



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

EDUCATION AND CULTURE COMMITTEE

Tuesday 21 April 2015

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EDUCATION AND CULTURE COMMITTEE

9th 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:

Grahame Barn (Civil Engineering Contractors Association Scotland)

James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP) (Committee Substitute)

Phil Ford (Construction Industry Training Board Scotland)

Barry McCulloch (Federation of Small Businesses)

Paul Mitchell (Scottish Building Federation)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Terry Shevlin

LOCATION

The Sir Alexander Fleming Room (CR3)

Scottish Parliament

Education and Culture Committee

Tuesday 21 April 2015

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:34]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Stewart Maxwell): Good morning. I welcome everybody to the ninth meeting in 2015 of the Education and Culture Committee.

We have apologies from Liam McArthur and Chic Brodie. I welcome James Dornan, who is here as a substitute for Chic Brodie.

Our first item is to consider whether to take item 3 in private. Do members agree to do so?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: I should have said, as I always do, that we should ensure that electronic devices, including phones, are switched off so that they do not interfere with the sound system.

Educational Attainment

09:34

The Convener: Our next item is to take evidence on the role of employers as part of our inquiry into attainment. I welcome to the committee Grahame Barn from the Civil Engineering Contractors Association Scotland; Phil Ford from the Construction Industry Training Board Scotland; Barry McCulloch from the Federation of Small Businesses; and Paul Mitchell from the Scottish Building Federation. Thank you very much for your written submissions, which were very interesting.

We will move straight to questions.

Mary Scanlon (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I will open with a question on what skills employers are looking for when they recruit young people straight from school or college. I am thinking about the importance of soft skills, as they are often known, and of formal qualifications. Could you give us a brief introduction on that?

Phil Ford (Construction Industry Training Board Scotland): Primarily, employers are looking for young people who have a good work ethic: those who are able to turn up on time, communicate effectively, take the initiative and work as part of a team.

There has been an issue about some of the technical skills that young people have before they go on to their apprenticeship, but the skills for work programme and work experience provide opportunities to better prepare young people for a career in the construction industry. More opportunities will come out of the "Commission for Developing Scotland's Young Workforce Interim Report"—the Wood commission report.

Mary Scanlon: If someone aged 16 comes along to you and interviews very well, how can you tell whether that person has a good work ethic and can work in a team? Can they bring anything to the interview by way of experience or qualifications that would help?

Phil Ford: We can look at what they have done in school. Have they done a skills for work course or have they had work experience in the construction industry? Do they have an interest in the industry? Have they done their research to find out a little bit about the job that they are applying for?

We encourage young people to look for work experience opportunities rather than just sign up for a modern apprenticeship in construction straight away. They should find out what it is really like to work in the sector before making a commitment. That also reduces the risk for the

employer. The last thing that we want is for a young person to start work and find that it is not the career for them. It is better that they test it out beforehand.

Paul Mitchell (Scottish Building Federation): I often hear simple, basic things from employers. Does the candidate look the interviewer in the eye when coming in to see them and shaking their hand? Are they tenacious? The construction industry is one of the few remaining industries in which people can come and chap the door to see whether there is an apprenticeship, leave their CV and come back the next week to try again.

Employers are really looking for soft skills. I am not sure to what extent they look for academic qualifications when they judge a candidate's suitability for an apprenticeship.

Mary Scanlon: Something in the FSB's written submission was a wee bit of a criticism of teachers. Paragraph 6 says:

"Undeniably, developing the skills and knowledge of teachers in areas they are likely to have little experience in (employability/skills and enterprise ...) is a challenge ... Whether the funding provided by the Scottish Government will allow teachers time out of the classroom to ... create closer links with business remains to be seen."

You seem to be a bit sceptical about the role of teachers in preparing young people for employment. Could you expand on that point? Could schools do more in preparation?

Barry McCulloch (Federation of Small Businesses): Our general point is that the Wood commission report presents a challenge for the education system and for businesses. It is fair to say that, until now, schools and colleges have not been adequately preparing young people for the world of work. That is the crux of the Wood commission report: how do we better prepare young people for that environment?

The particular point in that paragraph is that teachers have traditionally been asked to focus on qualifications—whether highers or, now, nationals. In line with the Wood commission report and the Government's response to it, teachers are now being asked to build in different competencies, such as soft skills or attitude and behaviours. That in itself is a challenge: it is about how we get teachers to expose themselves to that different world and how we get businesses involved at the same time. At the moment, we do not know how to do that. It is a massive cultural change. However, we are fairly confident that, with the near £30 million that the Government has allocated to that agenda, there will be enough time for teachers in particular to reflect on that.

Mary Scanlon: Are barriers being broken down? Is the pattern of silo working being broken down between schools, which, as you say, focus

on qualifications, whereas business is something that people do after they go out the door and leave school? What needs to be done to bring them together?

I will finish by asking whether there are any specific skills gaps that you think need to be addressed. Again, that could involve working with schools, because we need to improve work with schools to prepare youngsters for the workplace. Are there specific skills gaps in the context of breaking down barriers between business and schools?

