



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

EDUCATION AND CULTURE COMMITTEE

Tuesday 4 November 2014

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EDUCATION AND CULTURE COMMITTEE
25th 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)

*Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)

*Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD)

*Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Louise Cameron (Scottish Youth Parliament)

Fiona Dalziel (Scottish Secondary Teachers Association)

Iain Ellis MBE (National Parent Forum of Scotland)

Larry Flanagan (Educational Institute of Scotland)

Susan Hunter (YouthLink Scotland)

Jane Peckham (National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers)

Eileen Prior (Scottish Parent Teacher Council)

Jim Thewliss (School Leaders Scotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Terry Shevlin

LOCATION

The James Clerk Maxwell Room (CR4)

Scottish Parliament

Education and Culture Committee

Tuesday 4 November 2014

[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:03]

Draft Budget Scrutiny 2015-16

The Convener (Stewart Maxwell): Good morning, everybody, and welcome to the 25th meeting in 2014 of the Education and Culture Committee. I remind everybody to ensure that they switch off all electronic devices, because they interfere with the broadcasting system.

Our first agenda item is to hear evidence as part of our scrutiny of the Scottish Government's draft budget for 2015-16. We will focus on school spending, with evidence from two panels of witnesses, starting with the views of parents and young people, after which we will hear from the trade unions. I welcome Iain Ellis MBE from the national parent forum of Scotland, Eileen Prior from the Scottish Parent Teacher Council, Louise Cameron from the Scottish Youth Parliament and Susan Hunter from YouthLink Scotland. Good morning to all of you, and thank you for your written submissions to the committee, which have been useful in setting out your views for this morning's evidence session. We have a lot of issues to get through, so we will move straight to questions. I am sure that members are keen to get involved.

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): My opening question is for all the panel members. Will you give examples of the kind of budgetary pressures that you are aware of in schools and say how they impact on pupils' education? Perhaps Iain Ellis will answer first, because I was struck by paragraph 2.4 in his written evidence, which states:

"schools are increasingly expecting parents to fundraise ... for essential items such as pencils and paper."

Can you give us an example of schools that have to fundraise to get pencils and paper?

Iain Ellis MBE (National Parent Forum of Scotland): I cannot give you the exact schools, but the big thing is that, because of the cuts, there is not much flexibility in the money when schools get their funding. The majority of it goes towards staff costs and the upkeep of the school. They then have the priority of getting course material. That then filters down. What is the least important thing to supply? It is pencils and paper and stuff like that.

Mary Scanlon: Can you perhaps tell us in which local authority parents have to raise money to get pencils and paper, or is it all local authorities?

Iain Ellis: I would not say that it is all of them, but it is some. I know that, in my area, West Dunbartonshire, a couple of schools have done it. A parent council and parent teacher association have had to raise money because of the savings that have had to be made.

Mary Scanlon: Is West Dunbartonshire the only one that you are aware of?

Iain Ellis: That is the one that I know of. The problem is that some of the examples come from my reps—it has all been collated.

Mary Scanlon: It is just that it is in your evidence.

Iain Ellis: Yes. I know of a couple of schools in West Dunbartonshire that have done that. I am sure that Eileen Prior will have more examples.

Mary Scanlon: Okay. Can you give examples of budgetary pressures and how they are affecting pupils' education?

Iain Ellis: When we break it all down, there is not much of the budget left for schools to use. When they have to make management savings on top of that, that makes it even harder. The budget just gets cut. Schools are given an allocation and are then told, "By the way, you need to make another management saving on top of that." That is just not sustainable.

Mary Scanlon: What should money be spent on that it is not being spent on because of the cuts that you mention? Pencils and paper are one example. What else should be provided that is not being provided because of the budgetary pressures?

Iain Ellis: We are just about to go into the new higher, so new resources will be needed. There is not enough funding to supply all the resources that we need for the children. When children are starting to share books one between three, that does not work. That is the big restraint that we are now under. The money is not there to fund the new resources that are required, and we need to start replacing old resources. Kids are going home with books that are taped together and that kids from years gone by have scribbled wee notes on. There is just no money left.

Mary Scanlon: You feel that that might be detrimental to pupils' education as they approach the new higher.

Iain Ellis: Definitely. It is not just the new higher; it is everything.

Mary Scanlon: It was just that you gave that example.

The Convener: Sorry, Mary, but before we move on I want to clarify something. Mr Ellis, could you name a time when what you have just described did not happen? When I was at school—it was not yesterday—pupils shared books one between two or even one between three. Books were taped up, because they were old and the spine was broken, and previous pupils had written in the margins. I have to be honest and say that what you have described represents my memory of school. In addition, pupils were asked—if it was possible and their parents could afford it—whether they could buy the text for a play that they were doing in English. That was not yesterday.

Iain Ellis: I know that it was not yesterday. When I was at school 20 years ago, I had my own books. The books are getting into a state now and they cannot even be replaced. You say that there was one book between two children, but there is now one between three because of the state of the books. Given the way that Scottish education is and what we want it to be, is it good enough that there is one book between three?

The Convener: No, but that is not my point. I agree that it is not good enough, but my point is that, when I was at school, pupils sharing books one between three, parents having to raise money to supply extra books and material, pupils using old books and books being taped up were the norm. That was happening over 30 or 40 years ago, so I am asking why you think that it is new.

Iain Ellis: Parents are now bringing it to light. They are also saying, “Why should we do that? Is that not part of a child’s education? Why should parents have to supply books?”

Eileen Prior (Scottish Parent Teacher Council): We are supposed to have a system of education that is free at the point of delivery, but we do not. There is an impact on two levels. Individual parents are having to find money to pay for materials, trips or whatever for young people. We know that that has an impact. Scotland’s Commissioner for Children and Young People’s report from earlier this year shows that young people self-select. When young people from households in which there is little money are choosing subjects, they will avoid subjects that require additional resources, such as technical and practical subjects. They will not put themselves forward for school trips, because they know that their parents cannot afford them. There is therefore an impact on families and on the education of young people.

There is also an impact on parent groups. We have been tracking the situation for a number of

years and have found that parent groups are raising funds not for frills, not for ribbons and fancy things, but for fundamental resources. Information technology equipment is a key one. Funds are raised for things such as smart boards, laptops, iPads and tablets. Parent groups are funding things that would previously have been included in the school’s budget. That is happening across the board.

Louise Cameron (Scottish Youth Parliament): The Scottish Youth Parliament consults young people directly. Our education and lifelong learning committee has consulted young people on the issue. We submitted a full copy of the evidence to the Education and Culture Committee.

We found that young people were very happy with curriculum for excellence and they liked it, but they felt that there were some issues with implementation. They felt that teachers could perhaps have been better prepared and that there were not enough resources. However, young people are relatively happy with the content of curriculum for excellence. Perhaps the committee could put a bit of thought into the resources that go into it, because that would be preventative spending. If that was addressed, there would be a benefit in the future, because the more we put into education, the more returns there will be in the future and spending will go back into the economy.

Mary Scanlon: Do you think that the recent budgetary pressures have impacted on the implementation of curriculum for excellence?

Louise Cameron: Yes. Our concern is that it appears that the spending will struggle to be sufficient over the next year. We think that if those issues are resolved through resourcing now, there would be a benefit in the long run.

Susan Hunter (YouthLink Scotland): YouthLink Scotland represents our membership of more than 100 organisations in both the voluntary and statutory sectors and in our local authorities. Our experience is that the budgetary pressures on schools do not impact directly on teacher numbers but impact on the amount of time that teachers have to invest in partnership working with youth work practitioners to deliver the outcomes of curriculum for excellence, which are to give young people the principles of breadth, progression, personalisation and choice. Youth work offers that, and there are good examples of youth work in schools programmes that provide those opportunities, but teacher time is required for planning and delivery.

10:15

Mary Scanlon: I am a member of the Public Audit Committee, so forgive me if I am a bit of an

anorak about Audit Scotland, but earlier this year it prepared a good report on "School education", which I have no doubt you have all read. I will lump my two questions together and quote from the report. It states:

"Some schools have achieved better attainment results than their levels of deprivation would indicate, suggesting that the gap between the lowest and highest performing schools cannot be wholly attributed to different levels of deprivation."

I would be pleased to hear your views. We had a good debate last week in Parliament on levels of attainment, and the committee is doing an inquiry into deprivation and what can be done to narrow the gap.

In the same report, at paragraph 33, Audit Scotland stated:

"At a council level, there is no consistent approach to tracking and monitoring the progress of pupils from P1 to S3."

That is not to say that they are not being tracked, just that there is no consistent approach, and we want every pupil to get the best chance. I would like you to address two points: first, what affects pupils' attainment, other than deprivation, and secondly, whether we should have a more consistent approach to tracking pupils, because we know that reading and maths competence levels seem to deteriorate between P1 and P2 and secondary school.

Eileen Prior: The two key things that impact on attainment for young people are parental engagement and quality of teaching. That is not rocket science; it is out there and we all know that that is the reality. We pointed out in our paper that we must have a clear eye on the difference between parental involvement and parental engagement. Schools can do a great deal to support parental engagement, and parent groups such as parent councils and parent teacher associations can do a great deal to support parental engagement, but the prize of all of that is that parents engage with their children's learning and that improves attainment.

The quality of teaching and of leadership in the school environment is key, and the reason why there is such disparity between different schools and different areas with the same level of deprivation is the quality of leadership and teaching and the way in which families in those communities are engaged. That may not account for all of it, but it accounts for a lot of it.

As far as the tracking of young people is concerned, as a culture we are obsessed with measuring the pig. We will weigh it and weigh it and weigh it, and it will still weigh the same tomorrow as it weighs today. If we use assessment as a way of weighing the pig just so

that we can note that down, even though we know that schools are struggling with the amount of paperwork and bureaucracy that they already have to deal with, we have got to be extremely cautious about putting in further measures for attainment.

Teachers know their young people. If we have to look at ways in which attainment is measured, we must work with teachers to implement something to do the tracking that is low tech and low on bureaucracy. It does not need to be done nationally; it needs to be done locally and under the eyes of a vigilant local authority and a vigilant headteacher, with the co-operation of parents.

Mary Scanlon: I was careful to quote from the report, because I was not suggesting more testing and bureaucracy. I do not want to read any more out of the report, but I was not talking about weighing the pig, as you put it, but talking about comparing one school with another. That is what the Auditor General for Scotland was saying.

Eileen Prior: That is not always helpful.

Mary Scanlon: I appreciate parental engagement, but I am quite concerned by what you are saying about the quality of teaching. Is that affected by budgetary pressures?

Eileen Prior: I was not saying that the quality of teaching was affected by budgetary pressures. I am saying that the two things that give us high-attaining young people are high-quality teaching and parental engagement. Those are the key factors. That is separate from budgetary pressures, but of course budgeting has an impact on the teaching population.

Mary Scanlon: Do you have concerns about the quality of teaching? You have mentioned it quite often.

Eileen Prior: There are concerns about the quality of teaching. All parents can cite examples in their children's schools of worries about the quality of teaching. We have come a long way and I think that we have a long way to go.

Iain Ellis: I agree with a lot of what Eileen Prior was saying. What is attainment? That is one big issue that I have. What is attainment from one school to another? Attainment in a deprived area might be just getting the kids to turn up at school. That could be seen as raising attainment, simply because they are coming to school. Another definition of attainment could be how many national 5s people have.

We perhaps need to look at some sort of standardisation of what is or is not attainment. It is not good enough just to ask authorities what their attainment levels are, because they can all give different answers. What is the destination of school leavers? That is an attainment level, but we

do not specifically ask, "What is the destination of your school leavers?" and get a chart. We ask how many kids get five national 5s. Only about 20 per cent of kids in that year group sit and get those qualifications. What about the 80 per cent who do not? That is where we are beginning to lose out.

