



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

EDUCATION AND CULTURE COMMITTEE

Tuesday 3 February 2015

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CONTENTS

| | Col. |
|---|-------------|
| CURRICULUM FOR EXCELLENCE | 1 |
| SUBORDINATE LEGISLATION..... | 58 |
| Children (Performances and Activities) (Scotland) Regulations 2014 (SSI 2014/372) | 58 |
| EUROPEAN UNION ENGAGEMENT | 60 |

EDUCATION AND CULTURE COMMITTEE

3rd Meeting 2015, Session 4

CONVENER

*Stewart Maxwell (West Scotland) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Siobhan McMahon (Central Scotland) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*George Adam (Paisley) (SNP)
*Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)
*Chic Brodie (South Scotland) (SNP)
*Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab)
*Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
*Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD)
*Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Dr Janet Brown (Scottish Qualifications Authority)
Angela Constance (Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning)
Larry Flanagan (Educational Institute of Scotland)
Graeme Logan (Education Scotland)
Robert Macmillan (Scottish Secondary Teachers Association)
Jane Peckham (National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Terry Shevlin

LOCATION

The James Clerk Maxwell Room (CR4)

Scottish Parliament

Education and Culture Committee

Tuesday 3 February 2015

[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:01]

Curriculum for Excellence

The Convener (Stewart Maxwell): Good morning. I welcome everybody to the third meeting in 2015 of the Education and Culture Committee. I remind everybody present to ensure that all electronic devices, particularly phones, are switched off, as they interfere with the sound system. Obviously, they are also an interruption if they ring.

Agenda item 1 is the curriculum for excellence. The committee has held a number of meetings in the current parliamentary session on the curriculum for excellence and the progress that we hope is being made. I think that we would all agree that the curriculum for excellence is one of the most significant changes to Scottish education in recent years, and it is important not only to the committee and the Parliament but to parents, pupils and, I am sure, teachers to ensure that we are making satisfactory progress.

I thank the members of the public who responded to our online request and provided submissions and questions, which we have received. I am sure that members will pick up on one or two of them.

Today, we will look specifically at the implementation of the new higher qualifications, but we are also likely to discuss other topical curriculum for excellence issues as we go along.

I welcome Graeme Logan from Education Scotland, Larry Flanagan from the Educational Institute of Scotland, Jane Peckham from the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers, Dr Janet Brown from the Scottish Qualifications Authority and Robert Macmillan from the Scottish Secondary Teachers Association.

As the panel is quite large, I note that not everybody has to answer every question, although witnesses do not always respond well to that comment. If somebody has covered an issue, I would appreciate the other witnesses not doing so if they do not have to, but if they have something to add, they should by all means let me know and we will get them in.

I know that members have a number of questions. Mary Scanlon will start.

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): We have a significant amount of written evidence today. One piece, which I think came from the Mary Erskine school, includes the statement:

“This curriculum is far from excellent!”

I do not think that Jean Brodie could have put it better. We still have the problems of schools being bogged down by bureaucracy and assessment, teachers being stressed and there being a bit of a patchwork solution. To be fair, however, we are where we are, and we have to look forward. That is certainly what I want to do on behalf of pupils.

Looking forward, my main concern is the articulation between the new higher and the advanced higher—or, I should really say, the articulation between the old higher and the new advanced higher. Although 45 per cent of pupils are doing the old higher this year, in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics—STEM—subjects, on which we took evidence last week, the figures for those doing the new highs in biology, physics and chemistry are, respectively, 40 per cent, 39 per cent and 38 per cent. My concern is whether doing the old higher puts pupils at a disadvantage because they will suddenly have to jump to the new advanced higher. I understand that there is not to be any postponement or any choice next year and that everyone must do the advanced higher.

The evidence throughout the submissions that we have today from headteachers, principal teachers and others shows that there is an underlying concern about pupils who are doing the old higher this year having to jump to doing the new advanced higher next year, at such a critical time in their learning. I am looking for an assurance from the witnesses about what they are doing on that aspect.

The Convener: I ask Graeme Logan from Education Scotland to respond to the question about what is happening and where we are with the issues, and we will then go to Larry Flanagan.

Graeme Logan (Education Scotland): Thank you and good morning, everyone.

There has been extensive engagement with teachers to create support materials for the new advanced higher courses, which will be published online in March, and there is also subject-specific support in all areas to support that. In particular, the science subjects, which Ms Scanlon mentioned, have had an enhanced package of support. The online service on the glow network for sciences has been the most popular element. Teachers are sharing their materials and there are collaborative writing networks in which teachers

are getting together to write materials and support one another.

Our subject specialists have been looking at the content of the existing higher and the new one and the articulation to the advanced higher to see how the content compares and how the learner progression articulates, and they then provide further guidance to schools.

There will be no disadvantage to children who are sitting highers this year, because the quality and standard of a higher is the same whether it is the existing higher or the new one. Teachers have made local professional decisions as to which course to pursue, which is very much in line with the spirit of curriculum for excellence. We also know that our teachers are skilled at planning progression and are looking closely at the content of courses.

In the case of science subjects, I think that everyone recognised that the content needed to be updated quite significantly. That has happened and there is, as I said, a huge amount of additional support in that area to support teachers to make the change.

The nature of the advanced higher is very different. At that level, it is pre-university learning and the young people study largely independently, with a lot more emphasis on investigative skills. At that level, they will be able to use and apply all the skills that they have developed through curriculum for excellence. There are much smaller numbers of young people doing advanced highers, so schools work together through local consortia and so on to deliver them.

There has been a big emphasis and focus from the SQA and Education Scotland to support the transition from higher to advanced higher, whether it is the existing course or the new one.

Mary Scanlon: To be fair, we have heard about the help and support before. However, the chair of the parent council of Madras college in St Andrews says in written evidence that they have

“been given to understand that, in many subjects, the old Highers do not articulate well with the new Advanced Highers”,

so I think we need a little bit more information. Will those who have done the old higher be at a disadvantage doing the new advanced higher? That issue runs through our briefing papers. We cannot turn back the clock, but surely we could learn lessons so that we can give help and support. Schools are worried about it, so I think that we should be worried, too.

Graeme Logan: That is why a huge amount of additional support is going in to look at the progression from the existing or the new higher to advanced higher. All the energy and all the

support is going into looking at how the content progresses and compares. That is why we are producing materials and supporting materials that teachers are writing themselves.

There is a clear focus on that issue to make sure that young people are not disadvantaged. There is a focus on looking at the subject-specific lines of progression and providing additional support. We know that teachers are very skilled in doing that, but all available support is going in to look at the articulation—

Mary Scanlon: But you would acknowledge that they are worried. We hope that that will come forward, but the evidence that we have is that, as of today, they are worried.

Graeme Logan: A small number of schools that have responded are anxious. They are anxious because their teachers want to do their best. At this time last year, we were in a similar situation with the introduction of the new national qualifications.

We are in the middle of a series of headteacher events. In the last week we have seen about 600 secondary heads and deputies, and we will see the remainder over the next two weeks. By then we will have seen every secondary headteacher in Scotland to look at the support that is available and to look at those issues. We have headteachers showcasing and sharing the ways that they are going about planning for progression. We should remember that teachers in Scotland are very skilled at planning progression from one qualification to the next, or through curriculum for excellence levels.

Mary Scanlon: Will you ensure that those who did the old higher—

The Convener: Rather than having a conversation between the two of you, I want to bring in some of the other members of the panel, and I will then come back to you, Mary.

Larry Flanagan (Educational Institute of Scotland): Jean Brodie was quite a reactionary educational thinker, but that is just a comment in passing.

In relation to this year, we are keen to stress that the decision by the previous cabinet secretary to allow schools to choose between the old higher and the new curriculum for excellence higher has been crucial in ensuring that we have a relatively stable situation in schools. Once that decision had been made, though, we immediately raised our concern that, logically, there should also be the same ability to choose between the existing advanced higher and the new advanced higher, partly because of the issues of articulation, although there would be a debate about how well all the current advanced highers articulate with

highers, as they are a different type of qualification.

The big issue for us is the workload around developing a new course. If 45 per cent of departments have deferred on the current higher, that means that they will deliver the new curriculum for excellence higher for the first time next year. Having to deliver the new advanced higher alongside that will create an additional workload problem and a capacity issue.

There are a number of reasons why schools have deferred the CFE higher this year. Some are to do with content changes, but a lot of the reasons are to do with workload. Many schools are concentrating on learning the lessons of national 4 and 5 last year—last time we were here, we recognised that that had been a challenging agenda—and a number of revisions to how options are presented to pupils have had to be looked at.

The workload concerns that we raised last year in relation to national 4 and 5, which were generally acknowledged, have not abated this year in relation to the higher. Where people are delivering the old higher, they are reviewing the broad general education from S1 to S3 and its articulation with national 4 and 5—and they are reviewing national 4 and 5. The SQA has streamlined the verification process, which is helpful, but there is still a lot of concern that there is overassessment in the unit assessments in national 4 and 5.

No evidence is coming to us from our members that the workload pressures of last year have abated in any real sense. It is in that context that we are concerned that the option to defer the new advanced higher for a further year, so as to articulate with any decisions that are made this year, is not being presented.

10:15

We recognise that that represents a challenge for the SQA, which has planned to turn off the tap in relation to the old advanced higher this year, but I think that, if there is no option around that, a lot of schools will simply drop the advanced higher because of the workload and staffing pressures around school timetables. They are already under huge pressure. A viable advanced higher class normally requires between 10 and 20 pupils, and advanced highers have already been dropped in a whole range of subject areas. In Glasgow, kids have to go to university on a Wednesday afternoon to sit some advanced highers because schools cannot get viable classes.

The danger is not that people will push ahead with the advanced higher and take on board the workload pressure, but that people will turn away

from the advanced higher and it will be marginalised when it comes to being on offer in our secondary schools.

The Convener: A number of members wish to speak. I presume that they have specific supplementary questions about what has just been said. I will return to Mary Scanlon, but we will have some quick supplementaries first.

Chic Brodie (South Scotland) (SNP): This is a major step change in education, as we all know. Dr Brown, we have a quote from you that says:

“The first year is always difficult, and the second year will be better.”—[*Official Report, Education and Culture Committee*, 30 September 2014; c 16.]

Is it not the case, in your experience of the programme, that that is exactly where we are at, in that the first year is difficult, the second year will be better, and things will then get better still?

Dr Janet Brown (Scottish Qualifications Authority): As Larry Flanagan and Graeme Logan articulated, in the first year of running any qualification, an understanding of how it operates is always developed. That lesson has been learned during the course of this year. From talking to teachers, it seems to me that the temperature is a lot cooler than it was. I am not saying that it is cold or that there are no challenges, but there is more of an understanding of the nature of the change. The questions are much more concise, and we can address some of them through the support that is being provided by us and other bodies.

I stand by the statement that the first year of any change is always difficult. Understanding, seeing and going through the process enables people to articulate their questions in a better way, to respond to questions and to put in place changes such as the change to verification, which we made having considered what we still need to do to maintain standards and what we learned from the first round. That enabled us to adopt a different sampling regime and to change the approach that we are undertaking this year.

In the first round, we are not doing verification; we are doing training, which will allow teachers to go back into the system to train others. We are using candidate exemplification and candidate material for that training.

We have learned, the teachers have learned and other people have learned, and I think that this year is more manageable. The work pressure is still a challenge, but people—including us—know what they are doing.

Chic Brodie: Graeme Logan’s submission discusses

“a range of activities, including challenging over-bureaucratic approaches found during inspection. Local

authorities are taking forward the actions in the CfE Working Group's report on tackling bureaucracy."

Can you give a particular example? I have your report here, and I will ask you about the outcomes in a minute. In any new, major programme such as this, one might say that all the bureaucratic wrinkles should have been taken out at the beginning, but it never works that way for any major project. How are things progressing? Can you give an example?

Graeme Logan: Yes—absolutely. We are seeing significant progress in tackling bureaucracy. As you say, teachers want to do their best, so they initially look in depth at approaches to planning and assessing. However, the report was very clear that we need to challenge that approach in order to prioritise time for teaching and learning.

We have been looking at information technology systems, for example, and we have in inspections been supporting schools to streamline those systems by clarifying and simplifying what they have been doing. Recently, we had a primary school in Dundee where a main action point was to reduce the time that teachers spend on planning assessment systems, so that they can focus on learning and teaching.

Each local authority has given a response on how it is taking forward the report's recommendations, and we are monitoring that through our team of area lead officers. We are also helping to simplify and clarify what teachers need to do. Route maps through assessment, for example, give teachers a sequenced list of the key documents that they need to consult in order to plan and assess young people's progress; those route maps have been used extensively across Scotland.

We have a new key curriculum support website that highlights the key support and advice for teachers when they have time for planning and assessment. Finally, we have recently published significant aspects of learning for each curriculum area, which summarise on one side of A4 the key steps of progression in each curriculum area.

There is still work to do to challenge unnecessary bureaucracy, but we have seen significant progress and we continue to work together to make sure that the situation improves.

Chic Brodie: In terms of back-up—

The Convener: You were supposed to ask just a supplementary question, Mr Brodie. I will bring in Robert Macmillan and Jane Peckham, because they have been waiting to speak.