Grahame Barn (Civil Engineering Contractors Association Scotland): Before I answer, I should declare an interest: my wife is a teacher, so I understand some of the issues that teachers have. From an employer's perspective, it can be difficult to engage with schools, because employers do not know quite how to go about it and they are not certain whether they are encouraged to go into schools and whether, if they are, they have to go through certain checks before they can speak to young people. We need to better understand how employers can engage with schools. I think that employers wish to engage with schools and that teachers and the leaders of schools see that there is a role for their schools in working with local employers, but it is a question of how we can get that together. A few barriers need to be overcome.

Mary Scanlon: Could that happen at careers fairs?

Grahame Barn: Yes, that is one element, but we also need to get into schools more regularly, because at a careers fair we would be competing with tourism and all the other sectors, and we would get only 10 or 15 minutes every year to make a pitch. We need a bit more than that to be able to show the breadth of careers in construction. Sometimes, careers people believe that construction is just for a certain type of student or pupil, but we offer a breadth of careers for those who have degrees at one level down to general operatives at another. It is a huge industry with huge potential and huge requirements for young people, and 10 minutes once a year does not give us the opportunity to make our case.

Mary Scanlon: Maybe you could bring in more women at the same time.

Grahame Barn: Absolutely.

Phil Ford: I attended a developing Scotland's young workforce event at the Carnegie UK Trust, which was also attended by a number of headteachers, and I did not sense any lack of willingness to engage with employers; there was certainly a lot of interest around the table. There is a greater understanding among teachers of academic routes into the industry and it is

incumbent on organisations such as CITB, through our network of field-based careers advisers and by working closely with Skills Development Scotland and other careers advisers, to highlight the scale of the available opportunities in construction to young people and to let them know where a career in construction could take them. We have a construction ambassador programme that trains up people from the industry to go into primary and secondary schools to talk to kids about their experiences of working in the industry. That has been a powerful tool for helping teachers, careers advisers and young people to understand what a career in construction is like and where it can take them.

The Convener: Is there still a misunderstanding between industry and the education sector, in that teachers sometimes do not understand the difference between construction, engineering and all the different elements of the sector?

Phil Ford: Yes, I think that that is an issue. We need to work closely with the education system to outline the scale of opportunities and the career pathways across different sectors, because people can start off in one area and move into others. We need to make that much clearer.

Construction is changing. We have off-site manufacture, building information modelling is coming through and we have new technologies, so we need to give teachers and the education sector information about the scale of the opportunities that they can promote to young people.

The Convener: Are they doing it?

Phil Ford: As I said, we have not found a lack of willingness to engage, although levels of awareness are variable. In the schools that we work with, there is a strong level of interest in construction and the Wood commission provides an opportunity and framework for schools to engage more in that area.

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): I want to ask about employers' responsibility to recruit young people. The construction industry performs fairly well when it comes to apprenticeships, with about 7 per cent of total employment and 10 per cent of construction apprentices, but that is still only 1,300 people out of the 178,000 people who are employed in your sector. Bear in mind that, on leaving school, most young people will go into retail, hospitality or tourism. What proportion of the 178,000 people whom you employ actually are young people and is there a particular reason why you are not recruiting young people?

09:45

Phil Ford: The number of construction apprenticeships starting is around 2,500, which is 10 per cent of the total that are coming through. There is a very strong employer commitment to taking on young people. I will give you one statistic: during the recession, more than 2,000 young people lost their jobs. In the same period, 1,800 were re-placed with employers. Employers made a commitment throughout the recession, in very difficult trading conditions, to take on young people and a lot of those employers were microbusinesses.

The construction industry has a strong commitment to taking on apprentices and to training. Every year, £15 million is levied from the construction industry and £18 million is returned in the form of training grants. Yes, more could be done, but employers are committed to taking on young people—we saw that recently, when Muirfield Contracts went into administration. Almost all its apprentices have now been placed with other employers.

Gordon MacDonald: But what is the age profile of the construction industry, in general terms?

Phil Ford: We have an ageing workforce.

Gordon MacDonald: That is my point.

Phil Ford: We have a bigger issue with people leaving the industry. On top of the apprentice statistics, our labour market intelligence tells us that we need 5,700 experienced workers to come back into the industry to replace those who left during the recession, taking into account inflows and outflows. I accept that that is a challenge for us.

Paul Mitchell: It is often quoted that 30 per cent of the construction workforce is aged 50 years or over. That gives you an idea of the type of replacement demand that we will encounter in the coming years. Whether that 30 per cent will retire remains to be seen; I hope that they will work on.

I will give you the context around apprentice recruitment. Prior to the recession, the Scottish Building Apprenticeship and Training Council registered 2,700 apprentices in construction each year. That did not include plumbers and electricians. By 2012, that number had dropped to just below 1,300, so it dropped by more than half in a five-year period.

During the past couple of years we have started to turn that around and we are facing the right direction again. Last year—2014—we registered 1,550 apprentices, so we are growing again and we would like to grow towards that 2,700 target and beyond.

The construction industry in Scotland has always fared better on per capita recruitment than our counterparts south of the border. There remains a strong culture of recruiting apprentices in the Scottish construction industry. There is room for improvement, but now that we are coming out of recession the figures are beginning to grow again.

Grahame Barn: I will give an example from the civil engineering sector. Traditionally a person requires a degree to be a civil engineer. By the time they have their degree they could be 24 and may still not be certain whether it is the industry for them.

