADES. There is also learning and teaching advice for all units in national 1 and national 2 courses.

There is not just all that preparation; there is also direct engagement with teachers, for example at 140 SQA subject-specific implementation events covering nationals 1 to 5, and three packages of unit assessment for support for nationals 2 to 5. Many of those have been fast-tracked because of responses from teachers. There are specimen question papers and feedback from round 1 of verification events—the list goes on. I would not accept the idea that the most recent package of measures is to be seen in isolation.

Neil Bibby: I appreciate that it has been a long process, but we have heard concerns this morning that the Scottish Government has underestimated the workload that is faced by teachers. When was the imminent problem with workload first recognised by the Scottish Government, and when was the decision made that resulted in your announcement last week?

Dr Allan: Right from the beginning, the Government has recognised that the changes would result in hard work for teachers. I do not think that there is any getting away from that, and ministers would certainly not seek to avoid the fact that the changes have caused work.

We have responded to many of the points that have been made about workload. For instance, one of the points that was raised some time back was about teachers feeling that some local applications of CFE were unduly monitoring the planning that teachers were putting into lessons. That is why I formed and chaired the short-life working group on bureaucracy in schools, which was a direct response to a feeling among many teachers that some local authorities had obtained software that, when it was turned up to the max, essentially allowed teachers' plans in those areas to be monitored every couple of hours.

Working with the professions and local authorities, we managed to address directly teachers' concerns and to take some very direct messages to local authorities about them. Again, this is an on-going issue.

I respect what you said previously, convener, but some of the questions may be for the SQA. Is it acceptable to bring in the SQA?

The Convener: I do not want to repeat a discussion that we have just had. However, if Dr Brown or Mr Logan want to make any additional comments, that is fine.

Dr Brown: On the timing of the verification changes, we changed our approach because of the evidence that we got through verifications round 1 and 2. We would not have been able to make those changes any earlier.

Neil Bibby: Was there discussion of those changes among ministers, the SQA and Scottish Government officials?

Dr Brown: How we do verification is a matter for the SQA. Our responsibility is to maintain those standards. As we said earlier, we used the feedback from both our verification rounds and the feedback that we were getting from teachers. We looked at what we needed to do to maintain the standard. That is the approach that we have taken. We then shared our decision with ministers.

Neil Bibby: Was that prior to the announcement being made?

Dr Brown: Yes—because it was included in the announcement.

Neil Bibby: We have also heard concerns about supply teachers to cover for teachers who are undertaking development work. Why is that the case? What action is the Scottish Government taking to address the issue of supply teaching?

Dr Allan: There have been on-going negotiations with the trade unions about issues around supply. However, we recognise some of the issues that were brought to us about availability of supply teachers. Changes have been proposed for the pay arrangements for supply teachers, which I hope will go some way towards addressing the issue. If the unions are about to ballot—of course, some of the deal that has been put together is subject to what their members think—I hope that that will address some of the issues that have been raised about supply.

On your point about involving the teaching profession in decisions about implementation of curriculum for excellence, it might be important to say something about the management board for CFE. One of your previous witnesses, Larry Flanagan, said that we as politicians are all complicit in CFE, but I point out that teaching professions and local authorities are represented on the management board, which makes all the big decisions about CFE with regard to timing of its arrangements and so on. Throughout the process, the Government has gone to considerable efforts to ensure that it has been a joint activity—for instance, the short-life working group on tackling bureaucracy that I mentioned earlier was a joint activity with all stakeholders. I think that it will be useful to maintain that consensus, if we can.

Clare Adamson: Good morning, minister. I realise that I am saying this in the shadow of Mr

Flanagan's comment about being complicit, but I have to say that when we have examined the extent of the concerns that have been expressed, I have found the whole process quite frustrating.

I believe that, after last year's commitment by the cabinet secretary that any school, head of department or individual teacher could make an approach for support, a survey of local authorities was carried out that suggested that those that were implementing CFE this year—with, I suppose, the exception of Renfrew—were well placed for implementation. I was therefore quite surprised to hear the SSTA say that only 25 per cent of its members had responded to the survey; for the EIS, the figure was only 35 per cent. Both union representatives said that there were very serious concerns about this. I was quite concerned to hear that significant specific problems have been highlighted and passed to the SQA, but I wonder whether those concerns could have been raised through some other mechanism before the survey was carried out.