Robert Macmillan (Scottish Secondary Teachers Association): I have a quick point that

echoes some of what Larry Flanagan said and to an extent what Janet Brown said.

All sorts of material can be published to support teachers but, as well as spinning all the plates that they have to spin every day, teachers face challenges that include accessing that information, making sense of it and ensuring that it has an impact on their practice and what they do. I had a look at Education Scotland's website last night and on just one page, which is on learning, teaching and assessment, there are about 20 different links to things that teachers could look at to improve their practice. If a subject specialist looks at the SQA's resources and support, the picture is similar.

People do not have the time to assimilate all those things. That is partly why there is a fear about the change and why people are hesitant about moving forward. For some changes that have taken place, teachers traditionally had time during the study leave period after Easter—when many of their senior pupils would be away undertaking exams—to come together to plan what they were doing and to undertake some of the work that needed to be done. However, that time has been taken away, because in some schools a huge cohort—national 4 candidates—do not have external exams, so schools or authorities are making arrangements to work with those pupils on other things. Those pupils have to be taught and looked after, so the time that teachers would ordinarily have to come together to plan has been taken away.

There is workload pressure and it is made worse because people are having to do so much. We share a concern with the SQA about the subjects that traditionally—and currently—are taught by very small departments or through single-teacher delivery. The pressure on those teachers is huge at a time when local authorities have taken away advisers and subject support centrally. Many of the ways in which pressures could perhaps be relieved are being taken away, which puts much more of a constraint on people. How we work through that will be very challenging over the period ahead.

Jane Peckham (National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers): On tackling bureaucracy, a huge amount of work has gone into reviewing how the first year went and how to reduce all the bureaucracy and needless work that is being done. We fully supported that work, but it is still not translating down to the classroom. Our concern is that it is taking a long time to translate the recommendations from the two working groups down to the classroom level.

We are doing research into how quickly the local authority responses are being understood and recognised at school level. The evidence that we

have from our members is that the work is not impacting positively in the way that it should. I know that the CFE management board is looking again at that and at how the message can be strengthened, but it would be wrong just to tick that box, say that we have dealt with bureaucracy and move on.

Mary Scanlon: I have a couple of final questions. We are not taking evidence from parents today, so it is only fair to read out a comment from the national parent forum of Scotland about the SQA website. It states:

"It may well be that there are plans to update the information but it is unfortunate that there is nothing currently available as many parents will be looking for this now as prelims are underway in many schools and parents will be looking for this information now to support their children to revise, as exams start in April."

Despite all the SQA's warm words, parents out there are looking for information, guidance and advice—every parent wants to do the best for their children—but nothing is available.

I have no doubt that you heard the evidence that we took last week from the learned societies group about the reduction in the number of teachers of STEM subjects—I will not go over all the information. When Colin Beattie and I were in Inverness with the Public Audit Committee yesterday, we heard evidence on the shortage of doctors. One of the problems there is that young people lack the qualifications to get into Scottish medical schools, so the reduction in the number of teachers has a further implication, particularly in remote and rural areas.

Is there a shortage of teachers in science, computing and maths subjects? We have received this comment:

"I know of lots of teachers chucking in the towel and CFE is the reason."

Is there a lack of teachers? I saw Larry Flanagan on "Scotland 2015" last night, when he said that the situation in Moray is the tip of the iceberg. In my lifetime, I have never heard of schools having to close and send students home because of a lack of teachers. I am seriously concerned about that and about the shortage of teachers in the STEM subjects. If there is a problem in Moray, goodness knows what the situation is like in north-west Sutherland and some of the islands.

Will you comment on that and on the SQA website? Despite what you say, parents are desperately looking for support and, according to the briefing that we have received, it is not there.

Dr Brown: The point that you raise from the parents' submission is on exam practice papers. With any new qualification, there are—unfortunately—no past papers, because no papers have been produced over time. However, as a

result of all the feedback that we have received, we have included an additional exemplar higher paper for every subject. That exemplification helps teachers to build their own question papers using past questions from previous—

Mary Scanlon: The submission does not mention papers. In paragraph 2.4, the national parent forum does not say that parents want a list of past papers; parents are just asking for clear, easily accessible information.

Dr Brown: I am sorry—I obviously misremembered that. We have published questions from previous papers that fit the new curriculum for excellence qualifications. That enables teachers to undertake broader work and the questions can be used by candidates for examination practice.

On communication to parents in general, there has been strong collaboration with the national parent forum. We meet regularly and talk things through with it. We provide specific information for parents, either directly or through Education Scotland, on what the new qualifications mean and what the changes through curriculum for excellence have resulted in. That communication has gone out through the website or through leaflets from schools to parents. Last year, I sent out a flyer to every student who was undertaking qualifications. We are trying to ensure that parents are fully aware of the changes, as are employers, who are looking at the students who come out of school and need to understand what the qualifications mean to them.

10:30

The Convener: Larry Flanagan wants to come in on this issue.

Larry Flanagan: I do, but first I will respond quickly to Graeme Logan's comment that we are making significant progress on attacking bureaucracy. I am sorry, but I must disagree. Last week, the tackling bureaucracy working group met in this building. Its conclusion was that, although the key messages in the report are the correct ones, progress has been patchy at best. In fact, the group is looking to relaunch the key messages in order to make the significant progress to which Graeme Logan referred.

On Mary Scanlon's points, although the national parent forum's comment was not directly on practice papers, the forum has expressed the concern that its members, as parents, are looking for practical ways to support their children's exam preparations. The forum refers to the absence of practice papers.

I do not support Janet Brown's proposal that we cannot have practice papers until after the exams.

If we were working to a different timeframe, we would pilot the exams and produce exemplification for schools. In the last paragraph on page 33 of the committee's paper 1, the SQA says that it will provide full exemplification next year for the new higher and that it will do the same the following year for the advanced higher. That is a year too late; that is a year after the exams have been implemented.

The last time that we were all here, we pressed for the SQA to produce at least four practice papers in each subject area. I know that, this year, there is a 100 per cent increase at national 4 and 5 levels, because there are two papers rather than one. Additional useful questions have been produced.

Last week, when I was back at my old school, I took the opportunity to speak to some higher pupils. They were remarkably sanguine about the process. Their key point was about their lack of exam technique practice. They can use questions from past papers as coursework, but their prelims came as a shock, as they had to do a timed exam paper. The difficulty is the limited resource. The SQA has two practice papers on its website, so if one is used as practice and one as the prelim, all the resource is used up.

One thing that the Scottish Government could helpfully do is provide additional per capita funding. In the run-up to national 4 and 5, Mike Russell released £1 million to schools' per capita budgets to allow them to buy textbooks for pupils moving into those levels.

When we were here last, we talked about how a lot of commercial products had been put on hold to allow for the final changes to be made to the highers. Most of that material became available last autumn. However, any school department that bought a full set of textbooks would use up almost its entire per capita budget.

If the committee is looking for a practical step that would help young people who are sitting the new highers, I suggest that the Scottish Government should fund at least one textbook for each of those pupils. We need to replicate what was done last time with national 4 and 5.

I read with interest the comments on STEM subjects that were made at last week's committee meeting. I do not think that the comments on science subjects and maths have as much purchase in Scotland as they do in the UK, because a lot of the research was based on England. However, the Moray scenario highlights the issue that teaching is becoming a less attractive job option for a lot of graduates, as they are aware that wages have slipped and that the workload and stress levels are high.

In our survey last year, only one in two of our members said that they would recommend teaching as a profession. If there are teachers who do not advocate teaching as a worthwhile profession, that reflects the amount of pressures in the system. We are keen for the Scottish Government to conclude an agreement with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities to protect teaching numbers, because that would at least send out a message that that is a Scottish Government and local government priority.

The Convener: If I remember rightly, you were on "Scotland 2015" last night, when I heard you make the comments that you just made. Are we short of applicants for teacher training? Do we have a teacher training course that has fewer people than places?

Larry Flanagan: No. A useful thing that the Scottish Government has done is to increase the number of student probationer places in the north-east and Aberdeen through the teacher workforce planning group, in the hope that that will attract more local applicants—this is not an absolute—who might be more inclined to stay in the north-east and address some of the shortages.

There is no shortage of applications for teacher training.

The Convener: That was what my question was about.

Larry Flanagan: However, the difficulty is that there is no system to track where teachers go after they finish their probationary year. There is clear evidence from the numbers that we are training people who are not going into the profession. That is why we have raised with the Scottish Government the need to track people.

Some young people head off to teach abroad as part of their life plan, and a number head down to England. We are training teachers but not seeing them materialise in the system, so there is an issue. The issue is not the numbers who apply to or are enrolled in college; it is translating that group into teachers in our classrooms, because there is definitely significant slippage.

The Convener: However, the point is that it is clearly still attractive to young people to apply to go through teacher training. Some people have always gone abroad or down south; I know teachers who have come from down south or abroad to teach here. I accept that there might be particular issues with the current workload, but I am concerned that we are giving—perhaps unintentionally—the impression that there is no demand for teacher training. That is not true, is it?

Larry Flanagan: No—there is a demand for teacher training. Young people are still considering

it. The bigger issue is translating that training into teachers who work in our schools.

The Convener: I get the point.

Dr Brown: We recognise that we play a significant part in the support for STEM subjects. We are very involved in arranging continuing professional development for science as a result of the significant changes that have occurred because the curriculum moves much more quickly in science. What I learned as a physics graduate is not what physics graduates learn now.

Teachers also get strong support from the learned societies. The Royal Society of Edinburgh has done a lot of work on chemistry and computing, and the Institute of Physics is heavily involved in supporting physics teachers in Scotland. The professional learning and networking for computing—PLAN C—activity that the Scottish Government has funded for developing computing teachers is very positive.

We need to make sure that that support touches every teacher, because there has been and should be a significant change in the nature of the science learning that goes on in schools, as a result of the fast-moving pace in those subjects.

Graeme Logan: To go back to Ms Scanlon's point about parents, I draw the committee's attention to pages 7 and 8 of paper 1. They show survey results from Education Scotland questionnaires, which cover a sample of schools throughout the country. On parental satisfaction with education, the committee can see that

"91% agree or strongly agree that overall, they are happy with the school"

and that

"77% agree or strongly agree that the school keeps them well informed about their child's progress",

so we see high and positive trends in satisfaction.

As Janet Brown said, we work really closely with the national parent forum. For example, we have collaborated to produce nutshell publications such as "Nationals in a Nutshell" and "Highers in a Nutshell", which provide really clear and simple advice about the content of courses and about where young people and parents can seek revision material. They have been positively received and well used.

We need to keep encouraging schools and local authorities to communicate with parents as much as possible because, of course, parents get most of their information from talking with their children's teachers. There is an extensive programme to communicate with parents and support them with revision.

The STEM subjects are a major priority for training and support. For example, in the primary

sector, we are working with the Scottish Schools Education Research Centre on mentoring—240 primary mentors have been trained. Janet Brown mentioned the work with the Royal Society of Edinburgh, through which Jeremy Scott helped to write the computing science materials for national 4 and 5. There is extensive collaboration across the system and there is more work to be done.

Robert Macmillan: Many teachers have welcomed the production of additional specimen question papers, but colleagues in religious, moral and philosophical studies, for example, have been concerned that the second new specimen question paper changed the goalposts for what looked likely to be in the exam. As a result, the RMPS teachers have written formally to the SQA to express their concerns.

I was looking at a publisher's information sheet on support materials for a range of subjects. Some of the sorts of things that parents would be looking to purchase to support their children are either unpublished or will be published in April or May for the current higher—just as the pupils are undertaking the examinations.

On the wider issues, colleagues in my union, the SSTA, have concerns about pupils in the north-east undertaking higher courses without having had a science specialist teacher. The only way in which a school and teachers can work around that is through study support. Pupils are coming into school on a Saturday, and teachers are seeking to bring in colleagues from other schools, because there is not a subject specialist in one of the sciences.

A wider issue is attracting people to the north-east. One of my former colleagues, who was a probationer with me, got a full-time permanent post in Aberdeen. She is now looking to move south because she cannot afford to stay in Aberdeen. She is trying to get a job in the central belt because the cost of living in Aberdeen is so high.

All the pressures that we have spoken about have an impact on whether someone considers a career in teaching. We as teachers have many benefits and wonderful opportunities—maybe I am alone in saying that because I am the only teacher here—but the constraints that people are facing now are an extreme barrier.

The Convener: Does Jane Peckham want to add to that?

Jane Peckham: My colleagues have covered the issues.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): Members of the panel have spoken about teachers' workload, and some of the submissions that we have received refer to that.

The subject has also come up for discussion in previous evidence sessions. Has anyone ever tried to quantify or break down what is contributing to that workload? We have heard bits here and there but you cannot expect me, as a layman, to fully understand what additional work a teacher might be doing on a day-to-day basis. Is there some sort of breakdown? Is there a way in which we can understand the different elements that come together to add to that workload?

Jane Peckham: We asked members to record everything that they did in their working hours including any additional work; their preparation and the bureaucratic stuff that we have previously talked about, such as data collection; the numerous reports that need to be filled out, and so on. The role of teachers is to teach. You have to look at the extra workload—it is not duties—and remove as much as you can in order to allow teachers to focus on teaching.