We have realised that we must get to younger people quicker, so we are introducing a foundation apprenticeship. We are going into schools at secondary 4 and 5 level to give pupils a taste of civil engineering and show them the career that they can have. We are trying to offer them a career pathway on which they are employed throughout, going from their foundation apprenticeship to their modern apprenticeship technician role. They will be fully employed from when they leave school aged 17 or 18.

We offer a pathway comprising two years studying for a higher national diploma and two years studying for a civil engineering degree. We are trying to demonstrate to young people that they can still get a degree, that they will be employed for the whole period and that they can jump off at any point on their career path. We can demonstrate that, if they go to university, they will get their degree without having debt at the end of it, as they will be employed over the period.

More and more employers realise that we have to grow our own. We are competing with all those other industries and the number of young people coming through is very low, historically. We realise that we must be better at showing all young people—not just males—that there is a lifelong career in construction; it is not a hire and fire industry.

Gordon MacDonald: You say that you have to grow your own. Do you support the skills for work initiative that is taking place in schools at the moment?

Grahame Barn: Yes. Absolutely.

The Convener: Mary Scanlon has a quick supplementary question.

Mary Scanlon: My son is a civil engineer, so I know what it takes to get through that pathway. Are you saying that someone would do a foundation apprenticeship or a modern apprenticeship at 17 and then go on to do an HND at college, by distance learning or whatever?

I am an ex-lecturer. Do you see an HND as being equivalent to a degree, or did you say that, after the two years of the HND, someone would then have to do a two-year degree? Is there clear articulation from the HND into a degree course, with the final two years at university being full time?

Grahame Barn: Yes. The person would be employed during that period, but there would be day release.

Mary Scanlon: Do you mean day release to university to do a degree?

Grahame Barn: Yes, during that two-year period.

Mary Scanlon: For the final two years—for junior and senior honours.

Grahame Barn: Yes. We are working with—

Mary Scanlon: Can that be done by day release?

Grahame Barn: Colleges are doing that now. Inverness College is doing that with the University of Strathclyde for the civil engineering degree.

Mary Scanlon: The people involved are engineers who are employed but who are doing one day of day release and are coming out with an honours degree in civil engineering.

Grahame Barn: Yes.

Mary Scanlon: They are attending college one day a week.

Grahame Barn: I am not sure that it is one day a week—I would have to get back to you on that—but that is how it is working. During that two-year period, they are employed—they are working for an employer—and getting block release to go to university to complete their course.

Mary Scanlon: They are getting block release.

Grahame Barn: Yes.

Mary Scanlon: I would be interested in seeing more information on the articulation, convener.

Grahame Barn: I will get that to you.

The Convener: Can you send us that?

Grahame Barn: Yes.

Gordon MacDonald: My next question is for the FSB. We gathered evidence that many small and micro businesses find it difficult to employ an apprentice because they lack the capacity to provide the resources and training that are needed. Will you expand on the difficulties?

Barry McCulloch: Sure. It is fair to say that modern apprenticeships tend not to be the form of training that smaller businesses, in contrast to the

construction industry, prefer. Our statistics show that about 8 per cent of our members recruit a modern apprentice. That figure has been under 11 or 12 per cent for five to six years, and there is a steady pattern of disengagement. When we ask our members why that is the case, they tend to say that the model is not flexible enough. They say, for example, "I run a business that builds camper vans in East Lothian, and having the apprentices going to college on day release does not add value when they come back." That is one issue.

The other two key issues are time and cost pressures. Ninety-eight per cent of all businesses in Scotland are small businesses, and 94 per cent have 10 employees or fewer. Many do not have a formal human resources set-up, so their approach to recruitment and engagement tends to be quite risk averse. When a business takes on a modern apprentice, it makes a commitment and, in the past, there has not been willingness to engage in a formal programme of training. Our members tend to prefer informal, work-based training that they can dip into and out of and which is much more bite sized, rather than the commitment that they make for an apprenticeship.

However, it is difficult to generalise the situation overall, as it depends on the sector, the size and scale of the business and the geography. Apprenticeships in rural areas have their own challenges, including the distance to market and the distance to educational institutions for day release.

Gordon MacDonald: I have one difficulty with the point that you just made about small businesses not having HR departments. How many hairdressing firms have HR departments? There are 900 apprentices in hairdressing, yet those firms are predominantly small businesses with half a dozen employees. How do such small businesses manage to take on apprentices straight from school and train them when other businesses of a similar size and scale do not?

Barry McCulloch: That harks back to the previous point about complexity. In hairdressing, modern apprenticeships are an established training programme and part of the culture of the business, whereas in other service sectors, including retail, tourism and hospitality, they are less established. That comes back to common practice among the businesses in the sector, the business owner's expectations and their relationship with the college or the public sector.

Gordon MacDonald: How do we ensure that we have people with the right level of skills and experience for small businesses to take on? Whose responsibility is it to get people work ready for small businesses?

Barry McCulloch: Fundamentally, that is the business's responsibility. It knows its business and it makes the skills assessment. Is there a route for the public sector to assist it in that assessment? Absolutely. That is what Skills Development Scotland is there to do. The modern apprenticeship programme is applicable only to certain businesses in certain sectors, so we need to start talking about how other businesses can access skills and training flexibly.

Gordon MacDonald: How much engagement do you have with colleges and in particular schools to encourage them to work with your members?