Dr Allan: Again—and with your permission, convener—I will have to let the SQA speak for itself on this matter. However, with regard to responding to concerns that have been expressed, I should say that the commitments that were made still stand. There has been a commitment all along that any teacher or school with concerns about the implementation of CFE can make that concern known, and Education Scotland has visited many schools in response to individual requests for help. Whenever those requests have been made by a school, that help has been offered and those visits made.

With respect, convener, I will defer to the SQA on the issue of its own timetables.

Dr Brown: We regularly get specific feedback from teachers. Indeed, right from the start of the development of the qualifications, we have had a have your say feature on the SQA website, which basically solicits and seeks to answer such questions. That is essential, but we will take any question wherever it might come from and respond to it. As we pointed out in the previous evidence session, we need to understand the reasons for such questions being asked and then address the root cause.

Liam McArthur: My colleagues will ask in a moment about specific aspects of preparing for the qualifications, but I note that in the previous evidence session Larry Flanagan argued strongly for time and space for a consolidation exercise ahead of the move towards the new highers and advanced highers. Can the Scottish Government help to facilitate that?

On the issue of lessons learned, although the additional resources for books were welcome, Mr

Flanagan pointed out that when that money was divvied up per capita some schools or local authorities were still left short of the books that they required and the plea was that that lesson be learned as we look ahead to the new highers. Are you minded to support some form of stocktaking exercise this summer?

Dr Allan: The management board's on-going role is to review the process of implementation of curriculum for excellence. On the issue that you asked about, for example, we have listened to teachers, who told us that they were keen for a moment to pause and think about the new highers. Part of the reason for the extra in-service day that has been announced and, indeed, the extra space that has been freed up is to give teachers that time to reflect on the new highers for next year.

So, yes—the management board continually reflects on those things. However, I want to make one important point. As I mentioned, this has been a very long process. We are now approaching the diet of exams. We will learn, review and keep in touch with teachers, but there is no prospect of a change of course as we approach the exams.

12:00

Liam McArthur: For the avoidance of doubt, that was certainly not the point that I was making and I do not think, without putting words in Larry Flanagan's mouth, that that is what he was suggesting, either. He said that many of the lessons that are being learned in relation to the first diet of national 4 and 5 are precisely the lessons that will need to be learned for the subsequent roll-out. It is not about stopping beyond the statements made by the cabinet secretary on individual courses and professional involvement in decisions around that. It could be valuable to take stock around June or early July.

Dr Allan: I understand your point. Rather than us having a date in mind for taking stock, I reiterate that taking stock goes on all the time. We are very determined that the process is one of continual improvement. We want Scottish education to get better year on year. The professionals and local authorities have been brought into the review process, so we are confident that it goes on all the time.

Joan McAlpine: This morning, the SQA talked about support for examination preparation; it said that it is identifying questions from standard grade and intermediate 2 that could be used for practice in the new national exams. However, Mr Flanagan said that practice papers should be based on the national 5 course itself. Is the SQA correct in sticking to the idea of identifying questions from standard grade and intermediate 2 for practice papers?

Dr Allan: With permission, I will have to pass some of the specific questions about specific exams to the SQA.

We responded early in the process to the quite reasonable demand for sample papers. Obviously, a bank of past papers is not available for a new exam, so we have responded to the demand for sample papers and made them available. We recognise that past papers are an important part of the process.

Specimen papers for the higher will be published by the end of next month, so we are already thinking about the process for the higher as well as what we have provided for national 5.

Dr Brown: The specimen question paper for higher will come out at the end of February, so it is due out at the end of this week. Teachers will be able to grab hold of those and look at them, knowing that the courses start straight after the end of the exam cycle.

The Convener: Before Joan McAlpine continues, I want to ask for clarification because I am getting a bit confused. Will sample papers be available for pupils to use? Earlier that did not seem to be the case, but now you seem to be saying that it is the case.

Dr Brown: One sample question paper was published for all national 1 to 5 courses in which there was a paper, which was basically national 5. A paper for the higher course will be published by the end of this month.