If we start cutting budgets, as was mentioned, of course attainment will drop and we will never close the gap. Under curriculum for excellence, you have to help the high fliers in the school, so they will rise. Even if you help the kids at the bottom, things will move at the same level, so how will you bridge that gap?

That leads on to the quality of teaching; we need quality teachers. There are issues with teachers across the country. The General Teaching Council for Scotland is beginning to deal with some problems. God forbid that it gets rid of some teachers. I used to call teachers bombproof because you could not get rid of them once they were in a job—that was it—but we are now beginning to look at the problem and sort it out and we are beginning to get quality teachers through. When you see some of the new young teachers who are coming through the colleges under CFE, it is like night and day. Some of the ideas that they are using to bring the kids on are mind-blowing.

The big issue is that, if budget restraints start to kick in, I honestly think that it will turn into a postcode lottery, because some authorities work far better with their budgets than others and we are beginning to see gaps across the country. Some councils pay more to fund the kids for the year than others, but in a lot of them there are cuts. In the past three years, there have been cuts. Not a lot of them have been to education, but in the next three years there will be serious cuts to education because a lot of the other departments in local authorities have been cut to the bone.

How do authorities make savings in education? Paying for the bus trip down the road just when statutorily required to do so is not much of a saving. The only way to make serious savings in education is through staffing cut and school closures, neither of which is acceptable to parents. If we carry on down the road that we are going down with CFE, we could have one of the best systems in the world. If we pull the carpet out from under it now, there is a good chance that we will end up a big step back down the ladder.

The Convener: Thank you, Mr Ellis. I know that Gordon MacDonald wants to come in at this point.

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): Thanks, convener. Eileen, you said earlier that disadvantaged children from households with little money were avoiding choosing subjects that had associated costs and were not going on

school trips. First, what evidence is there of that? Secondly, during the summer, the Scottish Government announced a new fund for access to education, which allows schools to apply for up to £5,000 to help disadvantaged children. How aware are schools of that fund and what is the take-up of it?

Eileen Prior: The fund was announced at the launch of the report by the children's commissioner and Save the Children, which identified the fact that young people were self-selecting and were avoiding subjects that would cost their families money. We are already making those young people discard the career choices that they want to make, which I think is fundamentally unfair.

As for how aware schools are of the fund, I do not know. You would have to talk to the teachers unions about that, as it is a matter for schools, not families. Its use rests at the discretion of schools, not of families, and it does not impact on what is going on in the home.

Gordon MacDonald: If schools were aware of the fund's existence, however, they could make families aware of its availability.

Eileen Prior: Absolutely.

Gordon MacDonald: Would you agree that that would help to offset the problem?

Eileen Prior: I am sure that it would help, but I do not know if it would help enough. You would have to get a sense from the teachers unions and the headteachers of whether they feel that there has been a sufficient impact.

Gordon MacDonald: We have talked about the pressures on school budgets and we are aware that public authorities are under a great deal of financial pressure. In Audit Scotland's "School education" report, which was issued in June this year, key message 2 begins:

"Performance has improved against all ten of the attainment measures we examined over the last decade."

How does that tie in with people's view about the budgetary pressures that are affecting education? Audit Scotland has clearly said that attainment is actually improving.

Eileen Prior: You are not necessarily comparing apples with apples. The means by which we measure attainment in different countries is different. You cannot simply consider attainment levels here and compare them directly with elsewhere. Our teaching methods are different, our curricula are different and our means of measurement are different. Those are broad—

Gordon MacDonald: The report was about attainment in Scotland improving.

Eileen Prior: Yes—that is right. That is testament to the hard work of schools, teachers and young people. I do not think that there is any doubt that we are starting to move up.

Picking up on a point that Iain Ellis made, I point out that we are taking on board wider achievement as opposed to simply academic attainment. That is extremely important.

Local authorities have been cutting for some years and we see that at head office. Staffing levels in education departments, or whatever kinds of department they are as they are all multifunction now, are dropping—the number of quality improvement officers has dropped. That was covered in the Audit Scotland report. The number of parental involvement officers has probably remained static, but the amount of time that they have to support parental involvement has been cut drastically. Therefore, cuts are already going through at head-office level.

In schools, the numbers of classroom assistants, language assistants and business managers—the non-teaching staff—have already been cut. Parents are already saying that there is a reduced resource within schools for children with additional needs. That is already happening.

Many of those kids will not appear on the attainment charts. How do we know what the impacts are, aside from what parents are telling us? I imagine that people at the Additional Support Needs Tribunals for Scotland will be getting more cases.

Iain Ellis: I am heartened by the report from Audit Scotland. We have raised the barrier in Scotland. However, the big issue is the cuts that we have been discussing, which can only be detrimental to the system. That cannot keep going. The only way to save serious money is through school closures and staffing, and as soon as we start to affect the staffing, things will fall down. There is so much pressure on staff now that things can only get worse.

If we start tightening the grip now, when curriculum for excellence, the new qualifications and the new highers are all coming in, my concern is whether we can go where everybody round this table wants to go. All of them were probably involved in curriculum for excellence. Can we take curriculum for excellence to where we all wanted to go with it 10 years ago? How can we possibly stop the trend now? My biggest worry is that we might buck that 10-year trend of raising attainment.

10:30

Susan Hunter: For YouthLink Scotland, the issue is attainment for all young people. For some

young people for whom the formal school system is not the best fit, youth work provides an opportunity to achieve in other ways and to develop young people's skills, confidence and interests.

School budgets are statutory, and a set of statutory measures relates to schools, but youth work does not have the same status, which is a challenge. We are conscious that local authorities are having to make tough choices. They must fulfil their statutory obligations to provide school education, but there is also the informal education sector of youth work and family learning. Funding that sector, as a preventative spend measure, can bring greater benefits for people in the long run.

Louise Cameron: Something that the committee could consider is the massive difference in spending between local authorities, which varies a lot. We are concerned to ensure that all young people in Scotland have the same high-quality education and that everyone has access to opportunities.

I agree with Susan Hunter. Additional opportunities are important to young people. We have been told that work experience is vital in the context of employability and that pupils want different options. Curriculum for excellence recognises very well that we can no longer have a one-size-fits-all system. We need to continue to promote more vocational opportunities and different pathways to college and university, so that all pupils can take the pathway to employability that suits them.

The Convener: You are quite right to say that the amount that is spent per pupil varies between local authorities. I assume that that is a criticism; what is your solution?

Louise Cameron: It was not really a criticism; it is just something that I have noticed. I do not dispute that there are factors that come into that variation, such as rurality. However, we need to ensure that there is consistency between local authorities. There is quite a big difference in spending per head on education: the lowest spend is £4,433 and the highest is £10,821, which is a massive difference. The resources that the extra money could buy could have an impact on a person's education.

The Convener: You are right to point out the difference, but you must have a destination in mind that would solve the problem. Are you suggesting that there should be a statutory minimum spend, for example? Should we have centralised budgets? What are you suggesting?

Louise Cameron: I do not have a solution, and I am not the best person to provide one. Perhaps we should compare and contrast local authorities. If something is working well and having a good

impact on pupils' education in one local authority, it might be a good solution for another authority and might save it a bit of money. For some authorities, spending a little bit extra might have an impact and provide a better quality of education. It might be good to see what authorities are getting for their money.

The Convener: I see that Eileen Prior wants to come in. Local authorities have control over their education budgets. They are responsible for those budgets and decide how much to spend per pupil. What is Eileen Prior's view on that?

Eileen Prior: I would like to know how that works. When I started in this job I tried to find out, and one of the people I spoke to—who shall remain nameless—said, "There's only two people who know how it works, and one of them's dead."

There is a complete lack of transparency, which I find unacceptable. As a council tax payer and a parent, I want to know how education is funded. I want to see how much money my local authority gets and how decisions are made on how it is spent. I fail to understand why there is such disparity between local authorities. Of course there will be some difference because of rurality or whatever, but that does not answer the question. When I look at the difference in the figures, it makes no sense to me. I would like to understand why the figures are what they are, because they make no sense.

Iain Ellis: It is partly about good management and different authorities managing things differently. I would be more radical: we have 32 authorities and some of them are tiny; we need to box a bit clever and they need to start sharing education services. It does not make sense to me to have wee authorities right next door to each other that all have a director, head of service and quality improvement officers when we have big authorities, such as the City of Edinburgh Council and Glasgow City Council, that probably have more schools than three or four of the smaller authorities put together.

I know that it is hard for MSPs, because you give them the money but cannot tell them what to do with it, which is a huge issue. However, we need to tell them to be a bit cleverer and ask them whether they can work together and share services. We have tried it in a couple of places, but we need to put a wee bit of pressure on.

The Convener: I was going to bring in George Adam, but we have strayed into an area in which Clare Adamson is interested, so I will swap the questions.

Clare Adamson (Central Scotland) (SNP): The Scottish Government provides the block grant to local authorities, who decide how they spend it, and there are elements of national bargaining, for

example for teachers' wages, although other support staff's wages will be determined in local agreements. The Scottish Government recently used an element of pressure on teacher numbers—that has come out in the budget—and, in the past, it has used mechanisms to influence local authorities in certain areas.

Do the witnesses have an opinion on where the balance of power lies in who makes the decisions? Is the balance right at the moment? What influence are the witnesses able to have on local and Government decision makers?

Eileen Prior: In our submission, we make the more radical suggestion that we should have a real rethink of how we deliver education. To pick up on what Iain Ellis said, we have 32 local authorities and an incredible amount of duplication; is that the most efficient way for us to deliver education for the betterment of all our young people? We need to address that question. I am not saying that it is not the best way; I am asking whether it is. We have to stop and think about whether it is the best way of ensuring that all our young people get the best possible service.

The duplication between local authorities is just one part of that. There is also the issue of transparency. We identify in our submission the reality of what is happening at local authority level. We no longer have education departments—I think that we have only one education director left in Scotland—but have children and families departments, leisure, children and families departments and justice, children and families departments. The focus on education and, I believe, the understanding of what we are aiming for are being diminished. That is being further enacted by the cuts that are going on and the reduction in staffing in local authorities.

There comes a point at which we must say "Stop" and ask whether the current set-up is the best way to provide education. We suggest that the time has come to do that.

Louise Cameron: Clare Adamson asked how we could have an influence on decision makers. In Scotland, we are lucky and grateful to have many youth organisations, such as the SYP. We specialise in consulting young people and have a member of the SYP in every constituency in Scotland. If you want to get young people's views, MSYPs are a brilliant way to do it. They are interested, they specialise in consultation with young people and they can deliver their views to you. That approach is valuable and it would have very good outcomes, because you would get an opinion right from the young person's mouth, as it were.

We were absolutely delighted that you introduced a training, youth and women's

employment budget. It is valuable to link education and employability together. If you can get those things to work together a bit it would provide very good links for the future. At the end of the day, education is what will make people employable. Young people get their employability skills from schools. The link is very important. The committee could consider doing something with that, which would be valuable.

Susan Hunter: We would welcome the involvement of young people in consultation activity around local decision making. We know that within our membership is a network of local youth voice organisations, which are quite often placed within education departments of local authorities, which could provide a vehicle for meaningful dialogue around spending. With the referendum we saw our young people engaging on a single issue, which showed their ability to present solid argument, explore fact and be aware of consequences. Education is a similar issue, because it affects young people on a day-to-day basis. There would be no shortage of ideas or creativity from young people on how budgets could be allocated.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): As we drifted into discussions about local authority reorganisation, I was painfully aware that I represent the smallest local authority in Scotland—which, of course, might be preserved by its being surrounded by water.