Barry McCulloch: It is fair to say that the Wood commission is a bit of a game changer. In the past, businesses have been fairly passive. We are getting to a point where businesses must be more involved and are having to be partners in the process. It is too early to say whether that cultural change can be achieved, whether schools and colleges are open to that change and whether businesses are willing or able to engage.

We are only a few months into the Scottish Government's strategy, but we are optimistic. One in four of our members want to engage. The issue is how they engage. The engagement must be tangible. When businesses have spoken to schools and colleges or they have had that outreach, the schools and colleges have been specific about what they wanted from businesses and how businesses could help. Rather than asking businesses to come and engage in schools, schools are asking them whether they can provide classroom visits, careers advice, entrepreneurship and mentoring. That is about being specific about the type of engagement and the time required.

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): My question is about the inequalities in attainment. The evidence has shown us that schools and parents seem to have a problem with the idea of vocational education—everything seems to be weighted in favour of academic education. We are constantly told that people are not going into vocational training. I have heard stories of young people being encouraged to go down the academic route when they could have quite easily gone down the engineering apprenticeship route.

We have talked about this a wee bit today, but how do we manage to change that culture in schools? How do we ensure parity between academic and vocational training, similar to that in the European education models, where going down the vocational route is not looked down on?

Phil Ford: Some of that is about raising the scale of the opportunities that are available among young people and teachers. That is a bit of a

challenge. Some schools measure success by the number of pupils who go to university. We need to challenge that and promote vocational careers as being equally valid.

Because of the Wood commission, there is an opportunity through the new foundation modern apprenticeships and the senior phase at school, when young people get an opportunity to try different careers. They will not have to get through to the end of their school time before deciding what apprenticeship they want to go on to; rather, they will have had a chance to sample something through work experience, an FMA or some other initiative, which enables them to decide what they want to do. However, there is quite a bit of work to be done in the area; it is still a challenge.

George Adam: Another issue that comes up is that attainment is down to the leadership in schools—whether the head teacher and everyone else embrace it.

We went to Wester Hailes education centre, which seems to have achieved not a bad balance that involves working with the local college and working on the vocational side. That adds a bit of flexibility, which a lot of other schools are looking at.

Where is the employer's relevance in reducing the attainment gap? A perfect example is my father. In the 1960s, he came out of secondary school after failing his 11-plus. He got an apprenticeship in a local business and ended up employing more than 200 people by his own wee self. How do we enable that to happen these days? When pupils come out of school, the opportunities are not there for them. How do we ensure that vocational education is part of the curriculum?

10:00

Phil Ford: Employers can work towards the recently introduced investors in young people accolade. A number of construction companies already have that award. An example is GMG Contractors in the east end of Glasgow, which is run by Gerry McGinn. He has helped many young people who had a hard start in life to get an apprenticeship with his company, and many of them have stayed—the company has a very low churn rate—because he has invested the time in supporting them and bringing them through. There are many similar examples across the construction industry in Scotland.

Grahame Barn: As an industry, we need to inspire young people to choose to look at the construction industry and the breadth of careers that are available to them in it. Phil Ford made a point about the young ambassadors we have. There is no point in an old bloke such as me going

into a school, because I am not someone they will look to. We must get the young people in the industry to go back to show pupils in schools what they have achieved across the breadth of qualifications and careers that we provide.

We must inspire young people to choose to look at what construction can offer them, and we must ensure that schools are in a position to work with employers to offer young people tasters or work experience somewhere along the line so that they will be able to say whether a career in construction is for them instead of not being sure what they want to do in third and fourth year and making a career decision that might not be the right one when they leave school. We need to get in a bit earlier and give them a taster of what is available to them.

George Adam: I liked what Grahame Barn said about giving young people the whole career path. That is the vision thing.

You will be aware that the University of the West of Scotland in my constituency in Paisley was traditionally a technical college. It had to tell the parents and the kids how much could be earned in the engineering industry. It was only then that everyone started to work out where the future lay.

I will ask about the entrepreneurial side—I am talking about small businesses. In Scotland, it was not traditional for people—regardless of their background—to have an entrepreneurial spirit or to want to be self-employed. That has not been seen as an option. People have always tried just to get a job. How do we instill an entrepreneurial spirit in young people, regardless of their socioeconomic background?

Barry McCulloch: We can certainly do much more, but it is worth reflecting on the fact that, since 2008, one upside of the downturn has been the massive explosion in self-employment, which has grown by 30 per cent. Whether as a result of distress or otherwise, people took the leap and started their own business. Organisations such as Young Enterprise Scotland and the Prince's Trust do good work, but the problem is that it is patchy and relies heavily on the organisation's relationship with the school, the education provider or the education authority.

George Adam: So we come back to leadership in education.

Barry McCulloch: It is a question of leadership, but it is also a case of recognising that building the spirit of entrepreneurship in education has other implications and positive consequences for young people, whether by building confidence or by engaging with young people in a different way. The Wood commission was right to point out that around 50 per cent of those who do not go down the academic route are twice as likely to be

unemployed. We need to engage with them effectively and to ensure that they can make a contribution and that they are prepared for life in the jobs market, because it will be incredibly tough for them.

Paul Mitchell: About a quarter of all the workers who are engaged in the Scottish construction sector are self-employed, so there is still a strong element of self-employment in Scottish construction. Whether that is real or phoney self-employment, and whether that is a good or a bad thing, it remains a feature of the Scottish construction sector.