Joan McAlpine: The EIS recommended that three sample papers for national 5 should be produced and that they should be based on the exam itself as opposed to on standard grade and intermediate 2. Dr Brown has already answered on that, but I wonder whether the minister has any thoughts.

Dr Allan: I can only say what has been produced. A sample paper has been produced. We are hearing the views of the unions and others, but it is not unreasonable for the SQA to produce a sample paper. It aids learners. It has been a significant contribution and I believe that it will help.

Graeme Logan: To add to that, the course notes and materials for the courses were produced by Education Scotland in April 2013. They contain messages about learning, teaching and assessment and about the change of approach through which there is on-going assessment of progress and the qualification is not just about the examination. It is important to note that teachers have had those practical course notes, which aim to bring together learning, teaching and assessment, since that point.

Joan McAlpine: But the examination contributes to the mark in some courses. What percentage of the mark does the examination contribute?

Dr Allan: Obviously, in most subjects, there has been a move so that the exam contributes a significant but decreased proportion of the total mark for the qualification. For instance, national 4s are entirely internally assessed, whereas externally assessed exams are still a significant but lesser proportion of the qualifications at national 5. We do not take away from the importance of the exams or the pressures that young people have in preparing for them.

Neil Bibby: I think that we are all aware of the importance of practice and example papers but, as Joan McAlpine rightly said, we heard a call from Larry Flanagan and the EIS to have three example papers as a matter of urgency. Has that been ruled out?

Dr Allan: The management board and the group that respond to requests from unions continually look at those requests. I am happy to see a proposal on that although, obviously, it would have to be done with some alacrity. I emphasise that the process has been planned and is now getting near its conclusion but, if the unions wish to meet me about that, I am more than happy to meet them.

Neil Bibby: What is your personal view about the number of example papers? We have one, and the unions are calling for three as a matter of urgency.

Dr Allan: My view is that what the SQA has provided is adequate and has been in response to demand. However, I do not rule out listening to people.

Clare Adamson: One of the other workload concerns from the teachers was about constantly having to revise documentation because of changes. The process has been dynamic, and the SQA and Education Scotland have been listening and reacting to the concerns that have been raised as time has gone on. Going forward, can we expect some stability and less review of the documentation?

Dr Allan: As the system develops, change will not be a constant element of it. Obviously, we are going through a time of change. It is important to say, as has been referred to already, that where changes were made to SQA documentation, that was in direct response to requests for changes from teachers. It is important that we respond to those requests. Without taking away from the importance of the changes, in most subjects they were around the margins of the content of the courses.

The other point that needs to be stressed is that the process is designed to, in future, free up teachers from what they have rightly considered in the past to be an overly prescriptive system. The SQA or the Government will never offer to write teachers' lessons for them. I know that they are not asking for that, and that they would not thank us for doing it if we did, but it is important for people to understand that there will not be that level of prescription from the centre.

There has been a process and a dialogue on some of the material from the SQA and, as I said, the changes have been made in response to requests from teachers. It would have been unusual for us not to respond, given the degree to which teachers have been involved in the process. When I say "us", I am talking about the SQA, so Dr Brown might have something to say on the issue.

Dr Brown: Right from the start of the development of the qualifications, we have tried to be as open and transparent as possible. Historically, qualifications have been developed behind a wall and have then magically appeared at some point. This year, we decided to bring together a group of about 1,000 people to be involved in the development of the qualifications. Also, as we developed the thinking, we published that.

The publication of draft documents is comforting for some people, because they see what is going on. For other people, it is concerning, because it shows that a change will happen. There is a balance of sharing, being open and being transparent. Since the documentation was published, we have received feedback about looking again at some aspects. We have done that and modified the information. We needed to do that.

However, we need to move to the point of having definitive documents. We will definitely do that, with the caveat that the documents should evolve and respond to changes in the environment that is around us in the education system.

As we go into implementing the new highers, we have learned that we need to be clearer about changes. We are embedding that in the documentation that goes on our website. There is a balance of responding, making changes and being clear about what we have done, so that we can set the point of stability.

Clare Adamson: In this session, we absolutely take on board the concerns that the unions have expressed, but we are also keen to get the message out to parents and pupils who will sit exams that there is a good-news story. I think that parents will welcome the extra support.