One of the benefits of devolution is that—as a Basque politician described it to me—the bums are closer to kick. While everything is going well, nobody necessarily needs to go in and face up to their elected member or their education official, but when they are not going well, the notion that services are shared with other authorities, which means that the individuals whom you feel you need to see are that bit more distant from you, becomes a problem. Is that the sacrifice? Is there a risk that in looking, quite understandably, at where savings might be made, we dilute the democratic accountability of some of the individuals involved? Is there a risk that in pursuing savings we perhaps lose more than we gain?

Eileen Prior: You would have to ask the parents in large authorities such as Glasgow and Highland whether they feel that they are close enough to the bums that they need to kick. I do not know the answer to that, but I suspect that a lot of them do. On the contrast between some of the tiniest local authorities and some of the biggest, I am not sure that size is the issue. Does it not have more to do with how local authorities and local politicians engage with their constituents? I am not necessarily offering a perspective or a view on

that; I just think that perhaps the key is quality, not quantity.

Iain Ellis: If the quality is right, it should not matter whether the head or the director of education is sitting in one authority; they will always have somebody in the other authority so, as long as they are working together, it should not really matter.

Liam McArthur: As I said, when everything is working, nobody has a problem with it; when everything is not working, it becomes more problematic.

Iain Ellis: It is all down to leadership. The scenario is exactly the same as in schools. I said earlier that the management of authorities varies across the country. Leadership in schools varies across the country, too. If you get the right people in the right job, things are totally different. That is why there are issues in schools that are way above where people would normally think they should be; it is down to leadership.

Liam McArthur: That is interesting. I was going to ask whether the way to address that potential democratic deficit is to have more accountability resting with individual schools.

It is striking that, although we see differences across local authorities on spending per pupil, there is actually amazing uniformity within local authorities, which suggests that there is a bit of a one-size-fits-all approach within each local authority. Would there be an advantage in empowering headteachers, heads of department or whoever to take more decisions than they currently take?

10:45

Eileen Prior: That was the idea behind devolved school management, if you are old enough to remember that—I cannot remember the name of the report that David Cameron did on devolved school management and the potential for developing leadership in schools. We have a real issue and challenge with recruiting headteachers. Local authorities are struggling to get people to step up and take on leadership roles. Again, you should speak to the teaching unions about that, but it seems to be because of a combination of factors. The unions will say that it is because of terms and conditions and so on, but it is not just that. Other factors are at play, and one of them is that a headteacher has very little control. About the only bit of the budget that they have control of is the paperclip budget, because all the rest is committed—the establishment, power and staff costs are all committed before the headteacher starts. To have effective leadership in schools, headteachers have to be given a wee bit of authority.

Louise Cameron: I reiterate my point that it is young people who should be involved rather than headteachers. Headteachers probably worry that if they say the wrong thing, that might have an effect, but young people will say exactly what they think and exactly what is right and wrong in schools. To give a personal example, I have just left school and gone into my first year of university, but there has just been a review in which it was suggested that my high school might be shut down. There was a massive backlash in the community, with huge protests and consultation on the issue, and that was just because of a suggestion—the closure was not definitely going ahead. If you ask people, they will tell you and all that you can do is listen. Consulting young people is a good approach. They will tell you about the quality of their schools and they will be honest.

The Convener: I want to move on, unless you have something specific to say, Ms Hunter.

Susan Hunter: I just want to add that the approach should be about putting the child at the centre, which is what the Scottish Government has committed to. There is a real opportunity to build locally from what children and young people need in their communities and for their learning, individually and collectively.

The Convener: George Adam has the next question.

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): Thank you convener—I am glad to get in before everybody answers all my questions. I take it personally, convener.

The Convener: I know you do.

George Adam: I want to talk about solutions to the budgetary challenges. The national parent forum of Scotland submission states:

“Local Authorities’ strategies for engaging parents in these discussions”—

that is, budget discussions—

“are not always effective ... Budget discussions presume a high level of understanding and many parents feel they lack the expertise and/or time to contribute to financial debates of this nature.”

As a former councillor, I probably agree with that, because I have been in an administration whose bum was kicked on various occasions by parent groups, which was mainly because of a lack of communication and discussion.

How can we change that? That is the starting block for local authorities. They need to say, early on in the budget discussions, “This is the challenge that we face—how do we work together to try to attain what we want?” As you all agree in your written submissions, the solution is not just

about flinging money at things; there can be targeting.

There is also scope for involving young people. I have a constituent who wanted to do an advanced higher in modern studies and who found out only two weeks before he went back to school that he would not be given the opportunity to do that. What would be a basic solution so that local authorities could, at that early stage, be open and transparent and have the opportunity to sit down and talk to people like you?

Iain Ellis: I totally agree. The key is doing it early enough. The authorities all know that next year is going to be hard, so why are they not meeting parents now to tell them that it will be hard and to ask whether they have any ideas? They need to go into that discussion and make parents aware of the situation that they will be in. To me, that is the key factor.

Normally—as the committee is probably well aware—councils will come to us before their budget discussions to say, “Here are the proposed cuts.” We know that some of those proposals will never be acceptable because councils would never do certain things, given that there is an election just round the corner and it is councillors’ bums in the seats that might be going. Of the proposals that they give us, there are only two or three that we could go with.

We need to have early dialogue. However, parents also need to be up front and realise the problems that the country is going through just now, not least in education. They need to say, “There are issues—what can we do to help to address them?”

George Adam spoke about his constituent who was not able to take the advanced higher. In this day and age, with technology and the internet, teaching can take place in one place and benefit another part of the country. Highland is already doing that. Why can someone in Glasgow not tap into that system? Why can someone in Dumfries not tap into the system in Shetland and vice versa? If we started being a bit clever in that way, we could probably offer every subject under the sun.

If some authorities are already doing that, we can open it up. There might be a small charge, but at least we would start to get it right for every child, instead of just talking about it. That would be an easy win and would allow us to offer the curriculum across the country. Part of the problem with that is bandwidth, but that is another issue.

In summary, councils should get into conversations very early with parents and be up front with them. Being up front is a key factor.

Eileen Prior: I agree with that. There is a patriarchal and—dare I say—patronising approach on topics such as budgeting. People say, “You don’t need to understand this—it is really complicated.” Well, they should try me, and explain it to me.

I come from a communications background. The truth is that you do not wait until there is a crisis to start talking: you talk early and get people on side early. Parents need to be part of the decision-making process about the design of their service. They should not simply be given a menu of proposals and told, “These are what we are looking at—choose the areas that you think can get the chop.”

There are some fundamental issues with the way in which local authorities and—dare I say—Government deal with the public and share information transparently and accessibly.

Nothing beats talking to people. If councils and Government get to budget time and they have not started talking to people, that is when they run into trouble. Parents will get more and more angry at the direction in which things are going in their local authorities.

Louise Cameron: I can offer a personal insight on the matter. I had very good opportunities at my school: if I wanted to do a subject, the school would bend over backwards to let me do it. I had a very good quality of education, but I know that that is not consistent across all schools. Just from personal experience, I know that quality varies quite a lot between schools in my local authority.

There are systems that work well. In my school, if a subject was not offered, help was provided to allow a pupil to go to another school in the same local authority that could offer the subject. The school would help a bit with transport if that was an issue.

Methods that work very well for some schools could potentially work well for other schools. As I said, there are opportunities within and between local authorities. It would be good to discuss the systems that work well—perhaps the committee could consider that. There needs to be a space for schools to tell each other what is going well and what is not, so that they can build on each other’s experiences.

Susan Hunter: We are aware that local authorities have gone through significant changes, and young people are feeling that in how their school day is organised; the number of subjects that they are studying in a day; and the structure of their school week.

On communication, the youth work sector has an offer to make to education authorities and to young people, but we need to co-ordinate the

approach. Young people do not spend their whole week in school—only a proportion of it. We need to ensure that there are meaningful offers that develop young people’s learning and enhance their personal development beyond the school gates. We believe that youth work can be part of that solution.

George Adam: We have discussed where we should go in looking at the education budget in local authorities. I agree with Eileen Prior’s comment that we should be more quick to talk and to get parents involved in the budget process. We always seem to get to the burning-torch stage with parents before anything happens in the local authority.

We have discussed the fact that 51 per cent of the budget goes on salaries, 18.65 per cent goes on other employees and 11 per cent goes on premises and related costs. Where do we go? Where do we look? How do we address the challenges that we face? Where do local authorities go in looking at those challenges?

The holy grail for local authorities is joint working and finding ways to work together. In Renfrewshire, where I come from, it has been discussed for 10 or 15 years and we are no further forward in working with Glasgow City Council next door, Inverclyde Council or any other local authority. Where do we go? I know that Clackmannanshire Council works jointly with Stirling Council.

Something like £348 million a year is spent on public-private partnership contracts. We could do with that bit of money at this stage.

If we were to sit down with your local authority and say that we are at the start of the budget process, which route would you suggest the authority go down?

The Convener: Can I have relatively short answers, please? I am worried about time as we still have a lot of areas to go through. Susan Hunter can start this time.

Susan Hunter: We would look at the preventative spending measures that could be taken, and we would think about what interventions we can make now that will have a benefit in the longer term.

With regard to premises and PPP, many community groups within authorities are having to pay to use facilities that were previously not charged for. Although we see in the budget the capital investment in building, we want to ensure that community groups are not penalised for delivering their activities, given that they are now are having to pay charges to schools.

Louise Cameron: I agree with Susan Hunter that preventative spending is a very good idea.

Perhaps the committee could consider fixing the little issues that arise in the implementation of curriculum for excellence. If we fix those now, that will help in the long run.

We should also ensure that links are set up with the training, youth and women's employment budget, because it is vital that we link education with employability and that we continue to offer young people vocational options and opportunities to take part in extracurricular activities including volunteering. That is valuable for young people's future and their employability.

Eileen Prior: I wish that I had the answer to George Adam's question. We have been doing what has been called salami slicing for a number of years now. As we said in our submission, the time has come to have a radical rethink: to step back and ask, "Is local authority delivery of education the best way that we can do this?" I am not sure that there is enough flex left in local authorities to maintain the necessary investment in our schools and our young people in order to get us where we want to go. As Iain Ellis pointed out earlier, we are in real danger of taking a downward dip, and that is not where we want to go.

Iain Ellis: I will do my usual bit: I have a few radical suggestions. The committee will probably not like them, but such is life.

We need shared services: that is the best route to go down just now. The Scottish Futures Trust is putting all the money into brand-new schools. Is there some way we could use the SFT money to get rid of some of the contracts—PFI or PPP, or whatever you want to call them—in local authorities? Could some of that money be moved so that we could alleviate some of the pressures?

In my authority, we are paying something like £500 million over 30 years for four schools. That is bonkers. Who would buy a house for that sort of price with that payback?

My next suggestion goes back to what Eileen Prior said. Is having 32 councils the best way forward? We seem to have rationalised everything else throughout the country—we now have Police Scotland, for example—so I suggest that we ask whether we can do away with having 32 local authority education departments. Do we take education off their hands completely? That is my radical suggestion.

George Adam: You did not disappoint me, Iain. *[Laughter.]*

Eileen Prior: He rarely does.

11:00

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): One or two radical

solutions have been put forward. One is to centralise the budget—or at least to ring fence it—and the other is to increase taxes, which is never a popular suggestion. Is there space for getting better value for money from the education budget? Is there perhaps enough money in the budget, and is it being spent on the wrong places or on the wrong priorities? Can we do better?

Iain Ellis: We can always do better. I go back to the example of my local authority. We have 34 or 35 primary schools in West Dunbartonshire, which is bonkers in an area of that size. However, it is down to the local councils to make decisions on whether to close schools. My heart says that we cannot close a school, but when there are schools on each other's doorsteps, my head says—given what we are going through just now—that we need to think more radically.

We need to think cleverer. To me, it is all down to management. How can one local authority be really good at it, and another not be? I hate to say "share good practice", because I do not think that it is a good saying. If you say to someone, "Go and look at that good practice", usually the first thing they say is "We're never going to reach that, so I'm not even going to look at it". We need to box clever.