Another feature of Scottish construction is candidates who started out on an apprenticeship ending up being the owner of their own company. Mr Adam asked where the entrepreneurial spirit is. I can think of many people who started out on an apprenticeship who have ended up running their own company, whether it is a small local company or a national company.

Bill Robertson of the Robertson group springs to mind. He started on a joinery apprenticeship and now employs hundreds of people in the construction industry. That is one of the reasons why we still retain a strong culture of apprenticeship recruitment. That touches on the point that was raised about why hairdressers still recruit so many apprentices. Part of the answer is that many of the hairdressers who now run businesses were previously apprentice hairdressers. We still retain that element in Scottish construction.

On the earlier point about the involvement of employers in raising attainment, there are three elements in that. First, there is careers advice, information and guidance, which Grahame Barn touched on. We have to get into schools as early as possible to start the engagement process. Careers advice has to be more modern and more interactive. As Grahame Barn said, there is no point in people such as us going in and doing a PowerPoint presentation on construction. Instead, we have to get the kids' hands dirty and get them involved in mock construction exercises and so on.

Secondly, employers can offer better work experience placements. When I was at school, we got one week's work experience in fourth year. I am really not sure how meaningful or beneficial that was. There must be a far more meaningful way of doing that.

Thirdly, employers have to get involved in shaping the vocational qualifications that are offered at school level. We cannot just expect that to happen by magic. Employers must get into organisations such as the Scottish Qualifications Authority and describe, explain and outline exactly

what they want for vocational education in schools.

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): We have touched on how attainment can be improved more generally, but do members of the panel see the attainment gap between the most affluent and the most deprived communities as an issue? Is that impacting on your businesses? Are you able to access a big enough pool of candidates for the posts that you advertise? Are there pockets of the country where that is a bigger issue than it is in others?

Phil Ford: There is quite a healthy supply of applicants for each apprenticeship place—there are about four applicants for each modern apprenticeship position in construction, so there is clearly a lot of interest out there. However, in parts of the country such as Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire, where we are competing with the oil and gas industry, it can be a little bit more challenging to get young people in. We do quite a strong piece of work there with the schools to promote careers in construction. We give pupils information about the wages and the career potential so that they will consider a career in construction. The situation varies across the country.

Grahame Barn: Until about 18 months or two years ago, the main concern of the civil engineering sector was workload—people were saying, "Get us work—please get us work." Now, however, the main priority is skills and development. People are asking where the people are to do the work that they have now got. Employers have woken up to the situation—perhaps a little bit late—that we need young people from all parts of society to get involved. With regard to the attainment gap, I would say that there is a job for everybody in the construction industry.

The sector has realised that we need to get a supply chain that starts in primary schools. Therefore, CECA is funding a project called bridges to schools. The Institution of Civil Engineers has a bridge kit—it is not a silly wee bridge; it is 7m long—that it takes to schools. For two days, primary 6 and 7 kids work as a team to overcome difficulties and assemble this huge bridge that they can walk across. We are trying to show kids in primary schools that this is what construction is about.

The bridges to schools programme is great. We are building a very big bridge not far from here and, once the pupils have built their own bridge, we take them to the education centre at South Queensferry to be shown the real bridge being built; we are saying to them, "You've built your bridge—here's another one that's being built." The point is to get the children at an early stage,

encourage them and get them enthused about this activity. We have a number of iconic buildings in Scotland, and we have to get better at using them and making it clear that the built environment is for everyone and that we need to make our society better through building. That is what we have to sell to pupils.

We show pupils that they can make a lifelong career—and, in fact, some decent money—in construction. What is not that well understood is that construction pays well. A lot of people seem to view construction as a low-paying industry when, in fact, it is not. We can show pupils that, but the point is that employers can play a far greater role in selling the industry than they have in the past. If we do not do that, we will have big problems.

Mark Griffin: You said that one of the issues for the industry is continuing the flow of people to fill these posts and, to me, the most fruitful areas would seem to be the areas where unemployment and therefore the availability of people are highest. Are you focusing your bridges to schools programme on areas of higher unemployment and deprivation, or are you introducing it broadly across all areas? We are talking about closing the attainment gap rather than increasing educational attainment and employment across the whole of Scotland.

Grahame Barn: We have a grand plan, although whether it will work is another thing. We are running two pilots for our foundation civil engineering apprenticeships, which are partnerships between secondary schools and colleges. The first, which is in West Lothian, involves West Lothian College and Carluke high school as well as a number of West Lothian high schools, and we are trying to take the bridges to schools programme into the feeder primary schools for, say, Carluke high school, because we see a route from primary school into secondary school and finally into the local college through the vocational foundation apprenticeships. We are trying to do the same at Inverness College and the two secondary schools in that area.

That is what we are trying to do, but it is still early days. The primary schools involved will have pupils with attainment difficulties, and I hope that we can show them that they, too, can have a role to play.

Phil Ford: We work very closely with the Department for Work and Pensions and, indeed, have just signed a strategic agreement with it that covers a number of areas. One of the things that we are looking to do is share labour market intelligence on a regional basis to ensure that we know where the skill shortages are and that we prioritise accordingly. We have a long-term, five-year forecast that lets us know where the skills are

going to be needed, and we can then work with the DWP to find out whether it has people on its books who can fill the immediate skills gaps. We can also work with schools to promote careers in areas where we know that those particular skills are going to be required, and we can offer sessions for the schools' careers advisers to make them aware of the opportunities that are available in the construction industry and to bring the employers to them. So far, that approach has been fairly successful. As part of apprenticeship week, we have asked every construction employer to pledge to give young people a work experience opportunity with a view to their moving on, hopefully, to an MA or paid employment at the end.