The SSTA representative said that a significant change of mindset is required and has not been

achieved. We have talked about a lot of the support that has been given, but we have not asked whether there are geographic pockets of concern. Are the concerns general across Scotland or are some local authorities performing much better than others on implementation?

Dr Allan: I have established no geographic trend. With the convener's permission, I will ask Education Scotland to provide more information, but I think that, when specific requests for assistance have been made for a department, a subject or more than one department in a school on any aspect of implementing the new exams, Education Scotland has made a visit. About 90 such visits have been made in recent weeks, and I do not believe that they have had a geographic bias around the country. Perhaps Graeme Logan can say whether that is the case.

Graeme Logan: As I outlined earlier, we continue to work with schools across Scotland. The picture varies and no one area stands out. The important point is that we have provided tailored support to local authorities and schools. We have new partnership agreements with a number of local authorities that specify curriculum areas or stages of the learner journey on which authorities would like to work with us. Local authorities have also shared their materials; 21 of them have shared course notes, which we have published alongside our material. There is a strong spirit of collaboration and working together to improve and implement the qualifications.

Our leaflet "Great Learning in Scotland", which we produced with the national parent forum and other partners, explains the changes to parents in plain English and outlines what the changes might mean for five young people who are taking different paths. We will continue to encourage schools and partners to use the great learning leaflet and materials to help parents to understand the changes and to reassure parents that standards will be higher than ever before and that we want young people to be better prepared for learning, life and work than ever before.

Dr Allan: We are talking about sources and channels of information. As we have said, Education Scotland, the SQA and the Scottish Government have put a lot of effort into providing information, but far and away the most believed and helpful source of information for parents remains the school and the school community. A lot of work has gone into supporting schools to ensure that information comes out directly from them.

George Adam: Most of my questions have been answered. We keep on talking about communication between everyone. Most of the changes have happened when communication channels have been open. Are those channels still

open? Is further support available, should it be needed? What have been the most useful types of support up to now?

12:15

Dr Allan: The channels are definitely still open for individual schools, young people, headteachers and local authorities to get in contact. I am always willing to meet and hear from people. The most useful channels of communication for me have been the opportunities that I have had to meet people around the country. I mentioned my visit to Dumbarton academy, and I also visited Ayr academy recently. In those schools I had the opportunity to speak with teachers directly and hear their views informally, and their views have been fed directly into the system.

There are opportunities to do all those things, but I repeat that far and away the most effective channel of communication for parents remains the schools themselves.

Jayne Baxter: I am pleased to hear from the minister about what has been useful for him, but what is deemed to be useful for pupils, teachers, schools and local authorities? How is all the activity that we have heard about this morning, in the earlier session and in this one, evaluated? How do you decide what is useful, and how is that information communicated? Is there a framework for that, or does it involve simply responding to individual circumstances as they arise?

Dr Allan: A leaflet that explains how the new qualifications work was sent out to schools and parents, and there was a central evaluation of the messages that went into it and the effectiveness of that communication. There is an on-going assessment of the effectiveness of things such as training and the verification of the assessment process; there has been continual assessment of the verification of assessment, if you like, to ensure that the messages that are going out from the centre are understandable and are readily used.

I emphasise that the process is on-going and continual. We do not wait for things to happen—there is a continuing process of analysing whether what we are saying is getting through.

Liz Smith: Picking up on your last point, minister, you have quite rightly said—three times now—that there has been a 10-year period of planning. However, committee members have a paper from the Scottish Parliament information centre and two written submissions from the witnesses this morning that show that there are still significant problems at this stage.

Dr Allan: Some of those issues were outlined by the unions and others prior to the most recent

intervention, if you want to call it that—the package of measures to provide time and space for teachers that has been announced. There has also been direct contact between Education Scotland and schools, with hundreds of people involved in visits to schools.

I believe that it would be wrong of any Government in this situation to shy away from the fact that this is a time of great change that will involve a great deal of work and, in some cases, stress for teachers. However, we have, I hope, responded to those calls at every stage.

Liz Smith: Issues were raised in the first evidence session regarding the extent of the assessment process, particularly for national 5. Indeed, assessment is coming across as the crux of the problem in the national 5 set-up.