The preparation for courses has increased because they are new courses and teachers are having to cover national 4 and national 5 from last year and improve on that. One of the main comments that members fed back to us recently was an acceptance that, although there is a lot more support available than was available last year, something new will come out and the content will change, and they will then be teaching something that is changing again, and so on. The issue is the constant revision of what teachers do instead of their being able to rely on their skills—“I’ve taught this for a few years and I know what I’m doing”. Everything is changing so fast that they are having to race to keep up.

In order for the new qualifications to be successful, they have to be implemented as well as they can be. Our view is that time needs to be taken for that, and more time is needed than is available at the moment. If we rush things through—an example being everyone coming to the new advanced higher next year—there is a danger that we will miss a trick somewhere, which will cause issues further down the line.

The workload will always be high because that is the nature of the job, but we have evidence that more and more is being piled on without things being weeded out that are perhaps less important than was previously thought.

10:45

Robert Macmillan: I echo that comment. As well as all the things that Jane Peckham spoke about, we now have a Government commitment on working towards using data to reduce the attainment gap, with little consideration of who will do the analysis or how that will impact on teachers.

The fundamental question that teachers always ask is, “What do I not do?” Often, whether it is because of pressure from local authorities or pressures within schools from headteachers because of their accountability, very few things are taken off. Larry Flanagan has previously spoken about his headteacher, when he was in his previous role, saying, “We’re going to remove things from the improvement plan this year in order to focus on the new qualifications and what should actually be the school’s priorities.” That is not happening enough, in our experience. Things are constantly being added and, while people are struggling to find their feet, something else comes along.

We have spoken a lot about the implementation of the new qualifications, but we have not spoken about the changes to pedagogy, the changes to teachers’ practice or the development and implementation of new technology in approaching that. We are asking teachers to do all those things and more, as well as to tick all the boxes and complete all the forms that we have always asked them to complete. I echo what other folk have said: we are not seeing a reduction in workload. It is great if systems for local authorities’ tracking and target setting are going to be looked at, but local authorities have a budgetary commitment to that and contracts for the systems. They cannot suddenly undo those because a bureaucratic report says, “We need to do less of this.” In their everyday work, people are not seeing a reduction in the burdens or expectations that are placed on them.

Colin Beattie: One of the key issues that has arisen in relation to the implementation of curriculum for excellence—it is repeated in some of the submissions for today’s meeting—is overassessment. When that was discussed previously, there seemed to be an indication that it was a one-off and that it would fall away. We heard that, as there was more confidence about the process, the workload for teachers would fall considerably. Is that the case?

Larry Flanagan: If you are talking specifically about the qualifications, that is not the case. There was an issue with overassessment as a result of pupils having to do national 4 and national 5, whereas they might have more productively focused only on the national 5 qualification.

I spoke to Janet Brown just before we came into the committee room and said that one of the key issues around the qualifications is the fact that the unit assessment is perceived by teachers as being excessive. One of the key objectives of the senior phase was to reduce the burden of assessment on both staff and pupils. However, that objective has not been achieved, because the unit assessments are perceived by teachers as being more laborious

than the previous ones at intermediate 1 and 2 and higher. Previously, the unit assessments replicated much of what would be in the exam paper, so there was an element of practice about them.

The objective of the unit assessment that is meant to be undertaken is to get to a point where the teacher uses their professional judgment based on the class work that is there. The difficulty is that the pressure around the timetable for the introduction of the new courses has not allowed schools to assimilate that message or, in implementing that, to adopt the pedagogical changes that Robert Macmillan mentioned. What is happening in schools is that, in nearly all subjects, people are looking at three unit assessments and trying to factor them in.

Unit assessments tend to happen towards the end of courses except in science and maths subjects, in which the content determines the units. In skills-based courses such as English, the unit assessments tend to come towards the end of the course so that pupils have had the most opportunity to develop their skills. That is now leading to pupils having to do a unit assessment every second day to get through all the assessments in all their subjects, which creates a weariness among the pupils and is not the best preparation for their exams in May.

The reflections group, which reviewed the first year, has identified a need to reduce the level of assessment that takes place during courses. That objective has not been realised at all. In fact, I would say that the experience of most pupils is that, under the new qualification regime, assessment has increased rather than decreased as was intended.

Dr Brown: What Larry Flanagan has just articulated was seen on the ground last year. As he said, the aim of the new assessment was to capture the material that students would generate during the course of their work, which could then be used to ensure that they had passed the units. That is still the goal, and that is the direction of travel.

We learned that, last year, teachers were trying to assess in an overstructured way, so, during the course of last term, we did not carry out verification in the way that we did in the verification rounds last year, as I mentioned earlier. We did, however, provide training on unit assessments. We focused on having the nominees whom we train go out and disseminate that information in the schools. We have worked with the schools extensively to ensure that they understand the approach to unit assessment so that, this year, we will reach the point of assessing material on an ongoing basis rather than performing individual assessments for individual outcomes.

Graeme Logan: As I mentioned, we are in the middle of a programme in which we are seeing all secondary headteachers and deputies across the country, and that is a key area for discussion. There is some really good practice whereby schools are looking at assessment hotspots across the year. They are looking across a year group to find the points in the year when children are getting too much assessment and the rhythm of assessment is being changed at the school level. That is working very well in the schools that are doing that.

It all goes back to the design of the curriculum. At our events, we are showcasing really strong practice whereby schools have updated their assessment policy and strategies, on the basis of national advice, to reduce the burden of assessment significantly and to have assessment as part of teaching and learning. That is a key aspect of the broad general education between the ages of three and 15.

Teachers make overall judgments about children's progress, and that has been recognised internationally, by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and others, as a really positive thing because it does not introduce lots of tests with perverse incentives. We are investing a lot, and we are building up teachers' confidence to make judgments that are based on class work. We see that as a real strength of curriculum for excellence, certainly through the broad general education phase. We are, of course, still supporting teachers in increasing their understanding of standards and expectations, and we will all continue to work in partnership to do that.

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): I have a couple of supplementary questions based on what Colin Beattie has been speaking about. We have heard a lot this morning about teachers' workload, the levels of bureaucracy and so on. I was struck by a couple of the comments in the submission from Jane Peckham's union. In paragraph 15, it says:

"The Union acknowledges the work of the CfE Management Board Working Group in this regard but remains concerned that some local authorities have done very little to action the recommendations of both the *Tackling Bureaucracy* and *Reflections* reports."

Those recommendations were published in November 2013. Is there any underlying reason why the recommendations are not being implemented?

Jane Peckham: We looking at that. As Larry Flanagan said, the working group has met again and it has realised that. That was part of the point that I made earlier.

We all applauded the recommendations, and we were involved in the negotiation around them. There are pressures on local authorities in all respects, but the recommendations must be emphasised to the point at which authorities have no option but to follow them.

Until the bureaucracy is reduced and the teachers' workload becomes more manageable, the system will not flow properly. We need both to emphasise the report's recommendations and to do a bit of work ourselves, along with other agencies, to assess the situation. We received the reports from local authorities recently, but the members whom we are speaking to in the authorities are not aware of what is happening, so we will have to unpick that a bit more.

Gordon MacDonald: Given that some of the 32 local authorities are implementing the recommendations, why are others not doing so?

Jane Peckham: Because that is what the local authorities have chosen to do. It is about how much importance a local authority attaches to the recommendations. It must be strongly emphasised that the workload levels are unsustainable, because we cannot keep asking the profession to deliver year on year. Teachers will do their very best to deliver, and the success of national 4 and national 5 was based solely on the teachers delivering what they could.

Gordon MacDonald: Are you saying that some local authorities are choosing not to tackle the level of bureaucracy?

Jane Peckham: I could not say that they are choosing not to tackle the issue, but they are not all attaching the same level of importance to it. It depends on the local authority and the work that is being done. We would have to ask each local authority that question.

Larry Flanagan: It took two rounds of requests to get replies to our survey from all 32 local authorities. There are some examples of good work that local authorities have done. For example, Perth and Kinross Council has reduced its development plan to three objectives, which means that it has parked some things that are important because it has recognised that it must concentrate on a reduced number of objectives. However, there were other responses from councils that caused me to say that I had not seen so much creative writing since I stopped marking higher English.

The Convener: You must have read a manifesto at some point.

Larry Flanagan: It is a question of priorities. No one is resistant to the idea that we should tackle bureaucracy, but people are sometimes thirled to

the way that they currently do things and it takes something to shake that up.

The tackling bureaucracy working group intends to reissue the key messages and will exemplify from the good practice that has come back from local authorities, offering a practical way forward in order to trigger some action. Our survey indicated that, when schools had spent time in discussing the report, some progress had been made in tackling bureaucracy. The key messages are there.

Everyone, from the directors down, is overworked and it is hard to get their attention to explain that the agenda is important. Some local authorities have not addressed the issue as thoroughly as we had hoped, and neither have some schools. The intention of the relaunch is to underline the key messages and make progress. There is a willingness to tackle the problem.

Graeme Logan: Through the school inspection programme, we have made our expectations very clear: inspectors will look at planning and assessment and will challenge any unnecessary bureaucracy. That has been a main point for action in one school and has been mentioned to several others. There is an absolute commitment to that.

As I mentioned, we will launch a new website by the end of March and the new online service will streamline the advice and support for schools, illustrating ways in which planning and assessment can be reduced. There are a number of very helpful case studies.

In November, we held a conference of about 800 primary school practitioners, which represents about 40 per cent of Scotland's primary school headteachers, and the main focus was on reducing bureaucracy. For example, a headteacher from Dumfries and Galloway showcased how she has significantly reduced teachers' planning to improve the time that is available for teaching and learning.

There is a major national effort to take the agenda forward, and we are seeing progress. We want to continue to increase the level of scrutiny around the agenda through our area lead officers, who work with each of the 32 local authorities. Now that we have the statements from the local authorities, we want to improve consistency in how they take forward the recommendations.

11:00

Gordon MacDonald: I have a final comment on the written evidence that I referred to earlier. Paragraph 10 of the NASUWT submission said:

"some problems had arisen as a result of poor practices that originated in schools".

What has been done to address poor practice in schools in order to resolve bureaucracy issues and at what level? Is there a lack of leadership? What is the situation?

Larry Flanagan: It is about exemplifying what better practice is. EIS and Education Scotland have had a number of practical workshops in which we have looked at schools that are developing good practice. It is more productive if we can say, "Here is a different way of doing it," rather than just, "This is poor," but it is about schools talking to us. It is about everyone talking to everyone else.

Interestingly, the working group on tackling bureaucracy identified that one of the key drivers of workload was an IT system called on track with learning. Despite the best intentions around its design, it was clearly identified as one of the main drivers of workload because of capacity. In their responses to the EIS survey, some of the local authorities indicated that they were either reviewing or streamlining their use of that system. However, two local authorities said in their responses that they were tackling bureaucracy by introducing on track with learning. That makes us ask, "Does nobody talk to anyone else?" The system was identified as a problem, yet two authorities thought that it was a solution. A letter is on its way to both those authorities. We need to share practice so that we are focusing on what works, rather than making the same mistakes again.

Robert Macmillan: So much of what we are talking about comes back to the same points. Whether it is about advice to local authorities or schools to reduce bureaucracy, or advice to teachers about improving their practice or supporting pupils, we need exemplification, a shared understanding of what does and does not work, and time available at all levels so that people can share practice.

Many of the development opportunities that teachers have are at their own behest. For example, there are online options such as the Pedagoo website, where teachers collaborate and share practice with one another. We need to provide any and every opportunity for people to reflect on where they are. I echo what Jane Peckham said earlier. Even within a school, it is about having the time, for example, for the headteacher and the two union reps to sit down and say, "Let's look at this report and see what we can do." It is then about having the time for a discussion within departments to ask, "What bureaucracy can we not do?"

If I am the headteacher and I want to make sure that I am quality assuring the work of the school, I will have bureaucracy that relates to that. Similarly, if a department head wants to do that for

their department, that involves bureaucracy. Which parts of those things will we sacrifice to get to the absolute core of what needs to be done so that people can get on with the job of teaching and learning to the best of their ability, with the best resource that they have available to them?

Siobhan McMahon (Central Scotland) (Lab): Mr Logan, you talked about the survey results in regard to parents and their experience of schools. You said that you worked with the national parent forum of Scotland, which made a submission to us for this meeting. In paragraph 2.3 of that submission, the forum said:

"many parents feel that they have not been sufficiently involved in the decisions about which Highers are being offered, and they do not have enough information about what is happening."

That is what the national parent forum said—the people that you said you work with. I have read both the survey results and the forum's submission. They lead me to think that although most parents are satisfied with what their child's school is doing, they are asking for leadership from those above school level. Am I correct in thinking that?

Graeme Logan: I think that overall satisfaction rates amongst parents are very high, as I discussed earlier. That is evident from the survey results. The results are based on a national sample of a combination of primary and secondary schools across Scotland. As I said earlier, 91 per cent of parents surveyed strongly agree or agree that they are happy with the school; 77 per cent also strongly agree or agree that the school keeps them well informed about their child's progress. Our main focus is to work with the national parent forum to provide national support and advice around that. I mentioned the "Nutshell" series and the other work.