Barry McCulloch: There are three points that I think are worth reflecting on. First, private sector employment in Scotland is now at its highest level since 1999, and there are now more than 2 million jobs in the sector at a time when employment in the public sector has gone down.

Secondly, there is a story to be told about the role of small businesses in taking on those furthest from the labour market. Depending on what UK statistics you look at, somewhere between 75 and 90 per cent of those who are either inactive or unemployed find employment in the kind of small businesses that do not have the corporate social responsibility mechanisms or marketing departments to tell people about that.

Thirdly, we need to address skill shortages directly. The fact is that we have not yet matched supply with demand—if we had done so, we would have no unemployment. Part of the answer is having more local and robust labour market intelligence and finding out how those in schools and colleges can match what they offer in their curriculums with what the labour market can absorb in the short or medium term. Until we get to the point where the curriculum is being influenced by and producing for the private sector, we will always get these dislocations between the supply of skills and the demand from industry.

10:15

The Convener: Grahame Barn has mentioned the foundation apprenticeships twice in a relatively positive way, but the Scottish Building Federation said in its written submission:

“a significant level of concern remains regarding proposals to create ‘foundation apprenticeships’ in craft occupations.”

It went on to list practical issues, training issues and progression issues. I do not want to put words into Grahame Barn's mouth, but he seemed to be reasonably positive about foundation

apprenticeships, whereas the SBF's written evidence is very different.

Paul Mitchell: We stand by our written evidence. There are a number of concerns in the construction industry about foundation apprenticeships, which we can perhaps deal with in more detail.

I have had some exposure to the programme that Grahame Barn operates, and I think that it is excellent. To date, it has been successful, but it is aimed mainly at those seeking more academic and perhaps white-collar-type occupations such as technicians rather than at guys or operatives who will end up on the tools.

In the written evidence, I listed some issues to do with foundation apprenticeships that we are concerned about. They are broadly shaped into three categories.

There are practical issues around timetabling and, principally, resources. Looking to get more vocational training into schools is not necessarily a new idea. The main reason why that has not happened in the past is that it is resource intensive. Low pupil-to-instructor ratios, materials and a lot of space are needed, and people often need transport to get to colleges. That is often an expensive route to look at. There are academic alternatives that are maybe not quite as expensive. That is one of the main reasons why vocational training has not really got off the ground in schools to date.

I went on to look at training issues with foundation apprenticeships. Candidates would not have daily experience of being involved in the construction industry. Currently, the opportunity to go to college for a couple of weeks, go back to the site, practise skills on site, go to college again and practise on site again is embedded in the apprenticeship framework. There is an interrelationship between on-site and off-site training.

There are also progression issues. Where does the candidate go if they do not manage to get an apprenticeship at the end of their school term? Where do they go if they undertake a foundation apprenticeship and start to work towards some of their Scottish vocational qualification? Where is their progression route after they have finished school? We are not quite sure about that just yet.

Most important, we outlined a positive alternative to foundation apprenticeships at the end of the paper. Skills for work and the national progression award in construction offer candidates employability skills and a taster of a variety of different occupations in the construction sector. The opportunity for candidates to make more informed career decisions is very beneficial at that stage in their development.

The Convener: I am keen to explore that, but I know that other members have questions that are directly about apprenticeships, so we will come to it later. However, it was very helpful of you to outline that. Thank you very much.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): I want to go back to engagement between employers and employer organisations, and schools. From looking at the submissions, I see that there is a lot of aspirational stuff, but I do not see too firm a design, plan or way forward to develop those relationships. What do you think are the current levels of engagement between employers and employer organisations, and schools? Is that engagement good or variable?

Phil Ford: There are some examples of good practice out there. I mentioned earlier the construction ambassador programme, in which we invite people from the construction industry for a one-day course to enable them to go into primary and secondary schools and talk about their experiences of working in the industry. Generally speaking, schools are very receptive to that. They are happy to have people come in. There is quite a strong link between schools, colleges and employers.

Could the link be stronger? Yes, I am sure that it could. I am sure that, in some areas, it could be improved. However, there is a great deal of willingness among employers to engage in the apprenticeship system. Employers—particularly those who have engaged in apprenticeships for a number of years—can see the benefits of the apprenticeship system and the benefits of engaging with schools and colleges to get good-calibre young people in as apprentices. Most of the small businesses that take on apprentices will keep the apprentice after they finish their training because they want to mould them into the shape of their particular company.

Colin Beattie: What measures to increase engagement have been taken by employers and by employer organisations? Each will have a slightly different approach.

Grahame Barn: As an employer organisation, we run what we call a training and development forum twice a year, in which people in companies come together and talk about our training and development issues. Recently, we have invited heads of schools and colleges to those meetings. We had a meeting about three weeks ago at which the heads of West Lothian College and Carluke high school gave up their time to come along. It was very enlightening for both parties. It is a forum, so employers are able to ask headteachers—the leaders of their schools—what their views are, and I think that the heads get a

better understanding of where employers are coming from.