Would you accept that some of the assessment for which teachers are having to prepare could be interpreted as unnecessary for some pupils, because a lot of importance will be placed on the final assessment? With hindsight, do you think that you could in future reduce the extent of the assessment burden, which has obviously created an awful lot of bureaucracy?

Parents have seen that things are being done very differently for different subjects. That is happening perhaps for good academic reasons, but the process has not come across to parents as having robustness behind it. Will you ensure that that issue is addressed?

Dr Allan: It is fair to say that the assessments represent something new; they also represent a considerable workload. My impression from speaking to teachers is that—for understandable reasons—there is this year a certain formality about the assessment process. The reason for that formality is that, as always, teachers are anxious to ensure that they do the best for young people.

I am sure that one of the changes in future years will be that assessment will merge more seamlessly and continuously with teaching and learning in Scotland's schools. I suppose that assessment is so conspicuous at the moment because teachers want to know, for all the right reasons, that what they are doing is right. That is also one of the reasons why teachers are constantly and quite rightly seeking assurances through the verification process that their assessment processes are right.

Schools are constantly learning from the process and I suspect that one of the things that they might think about in the future is what they do about third year and when courses begin.

On course content, if I can call it that, with the convener's permission I would like to bring in

Graeme Logan, who has done some work in that area. However, I want first to reassure Liz Smith about the two points that she raised. On the diversity of approach in different subjects and different schools, you will probably agree that it is a good thing for teachers to have autonomy.

Liz Smith: It is about professional judgment. Teachers desperately want to be assured that their professional judgment is the key thing that will determine the appropriate assessment. We have seen concerns about the extent of assessment in relation to national 5. I am sure that Colin Beattie will refer to the higher issue, where nine local authorities seem not to have gone with teachers' professional judgment in deciding whether to introduce a blanket approach. There is concern about such issues. I ask that you absolutely guarantee that in future it will be teachers' professional judgment that will determine what is best for young people.

Dr Allan: You ask about local authorities and the higher, and I will address the more general point. With regard to professional judgment and the higher, I make it clear that the consensus is—this has been said by local authorities and the teaching profession—that the natural option for students this coming year will be the new highs, simply because they are the obvious thing to do at a time of other curricular changes. However, we have said that we want to allow flexibility, so if there are unusual circumstances in which there are reasons why it is in the interests of young people to stick with the current highs, we will allow that to happen.

We have said that the decision to go for the existing higher rather than the new higher is not down to just the teacher and the school. That decision should be made only if agreement and consensus are reached between the local authority, the teaching department and the parent body. That is why there will be examples of where that discussion had to be held but where agreement was not reached. However, it is important to say that no party has a veto. If the decision is to go for the existing higher rather than the new higher, it must be taken in consultation with parents and local authorities—it is not unreasonable to expect them to have a say.

Liz Smith: I will just finish on a point that I am sure Colin Beattie will take up. I think that the inference is that nine local authorities took a blanket decision that was not discussed on a professional basis. That is an allegation, so let us not say just now whether it is true. I would be much more comfortable if the position could be clarified to ensure that professional judgment is what will make the difference when it comes to any decision about exams and teaching courses.

Dr Allan: You are right to be anxious about ensuring that such situations do not arise. The information that I have is that there is no evidence of blanket decisions being taken around the country to go for the existing higher rather than the new higher. Indeed, I am sure that Education Scotland would challenge very rigorously any school or local authority that wanted to take such a blanket decision, given that local authorities and the teaching profession have already said that, except in unusual circumstances, the new higher is the most natural option for people and schools to go for. I will bring in Graeme Logan.

Graeme Logan: Thank you, Dr Allan. There may be a wee bit of confusion, and we will discuss the issue further with Larry Flanagan and the EIS. Perhaps Larry Flanagan was suggesting that nine schools had made a blanket decision to go with the new higher, whereas we will challenge blanket decisions where schools go for the existing higher. However, we need to compare notes on that, because the minister has made it absolutely clear that we will challenge blanket decision making. Decisions need to be made in the best interests of learners and in consultation with their parents. We have an evidence base around that, and Larry Flanagan clearly has some interesting evidence that we should compare with ours, so that we can provide the best possible support.