As I said, my radical solution is that we share services. We need to make sure that we have the right people in the right jobs, from teachers all the way through to headteachers.

Susan Hunter: In terms of getting best value we should look at early and effective intervention. We think that youth work can offer that in terms of raising attainment and achievement progression. It can also improve school attendance for young people for whom formal education is a struggle and a challenge and is not the best fit for them. We can help to ensure that school leaders are not drawn into using their time for the most vulnerable, by allowing youth workers to take that role and working in partnership.

Eileen Prior: Community engagement has a bit of a buzz at the moment. We have been very poor at engaging communities. We get a lot of calls from parents who are very distressed because the local authority is considering closing their school, and on a personal level I can completely identify with that concern. However, as Iain Ellis said, if there are two small primary schools cheek by jowl and both properties have to be maintained and so on, there is an issue. It is not a victimless crime.

We ask parents to think about the amount of money that is being spent and that is sitting on the head of each child in those two schools, and then to think how much more money would sit on each child's head if the schools were combined. It might not be efficient to maintain two schools, their

buildings and all that goes on around them. No one can blame an authority for saying “We have to be more efficient in how we deliver our service”. On a personal level it is painful, but we have to be a wee bit more calculating in how we deal with such issues.

The Convener: I do not want to cut you off, but we have to speed up a little.

Colin Beattie: I have one question on the back of that. If we accept the proposition that more money is required, where would we get it from?

Iain Ellis: That is your problem.

Colin Beattie: I think that it is everyone's problem.

Iain Ellis: I agree, but the bottom line is that we do not have the purse strings. As you are fully aware, the way we are going is not sustainable.

We were talking earlier about the cuts that are being made. If we look at the additional support needs budget, huge cuts are already happening. Those kids are the most vulnerable kids in school. To be cutting their provision because it is seen as an easy cut—that is what it is seen as—is terrible. Kids who had full one-to-one support last year are down to five hours a week this year. I do not think that that should be allowed. I will use the phrase that the committee does not like to hear: budgets like that should be ring fenced. I agree that we should not be ring fencing many things, but I think that ASN is a special case. It is scandalous when we start affecting those children by taking out the hours of support that they need.

Eileen Prior: The impact of that cut will be that more children will be excluded from school. We already know that children who have additional needs are much more likely to be excluded than their peers. Teachers will also struggle to manage behaviour in a class where children with ASN are unsupported. It completely backfires and impacts on everyone—on other pupils and the school as a whole.

The Convener: Are you aware that the number of ASN staff has gone up by 8 per cent?

Eileen Prior: I know from the headteacher at my son's school that they are considering a reduction in additional support needs year-on-year.

The Convener: Overall, the number of ASN staff has gone up by 8 per cent.

Eileen Prior: Well, at my son's school they are looking at reducing provision over the next few years.

Iain Ellis: I would like to see where those staff are. In all the places that I am hearing about there

are cuts here and cuts there. They are taking ASN auxiliaries away.

The Convener: That is the figure—the overall figure is up by 8 per cent. Provision has increased in primary schools, although it has gone down in secondary schools.

Iain Ellis: That goes against all the evidence that I am getting. I do not know where you are getting the figures from, but that is not what I hear.

The Convener: The figures come from the number of staff employed by local authorities.

Iain Ellis: That is not the feedback we are getting from parents.

The Convener: Okay. I am just pointing out that the numbers have gone up. I accept what you are saying, but the numbers do not reflect that.

I want to move on, because we have three members still to ask questions.

Liam McArthur: I should start by apologising for my late arrival, which was due to a flight delay.

I want to move on to the national performance framework. We have had a bit of mixed bag of feedback in terms of the usefulness of the NPF in moving us towards an outcomes-based policy in schools and education. The unions seem to be critical—one called it “a blunt instrument”. Children in Scotland is more positive about the NPF, but indicated that the framework might need to look at other indicators if it is to be useful in terms of budgeting.

Does anyone on the panel have particular views on the national performance framework? Does it work? Are there things that we should pick up that could make it more effective? Children in Scotland points to attainment and inequality, which are perhaps not reflected as well as they could be.

Susan Hunter: In the youth-work sector, the national performance framework is seen as part of a suite of indicators and outcomes for the sector. YouthLink Scotland is currently supporting our membership to look at outcomes for youth work that fit and feed into the national performance framework. We welcome the continuance of that structure.

Liam McArthur: Is there anything you are doing that the NPF is not picking up? You were talking before about the value that you add, especially for those for whom a school setting is not necessarily the most comfortable or appropriate setting.

Susan Hunter: Yes. That relates to the unique nature and purpose of youth work. Using our statement on the nature and purpose of youth work helps us to identify some of the challenges about widening their world view and understanding where a young person is at. However, the overall

outcome—national outcome 4—works for us in terms of what we want every child and young person in Scotland to be.

Louise Cameron: At the SYP we have a new learning programme, which ties in with the NPF. I know that Young Scot is working on a modern apprenticeship programme. I went to an awards ceremony for that last week. All the people who had gone into the modern apprenticeships were more employable and had gone on to jobs or to further apprenticeships that they were interested in. Programmes that youth work provides are very valuable, especially for furthering employability skills. We are in tough times and it is very difficult to get into university and so on. Having other opportunities for young people is very valuable.

Eileen Prior: We have not really addressed the national performance framework. For most parents it is a complete unknown. What is it? How does it work? That is not information that local authorities or schools share with parents. Parents are not aware of what the NPF means, or how it impacts on the way in which services are delivered.

That takes us back to the discussion we had with George Adam on the transparency of the system. The answer is that the system is not transparent. It is opaque.

Liam McArthur: I was going to ask whether we should have a clearer measurement of progress being made in supporting those with additional support needs, but given the earlier confusion about how many additional support needs workers are actually in the field, I suspect that there are other issues that need to be addressed more urgently.

Iain Ellis: To be honest, I think that most parents are not bothered about national performance. They are more interested in what is happening in their school.

Liam McArthur: Do they see that on the basis of inputs, such as the budget going up, the number of teachers remaining the same or increasing, or the subject choices being as wide as they were in the previous year, or are they looking at trends over the course of a number of years to see whether there is progress in one area or another? That is what the national performance framework is looking to achieve on a wider scale.

Iain Ellis: First and foremost, parents are interested only in their own children and how well they are doing, so they want to compare what is happening in their own school, not the school down the road. I do not understand why they would want to look at what is happening nationally. Are you going to move your child because the school down the road is doing better or because a school in a different authority is doing better? I do not think that parents want to do that. All they are

interested in is what is happening at their school and how the staff are working. The big issue is whether they have got the staff and whether they can get supply staff. That is what they are interested in; they are not really interested in other comparisons. The feeling that I get when I meet parents is that they do not really want to know what is happening nationally. They are interested in the local level, down to their school.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): Thank you for your evidence. It has certainly given us a reality check about what is happening on the ground and should act as a wake-up call to the Scottish Government. We have talked a lot about consultation with local authorities, but I would like to ask about consultation with the Scottish Government. The first sentence of the draft budget document states that it

“sets out the Scottish Government’s spending plans ... for consultation with ... people of Scotland.”

Obviously, the budget does not set individual school budgets, but there are implications for the local government block grant and there are also national policies around teacher numbers. To what extent have your organisations been involved in discussions around spending on schools with the Scottish Government, either prior to or subsequent to the publication of the draft budget?

Eileen Prior: That is an easy question. The answer is not at all, for the SPTC.

Iain Ellis: I sit on the working group that Mr Swinney established on teachers’ terms and conditions, which has to report back by 1 March. I have sat on quite a few committees, such as the curriculum for excellence management board, and a few of my other colleagues sit on other big committees such as getting it right for every child, the Wood commission and the early years collaborative, so we are feeding into those.

Neil Bibby: Do the other organisations represented have such involvement?

Susan Hunter: YouthLink does not, that I am aware of, although I have been with my organisation only for a short period of time.

Louise Cameron: I am not entirely sure. Our team can get back to you on that.

Neil Bibby: Given what was said earlier about the budget and the implications for spending on schools, could consultation with the Scottish Government be improved if organisations representing pupils and parents were involved throughout the draft budget process? What would you say to the Scottish Government about the draft budget and its implications, given everything that we have heard about the budgetary pressures on classrooms and on pupils?

Eileen Prior: I would say that the parents, on behalf of their children, are at the sharp end. They are the people who can give a reality check on what it feels like from day to day in our schools, whether it is to do with parents having to contribute to materials costs, their children avoiding school trips or activities because it will cost them money, their experience of additional support needs, language assistance or subjects not being available. They are the folk who can talk not in policy speak but about what is actually happening to our kids in schools in our communities. To me, that should be gold dust. That should be the starting point for finding out what the situation actually looks like.

We can talk about this block grant, that ring fencing or whatever at policy level, but what actually matters for the future of our young people is what is happening daily in their school and in their classroom. The discussion has to start there.

In our submission, we point out that the budget is largely inaccessible. The information in it is opaque—it will not get through to the average parent, and it is simply not understandable to most people. I know, because I struggled with it.

11:15

Iain Ellis: I would go along with what Eileen Prior has been saying. The next three years will be interesting. We have a general election, a Scottish election and a local election. It surprises me that, every time elections come along, pots of money seem to become available, with—I hate to say it—politicians going for short-term hits. Perhaps we need to stop those short-term hits. That includes the curriculum, too. Let us stop doing things that are just done to suit ministers, directors of education or local councillors. It is amazing how councillors can find a wee pet project and can find money for it, yet we cannot find money to put into sustainable projects. We need to box a wee bit clever and stop trying to pull the wool over people's eyes.

How can parents get fully involved in the budget? As Eileen Prior says, we look at it but we cannot understand it. People need a maths degree—and even then, they will struggle.

Susan Hunter: The views of young people and children themselves should not just be replaced by those of parents. They have to be expressed in parallel. Young people are the experts in their own lives—they are the children who are in our schools today, as we are discussing this.

By working with national organisations such as YouthLink, Young Scot and the Scottish Youth Parliament, through facilitated dialogue, we could start to unpack some of those issues for and with

young people. We would welcome that opportunity.

Louise Cameron: I completely agree on that point about setting up forums with young people and also with parents, if you think that that will be helpful. The SYP would very much encourage you to get in touch with the young people in your local authorities and nationally, and to hold events at which they can broadcast their views.

Jayne Baxter (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): I am thinking about the move from consultation to engagement. There is a serious question about what both those things mean. Do you have any views—and can you give us any examples—about how local authorities can engage more appropriately with communities, especially in the light of what we have heard about school being part of the community and about the learning that goes on outside of school? Should that work be developed more locally? If so, who should have an input and who should lead on that? I am thinking in particular of deprived communities, where parents might not have had such a good experience of school and where time pressures might be greater for some parents. What can local authorities do to promote those approaches?

Susan Hunter: Through youth work and wider partners in community learning development, there is a role for family learning approaches that are tailored to the needs of the communities in which they are based.

There are examples of a commission approach being taken, with communities bringing their own evidence. That starts with a blank page, rather than a page that has been pre-written by any agency, and communities are able to consult. People welcome that level of transparency and openness, and the genuine nature of that approach. Young people in particular are quick to distrust when they think that there is an alternative agenda. It is a matter of ensuring that the opportunities are equal and that they are based on trust and respect.

There are national examples, including the Young Scot youth commissions on alcohol and on tobacco, which demonstrate an approach under which young people can generate solutions, recommendations and ideas for you in the Parliament and the Government. Perhaps there is scope to do that for education.

As for bringing in the depth and range of experience that young people throughout Scotland have, as Louise Cameron identified, people will have different experiences of education depending on which school they went to. We need to ensure that there are opportunities to hear all the voices, including the voices of young people for whom formal education has not been the best route.