We must recognise that most parents get most of their information from their children's school. As that is the source that they engage with, talking to the teachers and headteachers there is important.

The national parent forum of Scotland has a strong network of local reps who work with parent forums in schools. We all work together to strengthen and improve that further. There has been a lot of discussion at school level about which higher course to pursue and whether that should be the existing or the new higher. The evidence suggests that teachers have made the decision based on the local context and circumstances. That is a benefit of the curriculum for excellence: a lot of the decisions are made at local level.

Teachers made the decision about highers some time ago and young people are most of the way through the courses. There is very much a

recognition that all the higher qualifications—we must remember that we have seen a record number of entries for higher this year—have the same value and currency. In fact, the certificate will say higher English for both and will not differentiate between the two. The standard of the courses is there, and teachers made the decision locally, based on a variety of factors.

Siobhan McMahon: That was not my question. I asked whether parents are looking for leadership outwith the school, because the leadership at school level is a cause of concern for the just over 40 per cent of survey respondents. We have had just over an hour's evidence on the new higher and the advanced higher. I want to go beyond that and find out where we should be looking for information. Should we go to local authorities and ask them for more support? If 42 per cent of the survey respondents said that the school is doing okay, but the national parent forum is saying that it has not got the required information to determine that, where should the pertinent questions be addressed?

Graeme Logan: The national parent forum of Scotland is on all the national groups, including the CFE management board. We work closely with the NPFS. We are always looking at new ways of working together to strengthen communication. A lot of progress has been made, but we will continue to work on that.

Siobhan McMahon: In your submission, under the heading "Primary Specific Support", you mention that you have

"worked with 16 local authorities since October to provide primary specific support."

Why did you choose those 16 local authorities? There is no information about that.

Graeme Logan: The tailored support for different schools and local authorities comes through requests from our area lead officers, who develop a partnership agreement with each council on what they want from us in order to meet their local needs. In primary schools, for example, where there has not been a positive inspection, there will be a tailored package of support with us and the local authority around what the school needs in order to improve further.

A local authority's priorities are, at all times, based on that partnership agreement and the discussion about what is needed. That is the targeted support. Universal support is also available to everyone.

Siobhan McMahon: Would they make the case to you for targeted support rather than the other way around?

Graeme Logan: Yes. A discussion would take place on that between an area officer and the local authority.

Siobhan McMahon: That is helpful—thank you.

We have read in the Wood commission's report about the requirement for careers advice and the need to get employers going into schools. Over the next few years, schools will implement that through the curriculum for excellence, although it will drive towards that in other ways, too. Is face-to-face contact about the careers on offer the best way to advise, or should we look at other approaches?

Larry Flanagan: I think that we have discussed that previously. We are concerned about the cuts in schools' careers advisory services and the introduction of the traffic-light system in which the only guaranteed face-to-face interview is for those who are a red light.

We acknowledge that a lot of good work has been done, such as through the My World of Work web service and the use of online programmes to support young people to make their choices, but there is a concern that the service has been cut to the point at which its ability to support the sustained destinations agenda through the senior phase, as the Wood commission recommends, has been slightly marginalised.

The Wood commission helpfully builds on the objectives of the senior phase, particularly in relation to those young people who previously might have disengaged from education. I know that the committee is looking particularly at highers this morning, but we also need to pay some attention to the group of pupils who, at the end of their broad general education, are looking not to do a suite of national qualifications but at an alternative route. The CFE senior phase opens up the possibility of those young people transferring their final year of schooling to a college environment or considering an apprenticeship as a career avenue.

In fact, that was one of the big objectives of the senior phase and it has been marginalised by the focus on qualifications—although qualifications are also part of the options. The Wood commission might be a catalyst for more attention to be paid to the agenda of alternatives to the university route, which is where a lot of the debate has been previously. We are keen to see that develop. The one point that I make about that is that it is simply a fact that, over the past few years, school-college liaison budgets have been cut. If we want to build on that aspect of the options for young people, it needs to be funded.

The Convener: I do not want to get into a huge debate about careers advice because we covered it in a recent, full evidence session. However, I am

more than happy to take views from Janet Brown and Graeme Logan.

Dr Brown: We must have multiple channels available for career counselling. Face-to-face counselling works for some people; the My World of Work website works for others. The agenda resulting from the commission on developing Scotland's young workforce helps to bring employers into the school and gets the school engaged with local employers, which broadens the opportunity for kids to know what is going on.

Larry Flanagan is right about what pupils do in the senior phase—CFE is very broad, which is as it should be. It dovetails well. Taster courses, such as skills for work, and national courses—higher national certificates and higher national diplomas—either in the school or with the college, are very positive. Different pathways are very important, but people will choose different pathways only if they know that they exist and where they will lead them. Engagement with local businesses is key to that.

The Convener: Graeme Logan, could you be brief.

Graeme Logan: To answer Ms McMahon's question directly, having a variety of approaches works. As Janet Brown said, face-to-face career coaching is helpful, as is My World of Work.

We must remember that young people's career choices are hugely influenced by their parents and teachers, so we are looking at new ways of teachers working together with careers coaches. We have launched a new model of inspection, in which we look at the quality of careers information and guidance that is available for young people from all the different partners in the local area. That is in a pilot phase now, but it is intended to improve further the quality of careers support that young people get.

Siobhan McMahon: Finally, Mr Logan talked about teachers being influential in careers guidance. Given what you have said, Mr Macmillan, about what teachers are required to do, the workload that already exists and the continuous assessments and so on, do they have the capacity to take on that role? Although many teachers will be doing that, we heard in evidence earlier that some might not have the capacity to do that. Do you think that that is the case? The Scottish Government's response to Wood in December added to his recommendations. Do we already have the capacity to help with that?

Robert Macmillan: It depends, because, in some respects, it involves looking at the existing links. For example, as Larry Flanagan said, school-college links are available and there are opportunities for young people to access a careers adviser. It is also about the capacity of the

school's guidance staff and the work that they do at various points in relation to course choice. There are tremendous opportunities and routes to get the information to young people.

In my experience, a number of schools have looked at developing opportunities for employability. Some schools are doing a lot of good, sector-leading work with local employers. The challenge is how we spread that to the other schools, because it depends on the buy-in from local employers.

My local school is Lochgelly high school in Fife. We have been affected recently by the closure of a local employer, with the loss of 180 jobs. Tesco in Kirkcaldy is closing, with the loss of nearly 200 jobs. Those are the sorts of local employer that we would be looking to to come in to schools to work with our young people on interview skills, job applications and the sorts of things that we really want to work with them to do. The positive destination might not be there at the end of the day if we do not have the avenues for training, for college places and for all the things that we are doing in schools to lead to a positive destination. In some respects that is where the challenge is.

You are right that there are tremendous constraints on all the agencies. The agencies are trying to support our young people in making the best career choices and decisions for themselves and their future.

11:15

The Convener: Thank you. There is very little time and three members want to come in, so there will have to be quick questions and answers.

Chic Brodie: We have talked about communication. When I listen to some of the answers today—and I have written them down—I question how much communication about achieving our objectives there is at the senior level. Larry Flanagan says that progress has been patchy, Graeme Logan says that things are improving, and we hear of some local authorities doing what they are supposed to do and some not. There might be a name-and-shame mechanism in there somewhere.

Mr Logan, are you going to achieve the outcomes that are in the Education Scotland implementation plan, and how much communication have you had with the rest of the body and the working group to ensure that those outcomes are established?

I suggest that you look at the outcomes on an a priori basis to see where we get the biggest bang for our buck in ensuring that local authorities implement the changes that will reduce as many

major elements of bureaucracy as possible. How will you achieve the outcomes?

Graeme Logan: It is worth remembering that curriculum for excellence is based on a broad national framework that is developed locally. It is a deliberate design feature that schools and local authorities have more autonomy within that broad national framework to design a curriculum that meets the needs of different groups of young people. Through our inspection programme and other engagement, that is something that we look at and evaluate: what is the story of the curriculum in this area? How have teachers and others worked together to maximise the autonomy? I think it is important to bear that in mind.

It is also worth saying that a real strength of our approach is the partnership working across the different agencies. We do not always all agree and there are challenges, but, through the curriculum for excellence management board, the implementation group and all the different national groups, we are actually all working together. Larry Flanagan mentioned—

Chic Brodie: So why is it patchy?

Graeme Logan: That refers to the ways in which local authorities are reducing bureaucracy. The progress there has been patchy, as we discussed earlier.

We do joint events. Larry mentioned earlier joint national events between EIS and Education Scotland to look at best practice in reducing bureaucracy. I think that by continuing to work together we will achieve the outcomes that we have set. It is recognised as a strength of the approach to CFE that we are all genuinely trying to work together and communicate.

Robert Macmillan: I have a very brief point. Several years ago the SSTA was removed from the CFE management board. One of the ways that we could have a greater involvement in support of partners is to get a place back at the table of those councils that exist at a national level.

Larry Flanagan: I would support that, although we think that the CFE management board should be winding up soon. We have got to stop implementing at some point.

The Convener: So your suggestion is that they should come on just at—

Larry Flanagan: Come on and say cheerio.

Robert Macmillan: We can come on and save the day. *[Laughter.]*

Larry Flanagan: I have two very quick points.

One aspect of Scottish education that does not exist south of the border is that there is a genuine social dialogue around education policy. We would

not complain about not having opportunities to put our position to Education Scotland or SQA or the Scottish Government. We think that they should listen to us more often, but we certainly get the opportunity to engage with them.

I genuinely think that one of the issues that we will have to look at in the future is translating national policy into local action—and that is potentially where there is a communication gap.

The Association of Directors of Education in Scotland is represented on all the bodies, and COSLA as a group usually defers to ADES in terms of representation.

The tackling bureaucracy working group is a classic example. In that group, we have all the teacher unions, COSLA, ADES, Education Scotland, the SQA and the Scottish Government. Everyone has signed up to all the key messages and they have gone out, yet there is an implementation gap because local authorities, as employers, often have their own priorities and agendas. That is an issue to be addressed in the future.

Dr Brown: Communication between the people who are involved in implementing CFE is critical. We have very challenging conversations, and I do not think that anybody is shy in saying what they are able to do, what they need or what they really think of problems. I agree with Larry Flanagan. The fact that we talk to each other is the best thing about Scottish education.

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): I have some questions about the uptake of the new higher. Previously, Scottish ministers said that they did not expect a large proportion of pupils to stick with the old higher. Given that I would expect the organisations that are represented on the panel to be feeding into the Scottish ministers' opinion on that, I ask the members of the panel whether they expected as many as 45 per cent of pupils to stick with the old higher.

Robert Macmillan: The most recent member survey that we undertook was in the autumn—we are currently surveying our members again—and the response was that 60 per cent of folks would be pressing ahead with the new higher and 40 per cent would be continuing with the old one. In some respects, the recent figures that Janet Brown produced are in line with those expectations, but perhaps not with a high degree of accuracy, as it has turned out. That survey was based on a sample of our members rather than the entire cohort, which I think explains the difference, but it certainly showed that 40 to 45 per cent of people expected to retain the previous system rather than move ahead to the new one.

Jane Peckham: It came as no surprise. The subject area and course content also affected

whether it was the old higher or the new one. Where teachers were asked their opinion, the vast majority have stuck with the old higher—I think that that is a telling statistic—whereas some areas made a blanket decision to fire ahead with the new higher.

The differential between different subjects is also interesting. In some subjects, teachers have tended to stick with the old higher. Biology in particular is a subject where virtually no one felt ready to progress, for the reasons that we have outlined in previous meetings. The decision gives teachers the chance to consolidate the work that they did last year and to move on with the new higher next year. However, I cannot stress strongly enough how important it is to consider a delay to the advanced higher for those who are sitting the old higher this year.

Dr Brown: Allowing teachers to make the choice was the right and appropriate decision, because teachers, as we all know and understand, are the ones who understand what is best for their students, in consultation with their parents, and I think that they have made appropriate choices.

The subjects that have had significant changes in the new qualifications are arguably the ones that people are getting excited about. The difference between the numbers that are staying with the existing higher and those that are moving to the new higher is pretty explainable, but it is also very different for different schools. Some schools are undertaking the new higher in the vast majority of subjects. They are making specific decisions about that, and they understand why they are sticking with the old higher in some cases.

That is the important thing. It is a question of teachers' judgment. They are professionals and they know what they are doing. They know what is best. We can handle whatever the mix is, and I think that what has happened is appropriate.

The Convener: That seems to be at odds with what Jane Peckham said. She used the word "blanket" to describe the decisions. Our understanding was certainly that decisions about whether to move on to the new higher or stick with the old one have been made flexibly, based on a individual circumstances. Why is there a difference of view?

Dr Brown: My understanding is that the decision is being made by teachers and schools, in consultation with parents.

Larry Flanagan: In theory, all local authorities delegated the decision making to schools and most of them did so in practice. Our members in some local authorities would say that, through the headteacher network, significant pressure was put on principal teachers to go with the new higher. By

and large, however, most local authorities delegated the decision.

In the EIS, we were a little surprised at the balance of the new higher versus the old higher. However, you should bear it in mind that the 45 per cent for the existing higher includes all the sixth-year presentations. All of those presentations will automatically be under the old higher. The number taking the new higher is slightly higher among those who had a fifth-year option.