We are confident in the assessment judgments that teachers in Scotland make. We are a country that has been developing approaches to formative assessment for more than 10 years and we are highly regarded internationally for the way in which teachers use a range of assessment techniques as part of learning and teaching. Through our local authority forum, we work with an assessment coordinator in each local authority area to look at moderation and assessment judgments and to support good judgments, and we are confident in the profession. That is why we have the model that we have in Scotland.

On curriculum content, I remind members that the standards expected in the curriculum for excellence are higher than ever before. We are in the process of setting up curriculum learning, teaching and assessment fora in each curriculum area, to keep content under review and to engage with professional associations, teachers and industry experts to ensure that the content of our curriculum will be world class and will help young people to have the best chances in life.

Next year, we will conduct a review of formative assessment approaches and publish a national report that will look at best practice and make recommendations for further improvement.

Liz Smith: Thank you. I do not think that concerns would have been raised to quite such an

extent in the documents that are before us if what you describe was already the case.

Colin Beattie: Minister, you have referred to the working group on tackling bureaucracy, which issued a report in November 2013. We also heard from the previous panel that the report is only now coming under consideration at union branches and elsewhere. Do you have any target dates in mind for implementation of the recommendations in that report?

Dr Allan: The report's recommendations have been conveyed to local authorities, which, of course, were represented on the group that came up with the recommendations. Indeed, they are a bit more than recommendations; they are direct challenges to all of us who are involved in delivering the curriculum for excellence. The expectation is that they will be acted upon without delay.

I have referred to one of the things that came up, which is that we must free up teachers to teach, and to have the discretion and flexibility to teach. As others have mentioned, we have to give teachers due respect and allow them to use their professional judgment to teach. It would be a fair criticism to say that, looking back a year or so, there was evidence at both primary and secondary that some local authorities were unduly monitoring—I hesitated before I used that word—what teachers were teaching, and that undue emphasis was placed on the planning, and on the recording of planning, of lessons. We all now accept that that ran counter to the spirit of the curriculum for excellence. A strong message has been sent out to local authorities that that is not what is required. There is nobody at the centre who is reading those lesson plans—nobody would have time to read all the lesson plans that were being submitted a couple of years ago. Teachers should be freed up to do their jobs.

Colin Beattie: Would you say that it is too soon to know what progress has been made with local authorities? I presume that they will give some feedback on the implementation of the recommendations.

Dr Allan: Local authorities have already given some feedback, and the strong messages about the use of information and communications technology systems for lesson planning show a change of heart. There is an acceptance and consensus that some of the things that were happening a couple of years back should not have been happening and are now not happening.

The group agreed that it would review the process, but we shall come back to that. The group's findings are not just a piece of paper on a shelf. We will review them and the dialogue will continue.

12:30

Liam McArthur: I touched on this issue earlier. The principles of curriculum for excellence were about providing a degree more autonomy for teachers. As we have heard, as a result of the verification process and the assessments, teachers have perhaps been putting themselves under pressure because of their expectations of what they needed to do in order to deliver for their students. That has not worked out as any of us would have hoped.

Is it your view that what we are seeing is a reflection of a change process, and that curriculum for excellence will settle down, lessons will be learned and we will move into new highers and beyond? There were serious workload pressures, as was evident from the testimony that we have heard from the EIS, the SSTA and others. Do you think that the workload will return to being more manageable and sustainable?

Dr Allan: As I indicated earlier, I do not take away from or deny the fact that change has produced workload issues. I slightly take issue, however, with the pessimistic view that you give of the implementation of curriculum for excellence to date. Any of you who have visited schools and are struck by how different they are compared with when you went to school, even the younger ones among you, will realise that there has been a transformative change—to use an overused word—in the way that teaching and learning happen.

The exams—the national qualifications—are only the final part, albeit a very important part, of that change. Anyone who speaks to young people at primary school will realise that they not only know what they learned at school that day, but they have a fair idea why. Anybody who sees that will recognise that something remarkable has happened in Scotland's education system.