Louise Cameron: Youth councils and youth forums are very valuable tools. For that kind of engagement, we need to be careful that we do not target just the ideal pupil. We need to have discussions with pupils from all forms of education, including those who are leaving school in fourth year to go off to college, those who are more involved in vocational education and those who are top in attainment and get highers and go on to university. We need to consider the whole spectrum and ensure that everyone gets an opportunity to have a say.

Eileen Prior: I agree with a lot of what has been said, because engagement has to be at community level. Many years ago, communities had their churches and schools but now for the most part they have only their schools, if they are lucky. A lot of discussion with young people and their parents can start in schools, and it has to be grounded on their lived experience and not set as an agenda by the local authority or central Government—it has to be about what their lives are now.

Iain Ellis: Probably the only chance for engagement with young people is through the school. We have all been at events where people come because they want to. However, it is those who are harder to reach that we actually want to engage with, but we can never do that. We can go into any school across the country and the staff will tell us that the parents who they actually want to see are the ones who they never see. The only way of getting round that is to use the youngsters in the schools, because they will bring their parents; their parents will come to see them at something and will bring their friends and the youngsters' grandparents. To me, that is the only way in which we will get proper engagement.

Jayne Baxter: Do any of the witnesses wish to comment on the statement by the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland that due to the sensitivities involved

“the reality is that draft budgets are now kept largely confidential”?

Reference has been made to that already this morning. Is there an alternative process going on behind closed doors?

Eileen Prior: It is because they are all fearful, is it not? It is also because we have election cycles at local authority level and local politicians constantly have their eyes on whether they will get in the next time round. I think that that is why budgets are often kept close to the chest until the lighted torch time. Time and again, we see local authority councillors backing off from making the tough choices and decisions. We have seen that with West Dunbartonshire Council and other local

authorities, because they are looking towards their election coming up.

Iain Ellis: That is quite interesting. The politicians at West Dunbartonshire Council changed recently, in that a different party took control of the council. The party that was in control previously was very up front in showing us budgets. We saw the budgets when they came out in December, although they were not finalised until February or March. Now, the budgets appear in March and that is it. To me, there was a big step forward previously but there has now been a big step back.

The director of education will tell us things that he probably should not tell us. That is happening across the country because the directors are trying to be up front, but their hands are tied by the politicians.

Eileen Prior: Bear in mind that the people who are hearing those things are the folk who are on the local representative group, so that is not every parent; it is just the few who sit on groups or committees. The message is not getting out to parents whose kids are in the schools.

Louise Cameron: I think that we have an absolute duty to ensure that budget information is not confidential. People cannot say what is good or bad in a budget if they do not know whether there will be cuts. The backlash will come when people find out that services are being cut. That is when it will become clear which services really matter in local communities.

As I said, it is vital that we do not keep such information confidential, given that young people are going through the system. I disagree that schools are the only way in which to engage with young people. From my experience of the SYP and the local youth council, I believe that there are people who are struggling in the system but are readily available to give anyone their opinions on education and how they think improvements could be made. However, we need to make information available to them about what is going to be cut. If something valuable is going to be cut but people do not know about that, it will just go and there will be no conversation about it.

The Convener: Thank you. Susan, do you have anything to add?

Susan Hunter: No.

The Convener: Okay, that is very helpful. Thank you very much for that. *[Laughter.]*

Thank you all for coming. You have raised a number of useful, important and interesting matters that I am sure members will be interested to raise with the Scottish Government and the cabinet secretary when he comes to the committee next week.

11:25

Meeting suspended.

11:28

On resuming—

The Convener: I welcome our second panel: Larry Flanagan, from the Educational Institute of Scotland; Jane Peckham, from the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers; Jim Thewliss, from School Leaders Scotland; and Fiona Dalziel, from the Scottish Secondary Teachers Association. Thank you for coming along, and thank you for the written evidence that you sent in, which has been helpful.

Mary Scanlon: Our first session ran over quite a bit, so I will put all my questions together, if I may. What budgetary pressures are having the greatest impact on pupils' education? Can you advise us on whether primary school budgets are on track, given the increase in pupil numbers?

Will you also say a word about whether additional support needs are being addressed? Although I understand that the number of staff who work with pupils with additional support needs has gone up by 7 or 8 per cent, I have seen figures on a projected increase in additional support needs of—I think—more than 70 per cent.

11:30

Larry Flanagan (Educational Institute of Scotland): The single largest line of expenditure in school budgets relates to school staffing, so the greatest pressure relates to teacher numbers, support staff numbers and admin support in schools. It is clear from the evidence that staff numbers in primary schools are not increasing in line with the increase in pupils. We provided evidence of a significant drop in the number of secondary teachers over the past five years.

Over the past three years—since 2011—we have had an agreement on maintaining pupil-staff ratios, but actually the drop in the number of pupils at secondary school is less than the drop in teaching staff, in percentage terms. That creates pressure towards bigger class sizes and rationalisation of timetable choices. It creates the workload pressures that I mentioned on my last visit to the committee, when I talked about the national 4 and 5 qualifications. The pressure has intensified to the point that our teacher wellbeing survey indicated that nearly 70 per cent of teachers are stressed all the time.

That is important, because—beyond our concern about teachers themselves—we are talking about the learning environment of young people. We fully understand the budgetary

pressures, but to suggest that cutting the education budget does not impact on the service that is delivered is fanciful. It impacts in a range of ways.

On additional support needs, I caught the tail end of the previous panel's discussion about pupil support. Over the past few years, and not just the past three years, it is undoubtedly the case that one of the issues that has been central to pressure in schools has been the policy of mainstreaming pupils who have additional support needs, particularly pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties.

Our members feel strongly that although they support the presumption of mainstreaming, mainstreaming must be resourced properly, and that is not happening. Even if there is a marginal increase in additional support in primary schools, it does not match the need that exists. A fortnight ago I spoke at a workload campaign meeting in Glasgow. A teacher stood up and said that she had been an EIS member for 20 years and this was the first time that she had come to a meeting. She said that she was there because since the start of term she had found three members of staff—capable teachers—in tears. That was because pupils had been included in infant classes who would previously have been in a special needs school, and the teachers could not cope with the disruption that that was causing. That affects the individual pupils; it is also an issue for the rest of the class.

We have not got time to develop the issue, but the problem is the result of budget pressures, because special needs schools are labour intensive and expensive, and there is a cost saving if kids are mainstreamed. However, the best possible education is not being provided. The cuts are hurting, particularly in the context of additional support needs.

Jane Peckham (National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers): I echo much of what Larry Flanagan said. Let me start where he finished, with additional support needs. It is not a question of whether the budget is increased; it is how it is distributed when it is implemented. That is what is causing the difficulty, because different areas are using different strategies to manage their budgets.

Although support staff are provided to work particularly with children with additional support needs, they are very often diverted to other roles and duties within a school or within an area—for example, because of the cut in qualified teachers in nurseries and the attempt to cover the very laudable aim of 600 hours of childcare provision, which nobody would disagree with. The difficulty is that not enough teachers are being employed in nurseries to cover that aim and it does not fit in

with the teachers' contractual week, so our members are reporting that support staff who are employed to work with them to support the ASN children in their classrooms are being diverted to cover those gaps in the nurseries. The effect is not on the number of people who are employed in schools, but on what those people are then tasked to do. Support staff are not in our membership, but I think that the difficulty is that very often they are not able to say, "Actually, that is not what my role is, although I see a need so I will go and help."

Throughout a lot of the documents, there is still talk of efficiency savings, but there are none now—there are no more to be made. Everything now is a cut and that has to be recognised. Transparency and openness are required. I was concerned to hear the last panel speak about an inability to share budgeting openly. That would cause us great concern.

The pressures are huge and there is a finite amount of money to work with, but much more has to be done with regard to looking at the best use of that money.

Jim Thewliss (School Leaders Scotland): I would not disagree with any of the points that Larry Flanagan and Jane Peckham have made, either in their submissions or in what they have said. However, I come at the question from a slightly different angle, bearing in mind the organisation that I represent.

First, I have a very general answer to the question. As one of the young people in the first panel pointed out, the experience in education of young people across Scotland will be very much dependent on which part of the country they are in. As an organisation, we have been hammering on for some time now about the inequality of funding across the country. We have no great concern about the removal of ring fencing of funding. The idea of having a flexible approach across the country to meet needs across the country is a laudable aim. However, it is a laudable aim that is perhaps more sustainable when there are not budget cuts. Whatever else it did, ring fencing gave a certain importance to the things that the money was ring fenced for. If we head towards flexibility of approach, everything is there to be cut.

Mary Scanlon asked about support staff and non-teaching support staff within schools. To an extent, that is an easy hit and we are all suffering from that. Other aspects are related to the capacity of leadership across the country, not just within schools but within local authorities. If we say that there is a budget there—an entire budget, which the chief executive of a local authority will then look at—the cuts can be made indiscriminately. The cuts within education and within educational leadership are starting to have

a direct impact on the quality of the experience in the classroom. It chimes exactly with what Larry Flanagan said about workload, pressure and stress.

In Scottish education just now—forgive me for giving you a lecture—the three great pillars of Scottish education are coming together well. We now have—or we are getting towards having—a curriculum that is designed to meet the needs of young people across Scotland in their local environments. Teachers across Scotland have laboured long and hard to put that in place.

We are moving into a stage when GIRFEC and the Children and People (Scotland) Act 2014 will start to bear upon staff in schools and have an implication in relation to workload and what staff are doing. If that means that the young people who are supposed to be supported through GIRFEC and the 2014 act will not be supported, because the leadership and management capacity has been removed, you do not need me to tell you the pressures that will come from that. The profession is involved in professional update and reprofessionalising Scottish teaching, which brings further pressures. To return to Mary Scanlon's original question, if local authorities and schools do not have the capacity to manage and lead that, the experience of the young people who are supposed to benefit from the impact of those things will be diminished.

Fiona Dalziel (Scottish Secondary Teachers Association): I, too, echo what has been said so far. Obviously, the biggest cost in the education budget is staff and, wherever staff could be cut, they have been cut. That includes quality improvement officers, who often offered huge amounts of support to schools. As we say in our written submission, they carried out investigations into discipline issues and grievances and so on. They have disappeared, which means that the pressure is back on human resources departments to find suitable people to whom those duties can be allocated. We are finding that, when an allegation is made that could be completely unfounded, our members are having to wait months and months before there is an outcome. That obviously adds pressure and stress and it can mean that people are on precautionary suspension at home for months on end, which is a cost to the authority.

As Larry Flanagan said, the removal of pupil support can mean an increase in violent behaviour and teacher stress. It is very difficult to deal with such incidents in the class. When teachers refer pupils on, they find that the people that they are referring to are busy with other things on which perhaps in the past somebody else took up the reins. We are very concerned about that. At a time when there are huge changes in the national

qualifications, people are full of good intentions, but the patience and good will of even the most obliging teachers are being stretched. They have standards that they have set themselves and they have a way that they want to teach the pupils, but they are finding that all the resources are being pulled away—not only staffing resources to support them, but physical resources such as books. That means that they just cannot do things that they want to do.

The Convener: I ask everybody to keep the questions and answers reasonably short. If somebody has already covered an issue, I would appreciate it if you did not go back over the same ground.

I ask Mary Scanlon whether she has any more questions.

Mary Scanlon: I have just one supplementary question, although I will lump together a few points. Obviously, the witnesses can choose which ones they want to answer.

The previous panel mentioned that the two main issues on attainment are parental engagement and the quality of teaching. Iain Ellis, the chair of the national parent forum of Scotland, said that we need to get better at dealing with teachers who do not perform well enough—I do not want to put words into his mouth, so I hope that I got that right. Larry Flanagan's written submission says that there are 4,000 fewer teachers in 2014 than there were in 2007.