The point that I wish to emphasise in communicating key messages is to reiterate what Graeme Logan said earlier. The higher is the higher. It makes no difference to the future prospects of young people whether they are sitting the new higher or the old higher. What makes the difference is whether they pass it or not.

I saw some suggestion in the papers that, somehow, some people would be disadvantaged if they sat a different higher. When the revised higher was introduced back in 2001, we had dual running between higher still and the old higher, and it did not make a whit of a difference. The Scottish credit and qualifications framework level was the same.

It is important to communicate to parents that they should not be concerned about which higher their children are doing. We do not want youngsters to be panicked.

The Convener: That is very important, and I am glad that you have said that.

Graeme Logan: I return to Mr Griffin's original point. We were always expecting a mixed picture. At previous evidence sessions, we said that we would not know the figures until we had the SQA provisional data. We did 45 visits to secondary schools between September and December and, as Larry Flanagan has said, teachers have appreciated that local flexibility.

The robustness of how the decision was made varied to some extent. However, as Janet Brown has said, the overall evidence suggests that it was made locally, in line with the individual circumstances of the school. There was a range of individual factors, which are covered in our submission.

It is important to emphasise Larry Flanagan's point that the higher is the gold standard. It will have the same currency and value as young people move forward. It is internationally recognised, and we have a higher number of entries once again this year—it is up by about another 5 per cent. Standards and ambitions are rising further.

Dr Brown: I remind everyone that the figures are provisional and are not finalised figures—I wanted to ensure that everyone was aware of that.

The Convener: That is helpful—thank you.

You were wanting to make a point, Robert. Has it been covered?

Robert Macmillan: Larry Flanagan has covered it.

Mark Griffin: Dr Brown, you have touched on this point already. I have a question about the variation, across subjects, between pupils taking the new higher and those sticking to the old higher. I want to drill down into the reasons for that. Is it just because particular subjects translate well to the new higher? Were there support issues with some of the STEM subjects in moving to the new higher? Why is there such a wide variation between subjects in the number of pupils taking the new higher rather than the old higher?

The Convener: Before you answer that question, Dr Brown, I want to back up what Mark Griffin has said. I want to ask this supplementary question to Mark's question because of a point that Graeme Logan made earlier, which slightly concerned me—it was also in his written evidence. He said that the STEM subjects in particular were overdue an update—I am paraphrasing, but that is in effect what he said. Perhaps he could explain that when answering Mark's question.

Dr Brown: First, I remind everyone how the highers were developed. They were developed in consultation with teachers, employers, universities and colleges—not only the people who were delivering the courses but the people who would be receiving the students who had undertaken and achieved the qualifications. They very much involve what is needed by way of skills and knowledge to take the individual from the point of higher to the next destination, whether that is at school, college or university. It is therefore not surprising that, since we introduced the higher still qualifications, there has been change. That has been particularly true in the science subjects, which are an area that moves a lot faster than other areas. I will not mention English, because Larry Flanagan may want to comment on that.

11:30

Content change and, to some extent, skills development are issues in specific subjects, and the teachers to whom we have spoken have based their decision on whether they feel confident that they are ready to teach those courses. Some of the courses have changed significantly, and we are doing a lot of CPD around that partly to ensure that teachers are as comfortable as they should be.

We are also hearing that teachers have chosen the new qualification because it is exciting, because they are able to make the learning

relevant and because the learning can be contextualised for each individual student. Some of the work that is now being undertaken at higher level can be individualised and students can learn a particular aspect of a science subject by doing something that they are extremely interested in. The new qualifications allow that. Some teachers are choosing the new qualifications because they are exciting and they see the opportunity in them; others are seeing the smooth transition from national 5 to the new higher; and others are saying that they want another year to get this under their belt and will progress to the new higher next year.

Robert Macmillan: In a small number of cases, when schools and departments had moved on to teach national 4 and 5, that did not articulate particularly well with the old higher, so there was automatically a pressure on them to implement the new higher, because not to do so could be detrimental to the students or the content would be very different. In some respects, we now face the same issue with regard to the advanced higher in terms of next year.

Graeme Logan: On your specific point, convener, it was recognised, particularly in the science community, that we need to update the content of the examinations more frequently. New curriculum forums have been set up that will keep curriculum content under review on an on-going basis instead of stopping at a point in time and updating the content, which will be helpful and will ensure that the qualifications and the content get refreshed as subjects move forward.

Mark Griffin: I have a brief question on Mr Flanagan's point—it was touched on earlier by Dr Brown—about information going out to colleges, universities and employers on pupils applying for jobs or places with different highers in the same subject. What information is going out to employers and institutions to make it clear to them that a higher qualification is still of the same high standard and that pupils will still have the right skills for the job or place?

Dr Brown: We are working closely with the university sector north and south of the border to make sure that everyone understands that the new higher is of the same standard as the old higher. We are making sure that universities across the piece understand that. There has been very close interaction for a long period of time with the universities in Scotland on curriculum for excellence, so they are fully aware of the comparability. The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service is also fully aware of what is going on in terms of the entry requirements for universities and colleges.

We have a significant programme of engagement with employers across the country to ensure that they understand not only the new

highers but the national 4 and 5 qualifications. We are making sure that they are aware of the nature of the skills and knowledge that are being developed and what they should expect and be looking for in their new employees.

The Convener: Will the higher certificate say “Higher English” on it, for example?

Dr Brown: It will say what it is—a higher in English or a higher in maths.

The Convener: That is the point that Larry Flanagan made earlier.

Dr Brown: A higher is a higher. It will have the same number of UCAS points although, like all qualifications, it will have a different content.

The Convener: Thank you. George Adam will ask a final question.

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): I will skip the other four or five questions that I was going to ask, convener.

Larry Flanagan raised an important point about delivery that is the crux of a lot of the issues that we are talking about. You are asking how we can deliver national policy at the local level. As a former councillor, I have sat through hours of education meetings in which we talked about best practice and how we could sort it, but some of the evidence that the committee has received suggests that councils are still not taking on best practice from other local authorities or other areas.

I am a very practical person. I am aware that, as Larry Flanagan said, some local authorities will create bureaucracy just to talk about bureaucracy. During the budget process recently, parent groups talked to us about how we deliver education locally. Although that is a debate for another day, it is maybe something to mention at this stage. How do we deal with this situation and get local authorities to start to work together, to ensure that the good practice that is out there is taken up across the board, in all 32 authorities if possible?

The Convener: Does anyone want to solve that one?

Larry Flanagan: There are a couple of key points in that. The EIS is very clear that local authorities are a key element of our education. Local democracy has a key part to play, and that is disappearing in England because of the academy programme. We would not want that role to be marginalised in any way.

Now that the referendum is out of the way and we are moving to the 2016 Scottish elections, there will be a debate about the mechanisms that might be used to maximise the delivery impact of education services. One of the bodies with which the EIS has limited contact is the COSLA education committee, which should be a key forum

for us. However, our engagement with COSLA tends to be through the Scottish negotiating committee for teachers, which is focused on pay and conditions. At the local level, some councils have consultative committees, which look at curricular issues, and some have local negotiating committees for teachers, which look only at conditions of service issues.

We need to create platforms where we can have education discussions. I have not met anyone in Scottish education who does not want to deliver a good-quality service for young people. We need to create platforms where we can share expertise and information. I am not sure that local authority education committees, as they currently work, really embrace that shared agenda. Sometimes they are far too closed and they focus far too much on number crunching and statistics, rather than thinking about the broader services that should be there.

That is not a solution to George Adam’s question, but there you go.

Dr Brown: We meet regularly with all the local authority directors of education and the people involved with delivery to get their feedback and try to understand what the issues are. We make sure that we tell them what we have learned and say when we think that something is a good idea.

Nominees are a classic example. They are trained to be verifiers and to get to the nub of what it means to teach to a standard. One of their roles is to go back to schools in the local authority and share that expertise. Some local authorities are using them well; others are finding it difficult to work out how to do that, or they have a different approach. We are trying to showcase how that has worked in certain areas, so that people do not have to reinvent the wheel every time and they can learn from one another. We try to do that with the things on which we need local authorities to engage with us.

The Convener: Does anybody have any final comments?

Robert Macmillan: I will echo something that Janet Brown said. Too often teachers engage not in curricular innovation but in wheel reinvention. We need to find ways to stop that and ensure that the collaborative opportunities that can exist are created, not only for classroom teachers within and between schools but for the other partners that are involved in education services throughout the country.

From a trade union point of view, we will need to think about how we put pressure on elected members locally to come to the table and have the types of discussions that Larry Flanagan was talking about a moment ago.

Larry Flanagan: I have just one thing to add.

The Convener: I was not going to open this up again, Larry.

Larry Flanagan: It is just a final comment, convener. It goes back to the point that I raised earlier about the practical step forward of resourcing every young person with at least one textbook for the new higher. I am aware that the cabinet secretary is facing you next. If you are looking for a figure, about £1 million would cover my suggestion.

George Adam: Talk to her on the way out.

The Convener: She probably has it with her, Larry.

I thank all of you for coming this morning and giving your time to the committee; we really appreciate it. I briefly suspend the meeting so that we can change over witnesses and, as Larry Flanagan said, question the cabinet secretary.

11:39

Meeting suspended.

11:43

On resuming—

The Convener: I welcome Angela Constance, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, particularly as this is her first appearance before the committee as cabinet secretary—obviously, she has been here before as a minister. I congratulate her on her appointment. We look forward to working with her on all the subjects that are of mutual interest to her and the committee.

I also welcome Alan Johnston, who is the deputy director in the learning directorate at the Scottish Government. I welcome back Graeme Logan and Janet Brown, who are staying with us for this evidence-taking session.

If members catch my eye, I will try to bring them in as soon as possible. We will try to cover all the subjects that we can in around an hour.

I believe that the cabinet secretary wants to make some opening remarks.

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning (Angela Constance): Indeed, convener. Thank you very much. I am delighted to provide the committee with an update on curriculum for excellence and our progress with the new qualifications. However, first, I will reflect more broadly and briefly on my priorities for Scottish education, particularly as this is my first appearance at the committee as the Cabinet

Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning. I hope that that will be useful to the committee.

I am sure that the committee is well aware of the progress that has been made to date in our schools. We have record exam results, more new and refurbished schools and a record number of school leavers in positive destinations. All that is good news. It is to the credit of my predecessor and the immense credit of the thousands who work on the front line in the Scottish education system that we have made such progress. It is also, of course, down to the hard work of pupils and the support of their parents. However, it is only a start.

I have already said that my number 1 priority is to raise attainment for all and to close the equity gap. In the Scotland that we seek, a person's background should never determine how well they do in education or life, but we know that, all too often, it still does. Therefore, we need to do much more to ensure that all children and young people have an equal opportunity to succeed, regardless of their background.

The committee has already heard about our attainment for all programme. At a future point, I will be pleased to provide a further update on it, as well as on the progress that we are making through the early years collaborative, the family nurse partnerships and our quality expansion of childcare.

Members are aware that the First Minister announced last month that we will provide free school lunches for every primary 1 to 3 child in Scotland. Above all else, that is an investment in our children's future because we want every child to be able to concentrate at school and to be able to achieve his or her best.

As we go forward, we will look for further opportunities to drive up attainment in all Scotland's schools. As the committee knows, we plan to introduce an education bill to the Parliament in March, and I want to ensure that it contains measures to address the attainment gap and promote equity for all our children. It is absolutely right to back up that commitment with legislation where that is needed and appropriate.

Curriculum for excellence is the best possible framework for us to raise attainment and close the equity gap. It is now how we do education in Scotland and we are seeing steady improvements in outcomes for more children and young people.

We are at an important milestone with the curriculum, and the introduction of the new qualifications is progressing well. We successfully introduced the new nationals last year and we know from the provisional figures provided by the SQA that significant numbers of pupils taking

highers this year have been studying the new highers. We have planned for that and expected it.

Last year, teachers requested flexibility and the Scottish Government was happy to accommodate it. More young people are being given the chance to sit highers. Provisional entries for highers this year suggest yet another increase. It is encouraging that those are 5 per cent up on this stage last year.

I am sure that the committee welcomes the fact that more of our young people are stretching themselves in our schools. That shows that ambition is alive and well in classrooms throughout Scotland more than ever. However, we must continue the momentum to really deliver on the senior phase and the great promise of curriculum for excellence, so we must continue to work with our partners and support those who are on the front line.

In my short time as Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, I have been hugely impressed by the motivation, energy and creativity that I have seen in the schools that I have visited. The student teachers from the University of Glasgow and the University of Strathclyde whom I met a fortnight ago showed that our next generation of teachers will be just as committed and inspiring to our children and young people. I also saw the same level of commitment during my visit to Craigroyston community high school last week. Clearly, Scotland is blessed with an outstanding and highly professional teaching workforce that has gone the extra mile in getting curriculum for excellence to where it is.

Education Scotland will continue to provide schools with the materials and support that our teachers need every step of the way. That level of support will be vital if curriculum for excellence is to match up to the expectations and ambitions of our young people.