That is something that other countries are looking at with great interest. The Welsh Assembly Government recently indicated that it wanted to learn from what it considered to be the outstanding practice in Scotland. Representatives of the Isle of Man and of Guernsey have been speaking to the Scottish Government, wanting to know more about curriculum for excellence, perhaps with future options in mind. International commentators and experts on education—educationists—have said some pretty outstanding things about the implementation and the changes to date.

Liam McArthur: With respect, I do not think that I was calling into question the journey that we are on. It does not surprise me at all that others are considering curriculum for excellence as a model that they might seek to implement. They will have

the benefit of learning from the lessons that we are learning ourselves.

I was reflecting more on the feedback that the EIS and the SSTA received from their recent surveys, which they both indicated was unprecedented. I acknowledge the announcement that was made last week in response to some of the concerns that were raised in that process.

What I was driving at was whether some of the workload pressures are a reflection of the fact that we are reaching a key pinchpoint with the first diet of examinations, and whether you are confident that, learning the lessons that need to be learned as we progress, that should not happen on an annual basis over the next two years with the roll-out of new highers and new advanced highers.

Dr Allan: The point that I hope we are both making is that the workload issues are the product of change. I have tried to be clear that I acknowledge that change will produce workload.

It is important to reiterate something that was said by Ken Cunningham, general secretary of School Leaders Scotland. He said:

“The preparation, consultation (for the Nationals): there's been more than I can ever remember. The amount of effort that has gone into this knocks the others into the corner.”

In other words, there is indeed more workload, which is a product of change, but there has been an astonishing degree of effort on the part of the Government, Education Scotland, the SQA, local authorities and, most important, teachers themselves, to ensure that we have a successful conclusion to the immediate process of change in Scotland's schools. The workload is about the process; it is a product of change.

Neil Bibby: I have a question for the minister and Education Scotland about the new highers and blanket decisions and approaches. Why did Bill Maxwell, as chair of the curriculum for excellence management board, send a letter on 8 November that set out the expectation that all schools would implement the new highers, when just 12 days later on 20 November that advice was amended? Surely such mixed messages over a short period did not help matters.

Also, have you been surprised by the number of schools that have decided that there are too many challenges to meet the 2014-15 target for implementation of the new higher?

Dr Allan: The expectation remains. I will continue to use the word “expectation”, which is the word that local authorities used, as you mentioned. The expectation continues to be that the new higher will be used. It will be, to use a phrase that I have used again and again, the natural option.

We are talking today primarily about whether the Government is responding to calls from teachers. It would be remiss of the Government not to have allowed flexibility where that was called for, and it would have been remiss of us not to have allowed the opportunity for what I think someone on your previous panel described as possibly 20 per cent of schools—he admitted that that was a guess rather than anything else, but it is certainly a small minority—to make use of the existing higher.

Neil Bibby: We also need to reflect on why Education Scotland and the Scottish Government were wide of the mark regarding schools' readiness to implement the new higher.

Dr Allan: I think that that may be wide of the mark, with respect.

Neil Bibby: What was wide of the mark?

Dr Allan: Your remarks.

Neil Bibby: In terms of the implementation of the new higher and the expectation that all schools were going to implement them and—

Dr Allan: I was slightly interrupting you because I think that what you said is wide of the mark. Perhaps it was not your intention to suggest that schools are not making preparations for the new higher in a way that will be successful for young people. I think that they will be.

Graeme Logan: As we discussed earlier, those timescales were agreed four years ago with all the partners to the management board. That was the agreed timeline. In response to further discussion with teachers and after we listened to teachers, that additional degree of flexibility was built in. The important point is that all young people in Scotland continue to work towards higher, whether existing or new, which is the gold standard, and that we have a phased approach to respond to the profession and ensure that young people's needs are met, in consultation with their parents.

Neil Bibby: I should clarify that what was wide of the mark was the Scottish Government's assurances that everything was on track and that teachers had all the support necessary to implement the new higher to the timetable that had been set out.

I understand from the minutes of the curriculum for excellence management board of April 2013 that views had been fed back to the cabinet secretary on the issue of additional in-service time. Given that pressure faced by teachers, schools and authorities has been evident for some time, I ask the minister what the nature of that feedback to the Scottish ministers was and why an announcement on an additional in-service day did not follow the board of management meetings last year.