According to the Audit Scotland report I referred to earlier, 18 per cent of the school estate is in poor or bad condition. The report states:

"there is no consistent approach to tracking and monitoring the progress of pupils from P1 to S3."

Do we know enough to compare like with like?

The Audit Scotland report also states that there has been

"no independent evaluation of how much councils spend on education and what this delivers in terms of improved attainment and wider achievement".

I will probably leave it there, but those are the issues that concern me, as well as the fact that the number of centrally employed teachers is up by 400 while the number of teachers in pre-school education has reduced by 12 per cent.

I am trying to make sense of all those figures, and I am thinking about attainment. Has Audit Scotland got it wrong? It found it impossible to look at the spend and what it delivers in terms of attainment, but is there some magic bullet that we perhaps do not know about?

I will leave it there. The witnesses can choose which issues to respond to. Those are my main concerns.

The Convener: I think they are enough, Mary.

Mary Scanlon: I am sure they are.

Fiona Dalziel: I am trying to think which bit of the question to answer. In terms of attainment, it is quite difficult to identify the spend and how the attainment comes about, because the way a school is run can make huge differences, as can the support of parents.

11:45

Jim Thewliss: I will not rehearse what I have already said, but the experience across the country differs depending on the way in which things are targeted within individual local authorities. That is a problem, and it has been a problem for some time.

Jane Peckham: We were pleased that Audit Scotland did the report, because I think that it is the first time that it has ever really looked in depth at local accountability. I know from meetings with Audit Scotland that its auditors often struggled to get the information. Part of the problem is that, because of the lack of ring fencing, it is difficult to identify how much was spent in a period of time on education. I know from having looked at the report that even the local authorities found it difficult at times to give specific figures.

I wonder whether there is a need for a more central overview. Jim Thewliss has suggested ways in which the postcode lottery could be prevented, and maybe a regime of more national accountability needs to be reinstated.

Larry Flanagan: There used to be a poster that was popular in schools during the late 1980s and 1990s, which said, "Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted." When we were constantly focused on targets, there was a notion that there was more to education than just measuring targets. One of the difficulties with the Audit Scotland report is that it goes with what it can measure and it struggles with the nuance of how to deliver education, which is always a difficulty.

There are things that would bring a rational approach to how we deliver education. We have already mentioned teacher numbers. One of the things that the EIS has called for is a national minimum standard, so that there is a basic number of teachers relative to pupils that has to be applied across local authorities. If local authorities want to enhance that, it would be a local decision, but just as we have national pay and conditions we think that there should be a national staffing standard. One of the variable factors among local authorities is the staffing formula to judge how many staff are needed to deliver a curriculum. It can vary quite

significantly and has a direct relationship to teacher numbers.

Reference was made to the quality of teachers. Scottish education has never been better served by the quality of its teachers. The professional update that Jim Thewliss referred to, which is now in operation, has been developed by the General Teaching Council for Scotland. There is a framework for teacher competence and there are clear professional standards, and if a teacher is in breach of those standards there are procedures in place to deal with that. I can confidently say that we have never had a better qualified or more committed staff across the country than we have at present.

Jim Thewliss: I would like to follow up on a point that Larry Flanagan has just made. Teacher quality is not just to do with the fact that the General Teaching Council has put the framework in place; it is to do with the psyche of the Scottish teaching profession. We have now had more than 12 years of newly qualified teachers coming into the profession who are trained and view the job in a certain way. To them, the whole notion of professional update is just a natural extension of the way in which they have been brought into the profession.

The Convener: Gordon, do you want to come in at this point?

Gordon MacDonald: I have a quick question. I asked this question of the earlier panel, who suggested that I ask the current witnesses.

Jane Peckham: I hope it is an easy one. *[Laughter.]*

Gordon MacDonald: It is straightforward, anyway. During the summer, the Scottish Government introduced the access to education fund specifically to help pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. What is the level of awareness in schools about that fund, and what is the uptake?

Jane Peckham: I am not sure that the level of awareness was that high. We tried to raise the profile of it, but it came to us quite late. I am sure that an email went out and schools had a couple of weeks to put in bids. I was concerned about the timescale of the announcement and when the bids were due in.

Jim Thewliss: The timing was not good; it was not helpful.

Larry Flanagan: There are a number of initiatives on the go to close the attainment gap—such as the school improvement partnership, which had funding of, I think, £1 million over three years—and they are all worthwhile projects. However, I have just finished reading a report based on an evaluation of the London challenge, which is credited with a huge increase in the

performance of London schools. That project was resourced with billions of pounds. Although we would never oppose any of the initiatives to tackle the impact of poverty, they are just papering over the cracks. Unless we invest the kind of resource that was invested in the London challenge, we will not get the systematic change that is necessary to address the levels of poverty that we have in Scottish society.

With 20 per cent of kids at school coming from families that are in absolute poverty, there is a huge barrier and our current funding formula for local authorities does not give adequate weighting to poverty. Back when I was a councillor in Strathclyde Regional Council, there was a much greater attempt to redistribute money to areas of priority treatment, as they were referred to then. Since we changed to unitary authorities, the impact of poverty in particular areas has not been a sufficient factor in how local government funding is distributed.

Fiona Dalziel: The other important thing is that, previously, breakfast clubs were a really good way of getting kids into school early in the morning and getting them ready for learning. An awful lot of them have disappeared because of cuts in staffing.

George Adam: I will talk about the solutions to the budgetary challenges that we face. The NASUWT sums up the situation perfectly when it says:

“the draft budget of the Scottish Government is in the context of the Westminster Government’s flawed economic strategy of ideologically driven cuts to funding.”

I could not agree more with that.

With the previous panel of witnesses, we discussed the local authorities. As a former councillor, I am only too aware that, if councils make a mistake or an error in judgment when dealing with the education budget, it will come back and bite them because the parents and teachers will tell them exactly what was wrong.

I have learned from my experience that engagement with teachers, parents and pupils is probably the best way forward on the budget, but we have heard from some of the parents groups that that is not happening at a local level. I would say that it is the way forward to ensure that, in this challenging time, the professionals who deliver education have the tools that they need to do the job correctly.

How well is that engagement happening throughout the nation? Is it happening or, like the parents groups and the youth representatives, would you say that it probably is not?

Larry Flanagan: There are a few different challenges.

I heard the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning say when he was at the committee a few weeks ago that he wished to maintain teacher numbers and, in fact, that he would expand them if it was possible. That was welcome, but we now have a working group that is considering setting aside the national agreement on protecting teacher numbers, and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities paper makes it clear that its agenda is what it regards as local flexibility, which is just another way of saying that it wants the door to be open so that it can push a cut in teacher numbers.

We are happy to discuss those proposals, but we will not agree to them, because the national agreement on teacher numbers was part of a significant settlement in 2011 that involved cuts to teachers' conditions and there has been wage restraint since then. We welcome negotiations, but there are certain red lines. We are clear that if you reduce teacher numbers you will impact on the service that is being delivered. There is a lot of comment around the quotation:

"The quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers."

You also have to factor in the number of teachers. We are clear on the issue of teacher numbers.

Another idea that is floated in the COSLA paper—again, this point is about consultation—is a reduction in the primary school week, which is an idea that was developed in Renfrewshire.

George Adam: Yes. That is where I was bitten—and I have learnt that lesson.

Larry Flanagan: There are severe financial pressures on every level of government, but introducing part-time education for our primary pupils is not the answer.

One issue that is not discussed is how to raise additional funding. Public sector services are based on taxation. I think that there is a huge debate to be had on the council tax freeze. My organisation does not have a position on that. It was a political decision to offer the council tax freeze, but that is a source of income that is being denied to local authorities. I know that the Scottish Government introduced council tax subvention, but the money that it uses for that is money that could be used elsewhere.

That area has to be debated. There is a huge debate going on about what powers the Scottish Government will have, but there is a purpose in having those powers only if it uses them. The Scottish Government already has the power to vary income tax, but the Scottish Executive never used it and the Scottish Government does not use it. If we want to have the local services that are

important to us, we have to fund them. That debate needs to open up a little bit.

Jane Peckham: The question of the importance of education has to be looked at. As George Adam rightly said, part of our submission was a recognition that budget pressures are an issue not just because of the Scottish Government—they have been created by the Westminster team. However, we have to be clear that that is not a get-out for the Scottish Government.

This perhaps goes back to my point about ring fencing. We need to take a bigger look at what else money is being spent on. I facetiously refer to it as the fluffy stuff. Education is one of the most important areas, along with health and other things, so it should have the most money. How much are councils spending on things that are not necessary?

On engagement with parents, we did a survey recently in the rest of the United Kingdom—it was not Scotland specific—that focused on issues caused by the education crisis there. In particular, it was about the cost of education to parents, and I took part in it out of interest, because I am an employee. I had not realised that the cost of my daughter's education to me in the past year has been more than £1,000. That is an unsustainable figure for any parent, regardless of their income.

There has to be a recognition that a lot of parents are funding things that should be funded from the education budget. That includes music tuition. There is an ad-hoc arrangement whereby some authorities provide it for free, but in my council parents have to pay for it. All those things have a knock-on effect. Technically, there is a saving, but where has the money gone that parents are now contributing? It is not going into education; it is being used elsewhere. We maybe need to look at readdressing the focus in some way.

Jim Thewliss: To go back to George Adam's original question, regardless of what the system is—whether education, health or any other publicly funded system—you cannot keep putting increasing demands on to it and expect them to be met with the same or decreasing sums of money.

If you ask any teacher, "What would you need to be able to do this?", they will tell you, "I need time" or "I need money". It has been the same ever since I went into teaching. Essentially, both those things come down to money. You cannot keep putting more and more demands into the system and expect the quality of outcomes to keep going up if you do not support or sustain people.

To go back to local authority funding, I started off by saying that my organisation has no great complaint about the whole notion of doing away with ring fencing. I work in Dundee, and I know

that 5 miles up the road in Angus the demands on education are going to be different from the demands in Dundee. The local authorities must therefore have some flexibility—some wriggle room—to be able to address and meet the demands that are specific to their area, which can be very different across the local authority boundary.

12:00

Surely there must be some way of working so that, within Scotland, there is a set of parameters within which the service must be delivered, and each local authority has the opportunity to be able to deliver something that better meets the needs of young people in its area. That is rather than having funding tied down into separate compartments, when we all know that, when we get to the end of the financial year, we have to justify things and shift money around so that we get it all spent. That is obviously daft. Let us look at placing parameters within the funding formula and the staffing formula that let local authorities and schools better meet the needs of their own pupils.

Fiona Dalziel: We feel exactly the same. Although the UK Government allocates a certain amount of money to the Scottish Government, the Scottish Government has some choices that it can make itself. We in professional associations feel that we are having to defend our members' conditions of service at every turn. Teachers are often seen as a barrier and a cost, rather than as people who go out there to teach children and try to do the right thing. Relatively speaking, teachers can seem expensive, but they are well-educated, well-meaning and well-intentioned people who give a huge amount of their own time and money. We know that teachers sometimes buy their own resources. They want to have a certain standard in the classrooms, and they back it up with their own money—at a time when they have lost probably 16 per cent of pay in real terms over the past six or seven years.

George Adam: As I mentioned to the last panel, from a local authority point of view, the holy grail is shared services. In Renfrewshire, the Lanarkshires and Inverclyde, we have not managed to get it working. Surely, in education, there must be a way that local authorities, which are working so closely together already and are delivering a very similar service, should be able to deliver the service on a shared basis. It cannot be rocket science, but for some reason local authorities seem to be meeting a lot of hard work. I admit that, when I was a councillor, the move to share services was going well and then all of a sudden it became difficult.

What are your opinions on shared services, as that is what local authority management would say is the holy grail and the—or a—way forward?