My focus, in all that I do as education secretary, will be on the children and young people. That will be the basis of everything; it will inform every decision that I take in this post. I for one will not rest until we can be assured that each and every child has the best of chances through curriculum for excellence and the very best of education; I am sure that everyone on the committee shares that aspiration.

Thank you. I look forward to the committee's questions.

The Convener: Thank you very much, cabinet secretary. Before we move to members' questions, I have a question that comes directly from Larry Flanagan. I do not know whether you heard the evidence from the previous panel, but Mr Flanagan made a specific request about a practical measure that the Government could take.

I am not quite sure where the figure comes from, but he was looking for £1 million of extra funding for textbooks for the new higher. What is the Government's view on that?

Angela Constance: As always, the Government listens closely to the EIS. We will give Mr Flanagan's suggestion all due consideration.

We have in the past accommodated such requests. I think that Mr Russell, at the tail end of 2013, allocated £1 million for a similar purpose. You will understand that I have not come here with my purse or my cheque book. Finances are of course tight and constrained, but I give the committee and the EIS an undertaking that the Government will look closely at that pragmatic suggestion.

Colin Beattie: A recurring theme is complaints about teachers' workloads and, specifically, the workload around the introduction of curriculum for excellence. In previous evidence-taking sessions, it was indicated that the workload was expected to lessen as curriculum for excellence bedded in. However, today we have been told clearly that that is not the case and that the workload is in fact getting worse. What has the Scottish Government done to analyse teachers' workloads? Are there any proposals to reduce their workload?

Angela Constance: It is not in anyone's interests—not least those of our children or our teachers—for teachers to be overburdened with bureaucracy. We take teachers' workload issues very seriously, which is why we have the tackling bureaucracy working group. Dr Allan chairs that group, which met last week.

In general terms, with the curriculum for excellence, we have seen the move to more assessment, because exams are not the only focus for measuring learning and attainment. The programme board produced what it calls a reflections report. It is true to say that a point of learning over the past year is that there has been overassessment. That is in the interests of neither teachers nor pupils.

The SQA has taken steps to reduce by more than a third the assessment verification burden; Janet Brown will speak a bit more about that. The workload and overassessment issues are also matters that Education Scotland takes seriously when it is inspecting schools. We must be vigilant on those issues.

Dr Brown: The reduction relates partly to our discussion in the previous session about the fact that, last year, we had three verification rounds of internal assessment in schools. As a result of looking at how we not only maintain standards but ensure that we are doing only the amount of verification that is needed, we reduced that from three rounds to two.

We also used the first time slot to do support and development work with the teachers who were sent to us as nominees in order to give them examples of how to combine assessments so that, instead of doing multiple assessments, they can capture an individual's learning outcomes using only one assessment. That was one of the actions that we undertook in the period in the run-up to Christmas.

We offer to all local authorities the option to request that we give them specific CPD around the new qualifications that were introduced. Again, as we discussed earlier, that is about spreading best practice on assessment. It involves a cultural shift in how teachers do assessment, going from checking every single thing individually to being able to capture someone's abilities in one assessment and to record all those things.

Colin Beattie: It is interesting that there was a focus on overassessment. When the committee considered excessive assessment previously, it was felt that that would fall away after curriculum for excellence had come through its teething problems. A lot of it was described as teachers overassessing in order to do the best that they could for their students. However, comments that were made earlier suggested that overassessment is an increasing problem. I would have expected the opposite to be the case, particularly in view of Dr Brown's comments.

Angela Constance: Dr Brown described the proactive steps that the SQA took to reduce the amount of assessment and its inevitable burden. As I said, the curriculum for excellence programme board undertook a very reflective piece of work, and attached to that is a detailed action plan that requires specific actions of the SQA, the Government and Education Scotland.

It is about what we can all do to ensure that we learn from the first year of the new exams—I ask Graeme Logan to say more about that. When Education Scotland is inspecting schools, it has a very important role in looking at assessment and how needless bureaucracy can be tackled.

Graeme Logan: Thank you, cabinet secretary. As I outlined earlier, we have seen significant change in schools from the inspection programme and support visits. In fact, all our secondary school inspections between August and Christmas were positive. Inspectors have challenged and discussed unnecessary bureaucracy, and have raised the issue in a number of reports.

The national bodies have completed a number of key activities since the reflections report was published. For example, we have signalled key documents that teachers need to look at and there have been the route maps through assessment, which are really practical documents that suggest

which pieces of guidance teachers need to look at and in what order. That helps to ensure that teachers' time is spent as productively as possible.

Through a programme of bringing together all the headteachers, we are showcasing schools that have reduced assessment. We have seen progress on building assessment into general education rather than separating it out. Some of the most outstanding examples that have been showcased nationally are about schools looking at the rhythm of assessments across S4 to see where the different hotspots are and ensuring for the young people that they are planned and spread across the year as well as possible.

As a response to the report that Ms Constance mentioned, we produced toolkits that look at streamlining the curriculum structure in primary and in secondary 1 to 3. We have showcased the best practice that we have seen, in which planning has been reduced and the amount of paperwork for teachers has been reduced significantly, which releases more time for teachers to support individual young people.

Angela Constance: When the management board for curriculum for excellence next meets, it will look at the very issue that Mr Beattie raised. The board will want to evaluate the impact of the work that is being undertaken by Education Scotland and the SQA on the specific actions on their organisations to reduce bureaucracy. We will pay close attention to that issue.

The Convener: Thank you. Mark Griffin has a supplementary.

Mark Griffin: In the earlier session, Larry Flanagan raised the issue of the workload of teachers who will implement a new higher and a new advanced higher qualification in the same year, as a result of their still using the old higher this year. Will any extra support or advice be given to schools that will implement the new higher and new advanced higher in the same year?

12:00

Angela Constance: Extensive support for the implementation of the new highers has already been put in place. One example of that is the 140 events that the SQA has organised, which have involved more than 7,000 teachers. The SQA and others have done a lot of preparation for the move into the next academic year from June onwards. For example, various materials, guidance, specimen questions and papers for the advanced highers will be introduced this month. The SQA will run a variety of events that more than 4,000 teachers have signed up to. We are doing everything that we can to ensure that teachers are getting the right, specific support for the

implementation of the new highers and the revised advanced highers.

Mark Griffin: Do you think that the teachers who have chosen to defer and will introduce the new highers and advanced highers at the same time will have time outside their class time to attend those seminars and go through the additional material?

Angela Constance: The Government introduced increased funding and support for more continuous professional development days, which is an important part of the process as we move forward with the new qualifications.

The teachers make the decisions about what is best for their learners, and that varies between subjects. Teachers will decide whether to use the new or existing highers and it is important that those are professional decisions and that teachers make them in the round.

It is important to recognise that the number of students who participate in advanced highers is much smaller than the number who take highers. The advanced higher is quite different, in the sense that it is more about independent learning. The taught component is much smaller. We will always have a watching brief and listen carefully to the feedback that we get from stakeholders and from teachers in particular, but there is flexibility within the dual running of the new and existing highers for pragmatic reasons. It appears to me that schools seem to be using that opportunity sensibly, basing it on the needs of their learners and their particular circumstances.

The Convener: Mark Griffin's point was raised in the earlier evidence session. The flexibility that has been provided for the introduction of the new higher is welcome and approximately half have gone for the old higher and half for the new. However, the same flexibility does not exist for the new advanced higher. Why was it allowed for the higher but not for the advanced higher?

Angela Constance: As I said in my initial remarks, approximately 22,000 entries have been made for advanced highers. The cohort is much smaller than it is for highers, which have received more than 200,000 entries. The advanced higher course is quite different because the taught component is far smaller. When I met School Leaders Scotland just before Christmas, people were clear that there is no need to have a dual system for the advanced highers. There is a three-year timetable across the piece to introduce the new qualifications.

I can ask Janet Brown and Graeme Logan to say a bit more about that, but I have not yet heard a compelling case for dual running in the advanced highers, given that the numbers are

smaller and the taught component is much smaller.

Dr Brown: The nature of the advanced higher is a very deep learning. It is the next SCQF level above higher and is equivalent to the first year of university. It therefore puts a lot of demands on the individual student and is about them taking responsibility for their learning. That is why universities like students to have done an advanced higher, because that prepares them for the nature of the learning that they normally do at university.

When students have finished highers they will often migrate into a university setting anyway, where they will face a new curriculum and new challenges. From a student's perspective, things will be no different whether they move to a new advanced higher or do the existing advanced higher, because they are facing that transition into a university environment.

On the support that we are providing, we have recognised that the nature of the advanced higher is not changing. We have changed the nature of the higher, adding course assessments that are about investigations, so we have brought into the higher some of the capacities and skills development that have historically been in the advanced higher. There is therefore a bigger change from the old higher to the new higher than there is in the context of the new advanced higher, which has a similar structure to the old advanced higher. The nature of the change is by no means as great.

In some advanced higher subjects there are bigger changes in the curriculum. That is why we are focusing on those subjects and providing support in the events that started last week. We are running advanced higher events from 26 January until April, which will focus on what has changed from the existing advanced higher to the new advanced higher.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): Colin Beattie asked about workload and assessment. I was interested in what Graeme Logan and Janet Brown said about the work that has been done. Although work has been going on, the written evidence that we have had from a number of headmasters and schools, including Boroughmuir high school, George Watson's college, Hamilton grammar school and Gleniffer high school in Paisley, all contain a similar theme on assessment.

The headteacher of Boroughmuir high school said:

"The same skills are being tested too frequently",

and the headteacher at George Watson's said:

"new assessment requirements place too much emphasis on establishing basic standards rather than enabling pupils to strive for true excellence."

Is there an issue for the management board in that regard? It is not necessarily that we are testing the wrong thing, but are we perhaps going overboard in requiring something to be proved to the nth degree rather than assessing a range of the skills that pupils are expected to develop over the course of the new higher? I expect that the same issue arises in the context of national 4 and 5.

Angela Constance: The management board has an important role in scrutinising the impact of the actions that result from the reflections group's report. We have to be hyper-vigilant about getting the right level of assessment on the right aspects. Janet Brown might comment on that.

Dr Brown: We need to ensure that a particular outcome is not assessed multiple times. That is never the intention. There are good practices, which we are starting to share, because the existence proof is there from last year's national 5s. Just before Christmas we shared existing student work on higher, giving examples of how an outcome can be assessed once so that people do not have to keep assessing it.

Teachers use their professional judgment in determining when to assess something. The assessment that is done as part of the assessment is for learning programme is done during the course of teaching. If we can have that philosophy in relation to ensuring that students are meeting the standard at qualification level, we should be able to take the assessment that kids do during their regular work and use it, on a sampling basis, to prove to the SQA—or to teachers—that they are meeting the standard and that teachers are teaching to standard. That will reduce the amount of assessment.

Liam McArthur: I think that Colin Beattie first made the point that we had rather hoped and assumed that the problems that we saw last year would be ironed out in due course. Notwithstanding Graeme Logan's point that the investigations that Education Scotland has carried out across a range of schools have indicated that the assessment problem is abating, we are getting feedback from individual schools—a number of which would, I would have thought, see themselves as exemplars—that still seem to be identifying assessment as a problem, perhaps for different reasons. The fact that it is coming up even at this stage means that it is a persistent problem.

Dr Brown: We go and talk to schools. We have a CFE liaison team that visits all schools, so we will follow up on all the pieces of feedback. One thing to remember is that schools are doing

internal assessment not only for national 5s but for higher. We need to understand how the two aspects interplay.

Mary Scanlon: I will be asking the same two questions that I asked earlier. I have already had a response from Dr Brown and Graeme Logan. I say that to save some time—unless they have anything new to add.

I want to ask about the articulation from the higher to the advanced higher. We have a paper from the Scottish Parliament information centre that includes a table that shows the higher course, for which there are more than 3,000 entries. If we look at the percentage of students who have chosen to do the new higher, we see that the subjects at the very bottom of the list—those for which the percentage of students doing the new higher is less than 40 per cent—are biology, physics and chemistry. I appreciate that that has been touched on.

We have a submission from Madras college in St Andrews, which sums up a thread that runs through our briefing papers. It says:

"we have been given to understand that, in many subjects, the old Highers do not articulate well with the new Advanced Highers."

That is a cause for concern. It is only fair to mention the view of the national parent forum of Scotland, as it is not represented at today's meeting. It says:

"it is unfortunate that there is nothing currently available as many parents will be looking for this now as prelims are underway in many schools and parents will be looking for this information now to support their children to revise, as exams start in April."

I would like you to comment on the lack of information and the concern about the STEM subjects, the new higher in which have a lower percentage of entries than other subjects. If the understanding of schools such as Madras college is that pupils who do the old higher will have greater difficulty articulating to the advanced higher, I would like to know how you can allay those concerns.

Angela Constance: Ms Scanlon is right to draw attention to the fact that there is variance over the range of subjects when it comes to entries for the new higher. In one subject, 84 per cent of students will do the new higher, whereas in computing science the figure is 30 per cent. That is to be expected, because the STEM subjects such as computing science and the other sciences are the ones that have undergone the biggest change in assessment and content. That was one of the reasons why flexibility was allowed in the first place.

It is important to state that a young person who wishes to progress to the advanced higher will not

be disadvantaged, regardless of whether they are doing the existing higher or the new higher. A higher is a higher, and our existing higher are very good. They are gold standard qualifications that are highly regarded by students, parents and employers, but because the world never stands still we have to revise our qualifications before they become out of date.