It is early days, but we hope that every time we arrange one of these meetings we can invite along headteachers and local colleges, on the same basis, to see how we can work together. We are all trying to achieve the best thing for our young people. Schools and colleges are trying to get the best for their young people and we are trying to get the best for our industry and to get the best people into our industry. That needs to work better. It is a small step but, if we keep working that way, we will get a better understanding of each other's requirements and difficulties.

Employers feel that schools are a no-go area for us. We have to be invited in and work to a set school timetable. One headteacher said that that is not the case. Our employers were not aware of that. It is about hearing from both sides and working out that there are ways in which we can do this.

Phil Ford: We have 15 industry training groups in Scotland, which are made up of groups of employers in regions all the way from Dumfries out to the Western Isles and up to Orkney and Shetland. Every year, those groups have targets for schools engagement. A number of the members of those groups will be actively engaged with their local schools.

We have apprenticeship week coming up in May. We are working with SDS and bodies such as CECA and the SBF, and 40 events are planned the length and breadth of Scotland, many of which will involve engagement with schools and young people. We need to build on such events and activities to reach our objectives for engagement between schools and employers.

Colin Beattie: In previous evidence sessions, we have heard from various bodies that schools are not necessarily putting together the mix of skills that employers are looking for. That is why engagement is so important. Do you find that that is the case?

Phil Ford: There is probably a bit more work to be done to link the construction offer into the curriculum for excellence. That is one of the things that we will be doing this year—we will be mapping that. Although there is willingness on the part of schools to engage with the process, a little bit more work could be done in that area. We also need to make schools aware of the opportunities that are available in construction and the career pathways that we talked about earlier.

Barry McCulloch: We know very little about small businesses' engagement in the education system. The only statistics available in Scotland were from a survey that we commissioned a couple of years ago. That survey found that we

can split small businesses 50-50 between those that engage and those that do not. Among those that engage, the top three types of experience tend to be things like work experience, classroom visits and class talks. More importantly, for those that do not engage, one of the key issues is that they had not been contacted. There is a level of passivity, and the cost-time pressures have not been considered.

However, encouragingly, we have found that about 25 per cent of small businesses in Scotland are willing to get involved. It is about how we broker that relationship. We are hopeful that the invest in young people groups—which have come on stream due to the Wood commission and the Government's response to that—will help with that. The role of those groups is to build that bridge between the business world and education in a very practical way, explaining how a small business can get involved and holding their hand through the whole process, because the process is very important for small businesses. It is critical to get that process right so that it does not take too much time and so that it is not onerous but is reflective of their needs. We are very confident that that will take place.

Colin Beattie: In your opinion, given your experience, what is the biggest change that schools could make that would support businesses?

Barry McCulloch: If I had to pick one change, it would be positive outreach—it would be a message to the business community that the schools are open. The point that Grahame Barn made is a very good one—whether we like it or not, a lot of businesses expect that engagement to come from schools.

If schools were to work with other parts of the public sector, particularly the enterprise network—the business gateway, Scottish Enterprise or Highlands and Islands Enterprise—they could utilise its expertise to make sure that businesses get more involved, which could be a game changer. If we look at the experience in northern European countries, we find that when there is a model in which businesses are much more involved, youth unemployment goes down. In Switzerland, for example, 88,000 foundation modern apprenticeships are delivered per year. Those are quite startling stats, which is why Skills Development Scotland is so keen to build such a model, notwithstanding the concerns that Paul Mitchell raised.

Colin Beattie: Given that particular point, do you believe that it is primarily the responsibility of the schools to reach out to the employers? I realise that there is a judgment involved here, but do you believe that the schools should be the ones to reach out?

Barry McCulloch: In some cases, yes. There is increasingly a shared responsibility but, from our perspective, the role of schools in particular is to prepare young people for the workplace. There is a philosophical debate about what the role of schools is but, fundamentally, that is our opinion. How schools engage and make sure that those young people are ready for the workplace is important. It is as important as the qualifications that they produce and it is what is most important for our members. It is less about the abstract qualifications and more about how young people apply that learning in the workplace, which is what makes work experience and work placements so important.

Grahame Barn: Employers can help schools and guidance teachers who are guiding young people by telling them what they are looking for exactly. Young kids are young kids; 16-year-olds going for a job interview are not going to have a huge CV, because they are only 16. They are a bit immature and a bit shy, and employers realise that. However, we need to be better at telling guidance teachers a couple of things that these kids could do better. For example, they could bring in a personal statement rather than a CV, setting out what their interests are and what they get involved in. That is the type of information that an employer uses when he is making a decision about employing somebody.

It is not all about academic achievement; it is about what young people do out of school—how they socially engage, in many cases. Sometimes I think that schools tell kids that they need to do a wee formal CV and do not spend enough time helping them to understand that it is not a formal job interview; it is a chat with an employer. The employer realises that if they can get three or four decent coherent points out of it, that is as much as they could expect, really, and they make their decisions on that.

Phil Ford: It is a mixture of both—it is about the schools reaching out and it is about the employers reaching out. There are some great examples of good practice. It is about capturing what works well. I do not think that there is a lack of willingness for schools to engage but there might be a lack of understanding and knowledge about how best to engage, what opportunities are out there and how what is being offered by employers links into the curriculum for excellence. Joining all that up would be a very positive way forward and the invest in youth groups are one way of doing that.