Larry Flanagan: There has been very poor progress in shared services. One issue is the different corporate identities of local authorities. In a couple of experiments where attempts were made to share services, or even to have a shared director, the difficulty was the political context in which people had to operate. In a sense, they had two sets of masters—especially when one council ended up with a different political leadership from the other. There are practical difficulties in the shared services agenda.

Another challenge for local authorities is understanding that teachers have national conditions of service, including national pay bargaining. That does not apply to most other local authority workers. Because of the statutory nature of the education service, there are things that corporate directors in education cannot do, which some of them find frustrating. In bigger authorities, such as Glasgow, one agenda that we are constantly fighting is the corporate approach to education, which is largely predicated on cost savings but which in the end delivers a poorer service. Supply teachers are a perfect example. Running a supply service to schools requires being in tune with schools. If it is run as just a personnel function, it ends up not meeting the demands of the schools.

I agree with George Adam that there is still great potential in the shared services agenda. The difficulties lie not with teachers in the classroom but with the political machines of the local authorities, because that is where the obstacles appear.

The Convener: I call Neil Findlay. I apologise—I mean Neil Bibby. [*Laughter.*] Neil Findlay used to sit here.

Neil Bibby: No offence was taken at all.

I will ask about workload issues and teacher numbers. You have all raised concerns about teacher workload, with the EIS referring to “the workload crisis” and the NASUWT mentioning “a ticking time bomb” in relation to workload issues. Larry Flanagan mentioned what the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning said the last time he was at the committee, and his statement about wanting to maintain and, if possible, to increase teacher numbers. The budget that we are scrutinising today was published a couple of days after that, but Mr Swinney did not specifically mention anything about teacher numbers in his statement, and I questioned him on that at the time. You have mentioned what has happened since the budget.

Do you still believe that there should be an increase in teacher numbers, following the cabinet secretary's statement? We have seen statistics that show several thousand fewer teachers over the years since 2007. I appreciate that there are other workload issues to do with bureaucracy and so on, but teacher numbers is a critical issue. How many additional teachers are needed in our education system to address the workload crisis that has been discussed?

Jim Thewliss: I will return to something that was mentioned earlier. I am not sure whether my colleagues will pick up on the teacher workload crisis, but I want to pick up on the school leader workload crisis and the school leader number crisis.

Over the past six or seven years, there has been a significant reduction in leadership capacity in schools at a time when workload has increased enormously. There is a huge issue around career progression in senior leadership in schools. People are looking at headteacher jobs and deputy head jobs and saying, "Do I want to take on this job if that's what it's going to involve?" My organisation has a significant concern about that.

I also return to guidance teachers and the way in which they are being expected to operate within the new structures that are coming along. Again, there is increasing pressure and a declining number of people in the guidance structures.

Leadership capacity is a major issue, and it is exacerbated by the removal of leadership capacity at the centre within local authorities. The removal of education officers, curriculum support officers and so on pushes that work back on to schools. That is a major and increasing issue.

In addition, the inappropriateness of the job-sizing toolkit to support senior leaders in how they are paid in relation to the workload that they take on is an on-going and increasingly overbearing issue within school leadership in Scotland.

Fiona Dalziel: On teacher numbers, it would be a big advantage if we had a better supply of supply teachers. It has been extremely difficult to get people to put their names on the list. The pay for a couple of days is not as good and the jobs that are advertised tend to be temporary. Nobody is going to give up a permanent job to go to another school for a couple of days a week.

The knock-on effect is that things such as continuing professional development and career-long professional learning do not happen. A teacher may be booked on a course to bring up their subject knowledge, but if there is nobody to cover their class, what choice do they make? They stay in school and give up their professional learning. In order to allow the capacity for staff to maintain and update their professional skills and to

maintain the standards that we want, we need to encourage people to go into teaching by ensuring that the profession looks attractive and less stressful than it looks at the moment, and that there are good career opportunities.

The change to the structure in doing away with subject-specific principal teachers has had a knock-on effect. If a newly qualified teacher goes into a school that does not now have a subject-specific line manager it would be difficult to develop that teacher in a one-person department. The does not encourage movement upwards, either. We need to have another look at what is available in the budget and the support that is given in that respect.

Jane Peckham: As Jim Thewliss and Fiona Dalziel have said, cuts in leadership and middle management have had a massive impact on teacher workload. When a principal teacher role is taken away, or when a headship is shared, in rural areas for example—we are not against that concept—work that would have normally been theirs falls to the class teachers. It increases teachers' workload, but they are not paid for it.

I find it very difficult to sit here and give Neil Bibby a number because it would probably lie completely outwith the realms of possibility. The issue is about redistribution of available posts, which varies from council to council, depending on their situation. A council might say that it has X teachers, but the real impact is on the type of teachers, the roles that the teachers have and how much provision they have of support staff and supply staff. A ream of things rolled into one have the impact.

Larry Flanagan: The agreement on teaching numbers that was reached in 2011 was that teacher numbers would be maintained in line with pupil numbers. The Scottish Government put a mechanism in place whereby if local authorities did not maintain a specific number of teachers, there would be a clawback of roughly £40,000 for every teacher they were below that number. There was some flexibility around how different authorities produced the overall figure, but that direct connection has ensured that during the two years that the agreement has operated, teacher numbers have largely been maintained. Some authorities have gone up a little bit and some have gone down and we will know this December whether the figures have been maintained for this current year.

What was proposed in the budget was that that penalty would be suspended for 2015 to 2016, but that is predicated on discussions involving the teachers' trade unions around COSLA's agenda for an outcomes-based system of measuring education delivery. We are prepared to have those discussions but we are very clear—we almost go

back to the Audit Scotland report—that there are some things that we should be able to measure that are useful benchmarks. From our point of view, teacher numbers is one of the benchmarks for education spending.

There should be an increase in the number of primary teachers because of the increasing roll. If that increase has not happened, it means that we have bigger classes, which has an impact on teaching and learning. It might be expected that there would be a decrease in the number of secondary teachers, but one of the difficulties with secondary school staffing is that we have to maintain a level of staffing to deliver curriculum choice, and working that out that can be complicated.

I welcomed the cabinet secretary's commitment on teacher numbers. The EIS's clear point of view is that one of the litmus tests of the acceptability of the budget is agreement on the maintenance of teacher numbers at least in line with pupil rolls.

Neil Bibby: Should the Scottish Government be looking at a specific number by which to increase the number of primary school teachers, given the increase in primary school rolls?

Larry Flanagan: No. One of the issues around the budget discussions is that there has been a request that local negotiating committees should have a look at the issue because the necessary increase will relate to local circumstances. A rural school might be able to increase its roll by 10 without requiring another teacher because of class sizes. In an urban setting, an increase of three pupils might mean a second-stream class. There are a lot of details that make it difficult. Anyone who has been involved in workforce planning for teachers will know the difficulty of coming up with a formula that deals with all the nuances. That is why we think that a minimum staffing standard across the country is a useful starting point that enables local authorities to then look at the nuances in their area.

12:15

Colin Beattie: We have touched on national and local decision making and have skirted around ring fencing and so on. It is true that the Scottish Government provides a block grant for local authorities, but within that a great deal of the budget is decided nationally—for example, teachers' salaries. To what extent should the Scottish Government intervene at local level in schools? There is always a feeling that local government is best at delivering the service, but we know that aspects are already dealt with nationally when it comes to costings and so on. Should the Scottish Government influence local

authorities more than it does now in terms of the spend?

Larry Flanagan: That is the \$64,000 question, is it not? The primary role of Government in education is in policy, because it must ensure that there is a coherent curriculum framework across the country. We have always taken the view that there is an appropriate role for local authorities in terms of the democratic process and accountability. There will probably be a debate—this almost brings us back to shared services—around at what level that local democratic control should be exercised.

There seems to be little point in having local councils if they have no decision-making powers. We think that local authorities are a key part of the decision-making process. That is not to say that we agree with the decisions that they make, but we think that they have a right to make them.

The Convener: They have the right to make the wrong decisions.

Larry Flanagan: Yes. *[Laughter.]*

Jane Peckham: They have that right as long as they are accountable.

Jim Thewliss: The local authority being there to judge the needs of the local community and to be accountable for how those needs are met is crucial to the democratic process. Central Government gives a steer and sets the policy. The nature of things is that central Government is in charge of the national finances and a large chunk of what is paid is for teachers' salaries, so it has an impact, but there must be the opportunity for local authorities to work together with the schools and various other agencies in the local authority to provide a service that meets the needs of pupils who attend the schools in that local authority.

Colin Beattie: You say that you would oppose ring fencing in order to keep such flexibility locally, so that local authorities can determine local needs.

Jim Thewliss: I suggested previously that there should be a set of parameters. Larry Flanagan has already mentioned that in relation to staffing. There should be neither ring fencing as such, which was very restrictive, nor complete flexibility that allows the smoke and mirrors that the representatives from the parents bodies spoke about in the previous evidence session. A useful way forward would be to have a set of parameters within which local authorities can operate and be held accountable.

Larry Flanagan: A good example of ring fencing is additional money that used to come from the Scottish Government to fund English as an additional language. That money was specifically for the national priority on supporting EAL. It meant that in Glasgow, for example,

although Glasgow City Council funded additional EAL services to the tune of £6 million, it had core funding from the Scottish Government. When staffing complements were being worked out in schools, that Scottish Government element was untouchable because it was ring fenced for that service. With the removal of that ring fencing, that additional funding is now part of the local authority budget, a consequence of which has been a cut in the EAL staff in Glasgow City Council. In certain areas, ring fencing is a desirable and acceptable mechanism for the Scottish Government to use where it is driving a particular policy.

Although some terms, such as teachers' salaries, are negotiated nationally, they are negotiated through the Scottish negotiating committee for teachers, which is a tripartite body. COSLA is one third of that body, so it is not simply about the unions and the Scottish Government: local government is involved, too. It is more than just a two-way process that starts with the Scottish Government and moves down the way.

Colin Beattie: Would outcome agreements be the litmus test of whether money is being spent effectively, rather than ring fencing, which just holds a sum of money that is available?

Larry Flanagan: Outcome agreements are just smoke and mirrors. There was a question earlier about the national priorities. My worry is that outcome agreements can be so nebulous that they do not mean anything. That is the agenda that COSLA has set for the forthcoming discussions. When I first heard about it, my response was to ask, "Well, what do they mean by that?" Nobody can quite tell me what it means. We will engage in dialogue, but I sometimes think that outcome agreements are just a way of masking a different agenda.

Clare Adamson: We have discussed ring fencing and the whole budget situation, and Larry Flanagan mentioned the council tax freeze. COSLA has made it clear in its submission that it is looking at things holistically.

The council tax constitutes only 10.8 per cent of the funding for local government, and the Scottish Government contributes to that. When I was looking at the budget with North Lanarkshire Council, it was evident that a 6 per cent increase in council tax for everyone would have been required for the council just to stand still. If we wanted to raise money, we would be talking about a 10 per cent increase, or thereabouts, in council tax.

Another issue that has come up today is that a quarter of our pupils are currently living in poverty. There has also been a 16 per cent drop in teacher numbers. Should we not look at the situation as a whole and consider what impact an increase in

council tax would have on teachers and parents? So far, a person in a band D house will have saved £690 in council tax because of the freeze that the Scottish Government brought in.

Larry Flanagan: I am not advocating that the council tax freeze should end—I am saying that we need a debate around taxation. I just used the council tax freeze as an example of an initiative that exists. We do not have a policy on it, and we understand why it was introduced.

My point was that if we are going to fund public services, the money has to come from somewhere. We cannot escape the fact that, at the end of the day, some form of taxation is needed as the source. I was not saying that the council tax freeze is necessarily the issue. I just used it as an illustration.

Liam McArthur: I should probably declare an interest in relation to two family members. One is currently a secondary school teacher and the other is a former headteacher of a secondary school, and they are both union members.