The new higher will have more synergies with the advanced higher and the curriculum that is being taught throughout the school. We must recognise that professional teachers are very good at managing progression from one course to another, so no student should be disadvantaged. It is important that, when we are explaining to teachers and supporting them, they get the right kind of continuous professional development, particularly in those subjects where the change has been the biggest.

I will ask Janet Brown to speak about the SQA website.

12:15

Mary Scanlon: You said that there is greater synergy between the new higher and the advanced higher, but what is being done to address the lesser synergy between the old higher and the advanced higher? I want to make sure that something is in place to fill that gap.

I have already heard from Janet Brown about the website, so unless she has anything to add I am happy with that.

What are you doing to support teachers to bridge the gap between the old higher and the new advanced higher?

Angela Constance: That is the way to articulate it: whether it is a new higher or one that is already in place, it needs to lead appropriately to the advanced higher. Those are issues for teachers to manage in the classroom, and teachers are very good at doing that. The purpose of the many SQA events that are being attended by thousands of teachers is to address the issue raised by Mrs Scanlon and to ensure that we give the right level of support to teachers, who in turn can give the right level of support to students.

Mary Scanlon: Perhaps you can look at the website and make up your own mind about that.

Angela Constance: I will do that.

Dr Brown: I have a specific point on the website. During January and February, the similarities and differences between the current advanced higher and the new advanced higher will be published on the website. They are not all there at the moment—some are up already—but the work will be complete by the end of February.

Mary Scanlon: I think that we can understand why parents would want that information ready for the prelims as well as finals.

Let us move on. Last week we heard evidence from the learned societies group. I appreciate Larry Flanagan's point that a lot of what they said applies UK-wide; nonetheless, much applies to Scotland, and this brings us back to the STEM subjects.

We have heard about the significant shortage of teachers in STEM subjects. Yesterday, Colin Beattie and I were in Inverness, where we heard that pupils in the Highlands are not able to get into Scottish medical schools—I do not know how much of that relates to them not being able to do some of the sciences. The main concern last night was that Moray Council had to close some schools, including Elgin high school, because it had no teachers. I have never heard such a thing in my life. Does that issue apply just to Moray? Is it one that you are aware of?

We had a conversation with Larry Flanagan who said that there is no problem recruiting people to teacher training but that the difficulty is in retaining those students in the teaching profession. Is the overall scenario something that you are aware of, and what is the Government doing to address the issue? No local authority wants to close schools.

Angela Constance: No, and neither would any parent want to face that experience.

There are several issues. I am aware that in parts of Scotland there are shortages of teachers in specific subjects. Such shortages are indeed more likely to be in STEM subjects and in rural areas of Scotland, although there are issues in places such as Aberdeen, too.

Teacher unemployment is very low in Scotland—the lowest in the UK. Local authorities are the employers of teachers, and they have a number of options open to them. For example, within the parameters of national pay bargaining, they can offer some financial inducements to recruit people and help them to relocate.

Indeed, I heard someone from Moray Council on the radio yesterday talking about how the council is trying to promote Moray as a good place to live—I am sure that it is—and how the council helps with relocation expenses. Some authorities have financial inducements as well. The lady from Moray Council also spoke very effectively—I know that other councils try to do this as well—about developing the non-teaching staff. For example, classroom assistants may wish to go on and teach. They have already invested their lives in a particular area, so for them to go on and study to become teachers is an effective way of dealing with teacher shortages.

From my perspective—I appreciate that this does not necessarily help with the here and now—at the turn of the year, I made an announcement that we were increasing the number of people going into initial teacher education at primary school and at secondary school level. We will have to develop more finesse in managing the number of people entering teacher education but, in doing so, we need to think more about how to help with teacher shortages in particular rural locations and for particular subjects. We are having a very active discussion with universities, including the University of the Highlands and Islands, about how we move forward with that agenda.

Siobhan McMahon: Cabinet secretary, you spoke about teacher numbers and teacher training and you mentioned the welcome announcement that you made at the turn of the year. We heard in evidence this morning, though, that perhaps what was needed was a tracking system for probationary teachers to see where they go after they get their training. Larry Flanagan said that teachers might go abroad—as is their right—or they might not necessarily go into teaching, which means that we invest a lot of money into training but we do not get the teachers. Are you coming up with a tracking system? Is that something that the Government is looking at?

Angela Constance: That specific suggestion has not been made directly to me.

I suppose that there are always issues across the public sector when people choose to go to sunnier climes or to move elsewhere in the UK. Scotland is a good place to teach—we invest heavily in the teaching workforce and we have very low teacher unemployment compared with elsewhere in the UK. The difference in the figures is quite stark. According to the last figures that I saw, 40 teachers right across Scotland are claiming jobseekers allowance. That is less than 1 per cent of the overall teaching workforce, so there is very low teacher unemployment—although that raises challenges when there is a shortage of teachers in particular parts of the country or in particular subjects.

If there is evidence that we are training teachers and they are not continuing with their chosen vocation, we will always look at that, but I would be looking for some substantial evidence. Scotland is a good place to teach.

Graeme Logan: The fact that our teachers have that guaranteed year when they come out of their initial teacher education has been recognised by the OECD as a world-leading entitlement, so we are off to a strong start there. We look at teacher numbers through workforce planning and modelling. I am certainly not aware of substantial

numbers of teachers exiting Scotland at the end of that first year, but we can look into that further.

The Convener: If there is any further information that you can give to the committee, we would be grateful.

Chic Brodie: I have just one question. We heard from Dr Janet Brown in a previous meeting that in any programme such as curriculum for excellence

“The first year is always difficult, and the second year will be better.”—[*Official Report, Education and Culture Committee*, 30 September 2014; c 16.]

ADES said in its submission:

“In conclusion, ADES would advise the Education Committee that CfE continues to develop and mature in a manner that supports the needs of children and young people”.

Change is a constant and that is what we are going through. Despite that, we seem to get some excited commentary. Some of it is justified, as was the case this morning when we talked about communication with local authorities, but there was also some agitation last week about the appeals system.

Can you confirm, for us and for the wider audience, that no pupil is at a disadvantage, regardless of whether they went to a state school or a private school? Do you agree with how Ken Cunningham, general secretary of School Leaders Scotland, described the issue? He said that it is a

“bit of a red herring”.

Angela Constance: I concur with that view. It is important to recognise that we moved away from the old appeals system having consulted heavily about it, and there was a great deal of consensus about the need to change from that old system.

There were concerns that the old system was overused, and that children who were absent from their exams due to a bereavement or an illness were disadvantaged in comparison with children who, it was felt, had not done as well in their exam on the day as they could have done. There were also concerns about how the old appeals system was impacting on learning and teaching, with a lot of time being spent gathering evidence in anticipation of an appeal, although the system was meant to be dealing with exceptional cases.

We moved forward to a new system. It is important to mention that it is in two parts. First, there is the pre-results part of the system. Should a child, in exceptional and often tragic circumstances, not be able to sit their exam due to illness or a bereavement, the teachers and the school can submit alternative evidence, and those children, like everybody else, will get their exam results on the same day and they will not be disadvantaged.

Secondly, there is the post-results service, which is new and which was subject to much commentary last week. I agree that some of that commentary was disingenuous, and I make it clear to the committee that the people who make a decision about whether to contact the SQA and whether to pursue an appeal are teachers. That is a professional decision made by them. Indeed, the SQA accepts appeals only from teachers, schools and colleges; it does not accept appeals from individuals.

Siobhan McMahon: I have a follow-up question about the post-results service. We have a briefing from SPICE showing some statistics from the old system until the introduction of the new system. I will read this out and then ask for comment.

"Statistics show that 1.6% of eligible entries requested a Results Service review. Of these, 25.7% resulted in a grade change. These figures do not include 'exceptional circumstances'—

which the cabinet secretary has just mentioned.

"In comparison, in 2013, 5% of Standard Grade results were appealed, as were 11% of Highers and Advanced Highers. 43% of appeals in Standard Grade were successful, as were 43% of Higher appeals and 48% of Advanced Higher appeals."

Are you concerned about the disparity in those figures?

Angela Constance: No, I am not, as those figures demonstrate the case for changing to a new system. Having a system where there were so many appeals raised questions. The fact that the number of appeals has fallen is to be expected, and it is positive. Appeals are being made under the new system with a higher expectation of their being successful. I cannot say that I am surprised by those figures.

Siobhan McMahon: We have heard about comments being made to the committee via Facebook by those who are sitting the highers. There seems to be a bit of confusion about the appeals process. I will read a sentence from the comments, although I know that the appeals process is not abolished, and I am not suggesting for one minute that it has been.

"By abolishing the appeal procedure young people are now pressurised into performing their best during one exam after a 12 month long course."

The expectation is not only that a pupil will be under pressure throughout the year with continuous assessment but that they will have to perform to their best at exam level. I was one of those who went through the higher still and higher phase, so I understand some, if not all, of that pressure. We all know that things can go wrong, but, whether it is through misinformation or something else, pupils do not feel that they will get

an appeal, particularly if they are in a state school. Is that not a concern?

12:30

Angela Constance: Pupils who are in a state school will have access to the post-results service. We can rely on the professionalism of our teaching staff to deliver that.

You make an interesting point about the pressure on young people, which is related to the reasons why we have curriculum for excellence and have changed to new exams. While we have not eradicated exams—coping under pressure and working to a deadline are part of life experience—the balance is different. There are also various units that are assessed, so when it comes to getting a qualification, the exam is not the be-all and end-all. Typically, with a higher, three units are assessed, and there is then the external assessment, which is usually an assignment and an exam paper. The balance between assessment and exams in the new qualifications is different. It should not all be about pressure on young people at an exam, although I acknowledge that, as exams still exist, there will be an element of pressure on young people, and it is important that young people are supported through that.

Does Janet Brown want to add anything?

Dr Brown: I reinforce the point about the balance between internal and external assessment. Members can see from looking at pupils moving from national 1 to national 5 and through to higher and advanced higher that the examination is introduced at national 5; there is no examination at national 4. Although the examination component is smaller than it was under the old higher, it is still a significant component because it allows a candidate to demonstrate that they can perform on the day in an exam situation, which is what they will be expected to do when they go to university or on to their next challenge. However, that is balanced against the internal assessment that is undertaken throughout the school system.

On your point about the appeals system no longer being there, Ms McMahon, we have a post-results service now. The old appeals system—

Siobhan McMahon: Sorry, but I did not say that it was no longer there. I read out a quote. The point is about miscommunication.

Dr Brown: I want to ensure that everyone understands that the old appeals system has gone. Under the previous system, schools undertook multiple assessments as preparation, just in case a candidate did not quite make the grade that they thought they would make. Schools sent us information and material that was

prescribed by us because it had to meet the standard. That is why so many candidates applied for appeals.

What we have now goes back to the original philosophy of why the appeals system was introduced in the first place a long time ago: as the cabinet secretary indicated, it is for children who are in really dire circumstances and cannot sit the examination. Under circumstances in which the school demonstrates an exceptional case, we are able to look at a variety of evidence. We look at not only a prelim but the coursework. We look at how that individual child has done, and are able to give them the exact grade that they deserve. That is a different approach. The exceptional circumstances in those cases include a death in the family or a severe illness, for example.

We also have a post-results service that allows for a check. If a teacher thinks that a candidate should have done significantly better than they have done, we can look at what happened in the external examination component that they took. The system now is very different from the system in the past.

Siobhan McMahon: I understand that. You have explained that to the committee and we all understand it. However, do you accept that there is, at best, miscommunication going on here? You have explained the appeals process to me and, as I said, I understand it completely, but even if it is not impacting the statistics—as the cabinet secretary believes to be the case—and even if the cabinet secretary thinks that it is a more robust system, there is still confusion about it, given the comments that we have received in evidence in the committee.

Angela Constance: I accept that we always have to strive to do more to communicate better, particularly in a period of change and particularly with parents and young people.

Mark Griffin: I have a couple of questions on the number of pupils who have chosen to stick with the old highs this year.

The Scottish Government was previously of the opinion that—I quote the Minister for Learning, Science and Scotland's Languages, Alasdair Allan—a “small minority” of pupils would choose to sit the old higher. Will you comment on the number of pupils who have chosen to sit the old higher and on why the Scottish Government's view was previously that only a “small minority” of pupils would choose to do so?

Angela Constance: First, it is not that pupils choose which highs to do in isolation. That decision is taken by teachers—the professionals in the classroom. Of course, we expect them to do that in consultation with pupils and parents, but it is important to emphasise that it is teachers and

schools that make decisions about whether the new or the existing higher in any subject will be pursued this year.

I have come at this with a fresh pair of eyes. Given the fact that we have agreed to a dual system, it does not surprise me that a significant number of people this year are continuing with the existing higher. I am pleased with the overall figure of 55 per cent of pupils doing the new higher; that is to be welcomed. Of course there are significant variations from subject to subject, but again that is to be expected, and I think that it demonstrates the importance of giving teachers the flexibility to exercise their professional judgment. It is a hallmark of curriculum for excellence that we trust our professionally trained teachers, who operate on the front line in the classroom, to make those decisions.