Dr Allan: The management board constantly feeds back requests that are received, which we respond to. We have responded. We cannot organise in-service days at the drop of a hat, for that or any other consideration. We have to consider the views of the parent body, which is why we have on-going dialogue with bodies such as the national parent forum of Scotland, which, although it may sometimes welcome an extra in-service day, is aware of the problems that that creates for parents.

Colin Beattie: Liz Smith referred to the implementation of the new higher and advanced higher. It was alleged that nine local authorities had taken a unilateral decision on that. We are going to get the names of those nine schools supplied by the EIS, if I remember correctly. What local consultation do you expect there to be on that? Do you expect the local authorities, headteachers and unions to make that decision as a group?

Dr Allan: I am always willing to look at evidence, and I would be more than willing to look at any evidence that may be presented on that issue. However, our evidence and Education Scotland's evidence is that there are at present no schools taking blanket decisions about those matters. As for how the decision should be taken, the Government publicly made it very clear that a decision to use the existing higher rather than the new higher should not be taken on a blanket basis across a school but should be taken in consultation with the local authority, the relevant teachers and the parent body in the school. Also, the decision should be taken bearing in mind the overwhelming evidence that, for good reasons, people regard the new higher as the natural option, if I may keep using that phrase.

It is worth making one further point about something that I have been asked about. The new higher and the existing higher are both the higher—they both have the same value in the eyes of the universities and employers, and they have the status and standards.

Colin Beattie: Is there any evidence of any schools wanting to delay the introduction of the new higher?

Dr Allan: On the whole, those decisions have not been taken yet. I may have to ask Education Scotland for any figures, but I do not think that those decisions have been taken in many schools. I keep coming back to the fact that there is no evidence that I have been presented with of blanket decisions being taken. Education Scotland has been dealing with the schools.

Graeme Logan: As we discussed earlier, and as Janet Brown mentioned, it will be August before we know the numbers presenting for the existing

and new higher. We continue to engage and discuss the matter with local authorities, and we are not aware of a local authority taking a blanket decision, as was outlined earlier. However, we will need to compare the evidence and explore that further. It would also be worth members being aware that ADES has produced a position statement around the expectation that the minister has outlined for progression to the new higher although acknowledging that decisions can be taken on the basis of the best interests of young people and in consultation with the parents. We will continue to support that discussion.

A lot of schools and departments have not yet made their decisions, and the priority for us at Education Scotland has been the production of our new higher course materials. Over 50 per cent of those have already been published ahead of time, and the rest will be there by the end of March. We hope that that will reassure teachers that the best natural progression from national 5 is into the new higher. In some cases, it is fair to say that it could be more work to try to move from national 5 into the existing higher because of the progression routes that exist with the new qualifications.

Jayne Baxter: Would the minister care to comment on Education Scotland's remarks about the fact that teachers may be putting themselves under pressure because they are aiming for the highest possible professional standards? Does he agree with me that it is down to all of us to support teachers through what is, without doubt, a period of major change?

Dr Allan: I do not think that there is any disagreement between ourselves or between either of us and Education Scotland about that. As I and others have said, we are fortunate to have a teaching profession that is not only highly educated but which operates to such high professional standards. I have discovered that it is because of teachers' sense of vocation that they are anxious to ensure that they do the best for the young people and that the first rounds of assessment go as well as is hoped. All of us, across the different parties and agencies, have a duty to support the teachers in what they do.

The Convener: I have one question with which to finish. The purpose of the meeting was to provide reassurance to pupils and parents about the new examination system that they are about to face. Can you reassure parents and pupils that the examinations will go ahead as planned and that the new system will be implemented smoothly and successfully?

Dr Allan: As I have indicated, the process is well in train for that to happen. The firm intention—and my commitment—is to ensure that that happens.

The Convener: Thank you for your evidence, minister. We are most grateful for your taking the time to come to the committee today.

Before I close the meeting, I place on public record my thanks and the thanks of the rest of the committee to Liz Smith, as this is her final meeting on the committee. She has been with us since 2011 and had been on the predecessor committee since 2007, so she has considerable experience. We thank her very much for all her efforts over the years. I am sure that Liz will go on to be equally successful on whichever other committees she now moves to.

Meeting closed at 12:46.

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