Larry Flanagan: Which union? [*Laughter.*]

Liam McArthur: I cannot say, but only because I am not sure. I am not going to be that specific.

You made a point earlier about the difference in 2014-15 as a result of the removal of sanctions. Obviously discussions are on-going, and you have made clear where you stand on the matter.

In the light of what the cabinet secretary told the committee three or four weeks back, do you expect that the teacher-pupil ratio will remain as was agreed back in 2010-11? Is there a risk that, with the removal of the sanctions—the element that kept everybody honest—teacher numbers will not keep up with pupil numbers?

Larry Flanagan: There are two key points in that respect. One is that a five-month period has been set for discussions, but those discussions will run parallel to the discussions in the SNCT on the teachers' pay claim. They will also take place in the context of our workload campaign with regard to CFE. There will be a lot of detailed discussions on all those issues. I hope that we will at the end have in place an agreement that will still contain a protection for teacher numbers.

Mark Carney was invited to speak at the annual Trades Union Congress conference this year. He observed that although living standards have fallen as a response to austerity, it is almost as if people have accepted that in order to protect job numbers. From our point of view, the protection of job numbers is the only thing that mitigates the fall in living standards, so the issue is important for us.

The other side is that, although there is a protection in place for the 2011 teacher numbers,

there is—as Jane Peckham said earlier—not much more to cut. We argue that the number of teachers that we have is basically what we need to deliver the statutory requirements of the education service. I do not know quite where COSLA thinks there might be real additional savings to be made through cutting teacher numbers. COSLA is not saying that, but that is what it is thinking. It is difficult to identify where those savings can be made, unless it is in individual authorities. The numbers already mean that the service that we are delivering is creaking under the pressure of workload and growing class sizes. It might almost be a false war, in a sense, because those numbers might not be able to change very much.

The Convener: Does anyone else want to comment on that?

Fiona Dalziel: With regard to reduced teacher numbers, the effect in secondary schools is that subjects can be presented in such a way that it is difficult for pupils to choose them. We are finding that subjects are dropping off the end, which means that a school can say, “Well, we don’t need that teacher any more, because no one is choosing the subject.”

If we want pupils to have a broad education and a lot of choices, sometimes we have to maintain classes where there may not be a huge number of pupils, as that is necessary to maintain the quality of pupils’ education and give them those choices.

Liam McArthur: I want to move on to solutions, which George Adam touched on earlier, as did Colin Beattie, to an extent. If there were any easy solutions, we might not even need to invite you here to give us some answers. We have heard Larry Flanagan talking about the council tax, and Clare Adamson has explained how removing the freeze would be very difficult and would not be terribly pleasant.

With regard to shared services, there are issues with democratic deficits at the local level. Trying to maintain some national parameters builds rigidity into the system and does not necessarily allow local authorities or individual headteachers and their senior staff to adapt and use flexibility to meet local needs.

On ring fencing, I take Larry Flanagan’s point about Glasgow. However, when we had ring fencing, places such as Orkney were presented with small pots of money that were good for absolutely nothing, and because they were ring fenced they could not be deployed in more creative ways. There are swings and roundabouts, and I appreciate that things are different for different councils.

Given all that, what direction can you guide us in with regard to our recommendations? Huge new pots of funding will not be found. Can you identify

areas where we are not getting the bang for our buck and areas that are central to educational attainment and achievement in which the money could be better spent? That would allow us to go back to Government and say, “Look—none of this is easy, but these are the areas in which you ought to refocus efforts.”

Jane Peckham: Part of the answer to that goes back to my earlier point. We need to take a more in-depth look at specific spend on certain items locally and at whether there are areas in which the money could be better used to increase education provision. I am not entirely sure that that has been done consistently. There has to be an open and honest exchange about budgets and expenditure. As I said, I was concerned to hear that that does not happen.

I do not think that we have magic answers, apart from ones that would not be achievable. My feeling is that money is being spent on things that are not necessarily a priority and that that spending is perhaps happening because those things have always been done. That needs to be looked at again. If you get a finite amount, the money has to be really carefully distributed. People should focus on that.

12:30

Liam McArthur: You touched on instrument tuition. Fortunately, the local authority in the area that I represent has covered, and continues to cover, the costs of that, but I know that it is in a minority in that regard. However, at a local level, decisions on those different priorities will be made on the basis of what a local authority feels that it needs to invest in. If it feels that there is the stomach for charging for certain things, it will put forward those proposals and be held accountable accordingly.

Jane Peckham: What is the comparison between the authority that cuts that provision and the one that can still provide it free of cost? Where is the saving being made in the one that still provides the service? Maybe there needs to be more interaction between authorities on what their successes have been with regard to what they have managed to retain without cutting. I am not naive enough to think that that is easy to do, due to the different natures of local authorities. However, if one area is able to continue free provision of a service and another is not, you are starting to get into a position in which there is inequality in access to education, which comes back to the issue of the postcode lottery.

Liam McArthur: It is interesting that you should say that. Members of the previous panel emphasised where there can be shared learning and shared experience. You would think that,

given the process that all local authorities have had to go through over the past few years, that dialogue would have been happening as a matter of course.

Jane Peckham: Yes, you would think that.

Liam McArthur: But your argument is that that is not happening.

Jane Peckham: I am not convinced that it is.

Liam McArthur: In that case, are there local authorities that we should hold up as examples—authorities that are exceeding expectations and delivering services well without massively increased resources?

The Convener: I would like to add another angle to that question before Jane Peckham answers it. Earlier, she mentioned local authorities spending money on “fluffy” services, and a moment ago she talked about money being spent on areas that are perhaps of less priority. Can she give us examples of those “fluffy” services or areas of less priority?

Jane Peckham: “Fluffy” is the wrong terminology; it is just my personal word for it. I am talking about what local authorities spend on projects for the arts, the types of wheelie bins that they provide—each council has its own arrangements in that regard—and so on, and the cost implications of such spending. I am also saying that we should ask whether they are taking away teaching jobs and redistributing the money to support staff.

The issue is about the importance of what councils are doing. For example, is there a need for the council to put leaflets through people’s doors about certain things?

I know that those issues are not all directly linked, but I think that the wider funding issue needs to be looked at. If we cannot afford to do something, maybe we should not do it, even if it has always been done. That was the point that I was making earlier. I know that there are no more efficiencies to be made and that, if we are to make savings, they will have to come through cuts. Perhaps the honest response should be, “We are not looking at efficiencies; we are cutting.”

To come back to Liam McArthur’s point, I do not think that there is an open exchange across authorities. In different scenarios that we have sought advice on—for example, in relation to the way in which various local authorities deal with notice pay—there is a massive difference in the response of local authorities with regard to whether they will share information. There is work to be done in that regard, but it is for the councils to do, not us.

Larry Flanagan: I want to make two points. In its consultations with the Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Employment and Sustainable Growth, the STUC has consistently identified the Government’s small business grant as being something that does not create jobs and as representing a pot of money that could be used to support public services. The STUC would probably have an internal disagreement about where we would redirect that money to, but I would certainly argue for it to go to Scottish education.

Macro decisions are made around the amount of money that is spent. There has been a commitment this year around the Wood commission, which we welcome because there is no point in having a commission if it is not going to be resourced, and the decision has been made to support it.

There are projects on the go in Scottish education that are worth while, but we have to ask whether they are realisable. For example, nobody has any real disagreement with the one-plus-two language initiative, but has it got any chance of succeeding in the next five to 10 years? Absolutely not. The level of resource that is required to turn that into a reality flies in the face of the discussion that we are having about the context in which Scottish schools operate.

I am now five minutes late for a meeting of the tackling bureaucracy working group.

Jim Thewliss: It is five minutes well spent, Larry. *[Laughter.]*

The Convener: You do not look too upset.

Larry Flanagan: One of the points that we have been making in the group is that schools have to pick their priorities and do those priorities well. However, that might mean not doing something that they would like to do and see as worth while but which they do not have the time to do. I think that there is an issue there. We tick all the boxes in terms of where we are going, but we cannot afford to fund all those things properly, so we fund them a little bit just so that we have ticked all the boxes. Maybe we should focus on the key things.

My final point is that I think that there is a debate to be had—this goes back to the shared services agenda—around whether we really need 32 education directorates across the country. I simply ask the question.

The Convener: Thank you. I will bring in Jayne Baxter with a final question. Everybody can answer it, and then people can pick up on anything that needs to be picked up.

Jayne Baxter: I asked the previous panel to comment on the statement from ADES that, due to the sensitivities involved,

"the reality is that draft budgets are now kept largely confidential".

The members of the previous panel referred to this being all about elections, with local authorities and Governments keeping things close to their chest and pulling rabbits out of the hat when we get close to an election. Are there ways in which we can broaden out accountability? Obviously, there is accountability through elections, but are there other ways in which those involved in school education could be held accountable, perhaps at a local level? Are there other stakeholders who need to be involved, or is it just about teachers, COSLA and councils? Who else should be involved in that mix?

Larry Flanagan: I have to be honest and say that, at both the local level and the national level, we feel that the EIS is consulted on the major issues and that we have a contribution to make. I think that some of the sensitivity about consultation is at the local level—a possibility becomes a probability just because it has been articulated. The education directorates used to be very good, when looking at options for budget cuts, at throwing up stuff that it would be totally unacceptable to cut just to make sure that cutting it would be totally unacceptable. The danger that they have now is that if they throw anything up in that way, it might actually be cut. I can understand the caution, because as representatives of public sector workers we do not want to see people presenting budget cuts that will unsettle people in the workplace. That is a difficulty.

There is a real challenge for local authorities in how they communicate with different representative groups. There is an onus on a representative group to act in good faith with regard to confidential information that is shared with it, because that is the basis on which information is shared. I think that just putting everything into the public domain is not necessarily the best way of conducting what can be quite sensitive and difficult negotiations.

Jane Peckham: I echo that point. It depends on the level of understanding of the group to which the information is being presented. We get involved in the local information exchange, but if that was rolled out to every household in the area, would they understand the nuances of the decisions that were being made, and would those decisions be relevant to what they needed to know? I think that the existing level of engagement is adequate, but only as long as it is an open exchange.

The analogy of pulling a rabbit out of the hat is potentially true in terms of elections, but—

Larry Flanagan: It is more fluffy.

Jane Peckham: I like a bit of fluff.

I am not sure that that analogy describes something that is a deliberate agenda at all times. If the question is asked, through whatever means, the answer should be given. Sometimes the problem is that the speed at which the response comes makes it difficult in the long term.

Jim Thewliss: I do not do fluffy.

The Convener: I could have guessed that. *[Laughter.]*

Jim Thewliss: Just to put a wee bit of meat on the bones of Larry Flanagan's point, ADES perhaps did not make the best choice of words; I suggest that the statement could have been phrased in a different way. However, if we get to a particular position in discussions on cuts, perhaps throwing everything into the public domain is not the best way to go about things. For example, looking at the school estate and the possible closure of schools must be done delicately. Let us look carefully at what we are going to do and at the way in which that will be shared with people. As I said, I do not think that the wording in the ADES statement was the best in the world.

Fiona Dalziel: Again, the difficulty with holding people to account is, believe it or not, to do with workload. I think that there are a lot of people who could contribute an awful lot, but by the time the meeting comes along, they do not have the time or the energy, or they have other commitments and so on. Quite often, those who have the loudest, more articulate voices are the ones who are listened to, and the decisions are made because somebody is right in front of the councillor, and they have priority.

The Convener: Thank you all very much for coming along this morning, and for submitting your written evidence in advance of the meeting. You will know that we will continue our budget deliberations next week, when we will hear evidence from COSLA and ADES, and from the Scottish Government and the cabinet secretary.

I am delighted that Larry Flanagan can now go to his meeting on tackling bureaucracy.

Meeting closed at 12:42.

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