Mark Griffin: We heard earlier from Jane Peckham of NASUWT, who welcomed the flexibility that has been given but questioned whether all teaching professionals were actually given that flexibility and were able to choose what they thought was best for their pupils. Are you confident that all schools and headteachers gave teachers the flexibility to choose whether their pupils were in the right place to move on to the new highs or should stick to the existing higher?

Angela Constance: It is difficult for me to speak conclusively on behalf of local government, which, at the end of day, employs teachers and headteachers.

Let me speak about my experience of visiting schools. Last week, I went to Craigroyston high school in Edinburgh, where I met a number of principal teachers and the headteacher. In their discussions with me, the principal teachers gave a very clear account of the decisions that they had made and why they made them.

For example, the principal teacher for drama and the arts said that, for the various subjects in her faculty, the new higher was largely being used and the principal teacher of English talked about how they had moved to the new higher. However, the principal teacher for computing science, whose faculty covered computing science, business administration and other subjects, talked about how, with the changes to the computing science higher, he had decided to take advantage of the dual system. He spoke favourably of the support materials that were available to him and how the extra time had been beneficial in allowing him to acquaint himself with that information and the new content, and it made sense to him to introduce things over two years. From my experience, therefore, I have seen evidence of teachers making those decisions.

George Adam: Mr Griffin has raised an important point that was also raised by Mr Flanagan, who said that, in theory, a lot of local authorities supported the idea of devolving decisions on highers to the schools. He said that that was what a majority ended up doing. He also said that it can be quite difficult to deliver national policy at a local level, because although a lot of local authorities are doing great work, some are simply creating a bureaucracy.

During our discussions on the budget, parents groups highlighted the importance of how education in Scotland is delivered in future and said that other approaches should be considered. No one is talking about redesigning local authorities, but could local authorities look at best practice and find a better way of working together to ensure that everyone is getting the best that they can possibly get?

Angela Constance: The reality is that we have 32 local authorities, and there is a variance in practice and in the implementation of the new highers. Indeed, in some areas, that variance can be seen subject by subject; as I demonstrated with reference to Craigroyston high school, different decisions are being taken on different subjects, and rightly so. In some local authorities, schools will do things more collectively as schools, while other local authorities will take more of a blanket approach.

I have had meetings with ADES, which has produced its 2020 vision for education. As part of that work, it has proposed a national performance framework; its membership has different ideas about how that could be pursued, but I am very interested in the idea of a framework that sets out very clear national positions. Of course, there will always have to be local flexibility.

Liam McArthur: Convener, I want to come back to a point that you and Mark Griffin made about the new highers. One of the characteristics of the roll-out of national 4s and national 5s is that we as a committee found ourselves returning to the issue. Although the cabinet secretary's predecessor was at pains to point out that he responded to any request that was made to him with additional resources, deep audits or whatever, it felt as though we were constantly chasing a problem over the horizon. With regard to the new highers, the quite sensible decision was made to allow flexibility course by course and school by school, and although the cabinet secretary herself has expressed no surprise at the numbers who have sought to stick with the existing highers instead of moving to the new ones, it was clearly a surprise to Mr Russell and Dr Allan, given what they said on the record about their expectation of the numbers involved.

Given where we are and given that the principle has been accepted, I cannot understand why the cabinet secretary would not want to roll that principle forward with regard to the advanced highers. Even if the predictions are borne out and the numbers who stick to the current advanced highers turn out to be fairly minimal in a cohort that is itself smaller, nevertheless, the teachers and schools where that applies have, I presume, taken the decision that that is the appropriate advanced higher for their pupils to do.

As there is acceptance of the principle, which is a reflection of lessons learned from the roll-out of national 4s and national 5s, I am struggling to understand why we are reverting to a situation that could well result in our doing the same as we did last year: chasing a problem that is over the horizon. That did not happen across the board, but it did happen for particular subjects and in particular schools.

Janet Brown's point that the new advanced higher reflects more the jump from school to university learning is perhaps fair from a pupil perspective but, at university, the lecturers and tutors are comfortable with the curriculum and are not trying to put in place something that is new to them as well as to the pupils. It is the uncertainty among staff that has had a knock-on impact on the pupils. That reinforces the sense that we are again trying to accelerate the process when it seems to be accepted that providing a bit more flexibility would be in everybody's interests and would ensure that the new qualifications were implemented successfully and smoothly for everybody.

12:45

Angela Constance: I go back to the history of curriculum for excellence. As I said, I have had a chance to look at things with a fresh pair of eyes. On your point about the implementation group and the management board, now is a good time for us to be doing a bit more horizon planning and for us not to feel that we are constantly revisiting the same issues. Not everybody agrees on every point, but my overall or global impression, whether it is from ADES or the teaching unions, is that things are certainly less pressured this year than they were last year.

I do not want to reiterate completely what was said earlier, but Janet Brown set out in detail that the move to the new advanced highers involves less change. It is a smaller cohort of pupils and the courses have a smaller taught component. I have not heard an overwhelming case put to me that we need dual running of advanced highers, although we are not complacent and we will always listen carefully.

Curriculum for excellence has moved forward and progressed through partnership, discussion and consultation for well over a decade. We now have a three-year timetable for the qualifications, which is an important milestone. We need to get the job done. I will never close my ears to suggestions or problems, but I have not heard an overwhelming case for the dual running of advanced highers.

Liam McArthur: Some of what you say about the numbers and the differences sounds entirely reasonable, but it actually sounds very similar to the case that Mike Russell made on the shift to national 4s and national 5s and the shift to new highers. As Mark Griffin said, Mr Russell anticipated that a small minority would stick with the old highers but, in the event, it was a larger number—it was almost 50 per cent.

You may well be right that, because the cohort is reduced and the type of learning changes for advanced higher, a very small minority will be involved. However, I presume that, for that small minority, having dual running for another year would mean that they would feel less like guinea pigs in a process and would have a fair crack at the suite of qualifications that their ability entitles them to expect. Further, that approach would not derail a process that everybody admitted was going to take three years to implement through the senior phase.

Would it not be a helpful steer for teachers, pupils and parents if the Scottish Government said that it was open to considering possible dual running, rather than getting to the situation that we were in with the roll-out of national 4s and national 5s, which as I said seemed to be a constant response to crises that were bursting out here, there and pretty much everywhere?

Angela Constance: It was not a surprise to anyone that there was a dual system for highers. The national qualifications have run alongside the intermediates, and we are moving into the last year for intermediate 2. I suppose that it has never been part of the plan to have dual running for advanced highers. At this late stage, we would have to be cautious that introducing dual running for advanced highers did not have unintended consequences. In itself, introducing dual running could be quite disruptive to the planning process that is taking place in various parts of the education system.

Before I ask Janet Brown to say more about the potential disruption of changing course now, I will ask Graeme Logan to say a bit more about support.

Graeme Logan: Another point that is worth bearing in mind is that the last cohort of pre-CFE learners will exit the system this June. In other

words, a benefit of dual-running for the current sixth years was that they began being taught before the roll-out of the CFE programme. After they exit the system, all the children in the system will have come through the CFE qualifications suite, which is an advantage.

The Convener: Is that correct? East Renfrewshire Council carried on with the old system. Every school in that area delayed the new system for a full year, and there might be other schools that did the same thing. I do not understand why you are saying that the current sixth years who are leaving the system are the last cohort of pre-CFE learners because, clearly, the fifth years in East Renfrewshire are still following the old system.

Graeme Logan: Obviously, there is that one distinction. We can talk more about the tailored support. Let me clarify that: nationally, they are the last cohort. I am sorry if that was confusing. We are engaged with supporting East Renfrewshire Council and finding additional ways in which we can work with it on the progression from the existing higher to the new advanced higher.

The support materials that we are publishing, which have been produced by teachers for teachers, are coming into the system. As Janet Brown said, there are fewer changes with regard to advanced higher content. Of course, the nature of studying for advanced higher is much more independent, as well.

Education Scotland has visited individual secondary schools to provide tailored support. Up to Christmas, we had been in 174 of the 370 secondary schools. I reiterate that we are keen to offer tailored support to any individual department that feels that it has specific support needs or any teacher who feels that they have particular needs with regard to the further implementation of curriculum for excellence. Tailored support has been a particular success of the programme, and the offer continues to be there.

Liam McArthur: On the post-results service, I heard what you were saying in response to Siobhan McMahon and Chic Brodie. One of the concerns that came through from some pupils' feedback was that, with a two-year higher, there is every likelihood that some pupils will find that the new higher is the first formal serious exam that they take, with all the stresses and pressures around that, even with prelims having been taken. Is additional support being provided to ensure that pupils who are being encouraged to follow that path and end up taking the new higher as their first formal exam do not hit the buffers and find that they are not at the place where they should be by that stage?

Angela Constance: Janet, do you want to speak to that?

Dr Brown: That relates to teacher judgment. The teacher will be aware that a student should be absolutely ready for the higher when they sit it. It is one of the things that teachers are doing well—they are selecting the right students to go through the two-year higher course and not the national 5 course. They are ensuring that candidates are absolutely ready not only to undertake the internal assessment but to deal with on-the-day performance. There are ways in which teachers do that. Graeme Logan might want to talk about that from the point of view of curriculum design.

Graeme Logan: There is more variety in assessment methods than there has ever been. Young people are assessed in lots of different ways throughout their broad general education, and there are still tests—teachers choose when it is appropriate to test children's progress and their skills. It is all about the design of the curriculum. In secondary schools some really good support is provided through study support courses and so on to prepare young people for exam conditions and to ensure that conditions do not come as a surprise.

The Convener: Okay. Thank you very much, cabinet secretary. We appreciate your coming along to assist with our discussions and our examination of the new highers system under CFE.

12:55

Meeting suspended.

12:56

On resuming—

Subordinate Legislation

Children (Performances and Activities) (Scotland) Regulations 2014 (SSI 2014/372)

The Convener: Item 3 is consideration of a Scottish statutory instrument.

Before members comment on the instrument, I will make one. If you remember, we recently made a comment to the Minister for Children and Young People and her officials about consultation in relation to two instruments; there had been none on one instrument, and on the other there had been consultation but no explanation of what happened as a result of it. Although I have no problem with SSI 2014/372, I am afraid to say that the policy note states that

“A public consultation on the proposals ... took place”

but does not tell us what the outcome of the consultation was nor what was changed as a result of it. We received a promise from officials and the minister that lessons had been learned, or would be learned, and that the approach would be changed. Unfortunately, in this case that does not seem to have happened.

I throw that in there, because committee members and I questioned the minister and officials on the matter when they came before us. Do members have any comments?

Mary Scanlon: I do not think that the minister has passed the test on this occasion and could do better. Given that you raised the issue previously, I would have hoped that the approach would have been corrected and that there would have been something quite different in front of us today. I support your comments.

The Convener: I should say to members that the clerks approached the Government for a response, knowing full well that we had raised the issue previously. An email response was forthcoming, which explained what had happened in the consultation, what responses had been received and what changes had been made. The fact that that information was available and was given to the clerks makes the situation worse, because it should have been included in the information that we received initially, given the promise that had been made to the committee.

Although such things may be small, they matter. I suggest therefore that we write to the minister to point out that it is, given the promises that we received, disappointing that the same point about lack of information on consultation has arisen in

relation to another instrument. Are members agreed?

Liam McArthur: Are we seeking to annul the instrument?

The Convener: No. We will write to the minister to make the general point about consultation on regulations.

Liam McArthur: I agree with that approach.

Gordon MacDonald: We should emphasise that the information was available.

Mary Scanlon: Yes, indeed.

The Convener: That is a relevant point; it makes what happened more irritating, to be honest.

Chic Brodie: One of the things that annoyed me when I was on the Subordinate Legislation Committee, or whatever it is called now, was the business of timelining things. The Government sometimes did not meet the 40-day rule. I am sure that this is not the first time that this has happened. I think that it is right to write to the minister, but somebody somewhere needs to get their act together.

The Convener: I am not making a point about this instrument; I am making a general point that we have raised before that has not been addressed in relation to this instrument. I ask for the committee's permission to write to the minister on that basis. Are we agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: Does the committee agree to make no recommendation to Parliament on the instrument?

Members indicated agreement.

European Union Engagement

13:00

The Convener: The final item is to appoint a European reporter, following Clare Adamson's resignation from the committee, and to consider the committee's EU priorities.

I invite nominations for an EU reporter.

Chic Brodie: I nominate Siobhan McMahon.

Liam McArthur: I second that. It is an ambush.

The Convener: Chic Brodie has nominated Siobhan McMahon and Liam McArthur has seconded the nomination. Thank you very much, although I do not think that seconding is necessary.

As there are no other nominations, is Siobhan McMahon happy to accept?

Siobhan McMahon: I freely accept.

The Convener: We will make sure that it is on the record that you freely accept. Thank you very much, Siobhan.

Does the committee agree that Siobhan McMahon be appointed as our EU reporter?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: We must now consider a response to the European and External Relations Committee relating to our EU priorities. Our proposed response is included in the committee papers. As members have no questions about our response, is the committee content to agree that we send it to the European and External Relations Committee?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: Thank you very much for your attendance at what has been a relatively long meeting.

Meeting closed at 13:00.

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