Siobhan McMahon (Central Scotland) (Lab): We have talked a lot about engagement with schools, but what are the barriers to employers engaging with individual pupils?

10:30

Paul Mitchell: Employers often say to us that some of the barriers to offering work placements are to do with health and safety: for example, people cannot operate some machinery until they are 18, and many employers like people who go to work on building sites to have a certain level of health and safety training and perhaps to possess a safety card. However, I am not sure how real some of those concerns are—some are merely perceived barriers. When we try to break the barriers down, we can overcome them, but there is certainly a widespread hesitance among employers in the construction industry to have 15 and 16-year-old kids on building sites.

Phil Ford: The last thing that an employer wants is for a school pupil to come on site and have an accident. That is a concern. We need to work with employers to identify the real barriers. A pupil might not be able to work on a particular piece of equipment, but there will be things that they can do that are not just making tea and coffee in the office. They can have health and safety training and they can do bits and pieces when they are shadowing. They can be accompanied on site and they can watch what is happening. We need to outline what is possible. We have some great examples of employers who have engaged and worked with us closely to overcome barriers, and it works well. We need to unpack the issue a little and to separate the real barriers from the perceived ones.

Siobhan McMahon: The reason why I asked the question goes back to Mark Griffin's point about the attainment gap. A lot of the evidence that we have heard this morning—useful though it is—has been about what we can do with the Wood commission report and responsibilities related to that, but that does not address the problem of the attainment gap. When employers go into a school, the teachers have already selected the pupils whom they think are the best for that industry, those who are more apt to have a discussion with employers, and those who are better at presentations or whatever. We might be missing pupils who would adapt well to some situations.

The point that I am trying to make is that employers have to look for those pupils in schools. From where I sit, it looks as though pupils being preselected is already a barrier to employers. How do we deal with that? We are trying to come up with evidence for the committee's report that suggests that we can do something practical on that. The Wood commission is all very well and good, and we are all signed up to the practical measures that we can take and the opportunities that we can give pupils, but if we do not get to the pupils who can take those opportunities, we are already failing them.

Phil Ford: A lot of that is about getting in at an early enough point so that employers are not, as you say, given preselected candidates who are being shepherded in a particular direction. However, the issue is complex. As well as the relationship with the pupils, there are relationships with careers advisers and teachers. We need to get in early to offer opportunities in construction—in S1 to S3, or even at primary school level—rather than towards the end of a pupil's career in school.

There is a great deal of work to be done with parents, because they probably have the greatest influence over what young people do or do not do. From speaking last week to some of our apprentices in college, I know that dads who left school at 16 are probably quite encouraging of the young person doing an apprenticeship. Those who did not will be less encouraging. We need to work with parents, through parent forums, and we need to link into SDS's My World of Work website—which has been refreshed for young people—and to CITB's careers portal in order to help parents, careers advisers and teachers to understand what opportunities are available, so that they do not push young people down a route that is not suitable for them. We need intervention at the earliest possible stage to outline the scale of the opportunity.

Siobhan McMahon: In the written evidence, no one has spoken about work that you might be doing on protected characteristics. For instance, you have not talked about the problem of not getting enough females, people from ethnic minorities or disabled people into the sector. That has not come up in evidence, but it clearly relates to the attainment gap. What practical measures are being taken to address that and how do you promote those measures? You have not promoted them in what you have given to us—it is hidden away, rather than being out in the open.

Phil Ford: One project under the joint investment strategy is OnSite, which the CITB submission talks about. That piece of work, which we are doing with Equate Scotland at Edinburgh Napier University, is specifically to address gender issues in the construction industry. It involves providing work experience opportunities with additional support for schoolgirls who want to come into the construction industry. It looks at the career opportunities that are available, and at the barriers—real and perceived—that might have to be overcome. For example, it looks at what support can be provided with childcare costs, which is particularly important if people are going on to a construction site at 7 in the morning.

Equate Scotland has worked hard with us to identify barriers and has carried out a great deal of research in those areas. That theme is captured in

the new skills investment plan for the construction industry, which we fed into and which SDS launched a couple of weeks ago. We have also had conversations around sexuality with organisations including Stonewall. Sexuality is a real issue of which we are aware.

We know that in the craft modern apprenticeships only about 2 per cent are females, although the figure is slightly higher—at 30 per cent—in the professions. We are working hard to address that, but we have some great examples of women who have come into the construction industry and are doing very well for themselves and running their own businesses, and we have a number of female construction ambassadors who go into schools and strongly promote their experiences of working in the sector. I would not like the committee to feel that we are not addressing the issue; we are looking closely at those areas.

Grahame Barn: I can give a practical example of what we are trying to do, on the foundation apprenticeship in civil engineering. The college has stated that there will be a 50-50 split between young boys and young girls, and that when the boys have been recruited—because there will probably be more boys than girls applying—recruitment of boys will stop and the college will actively try to fill the remaining places with girls. I accept that that is a small step, but it is an example of how we have realised that we cannot keep avoiding half of the workforce.

The Convener: I will play devil's advocate for a moment. Imagine that you are the parent of a young boy at school who is applying for the course that you have described and who is perfectly able, skilled and keen but would, unfortunately, take the balance to 51 per cent on the course being boys. If he is told, "We won't take you, but we'll try to fill the empty spaces with other people and you will not get one of them," how would you feel about that?

Grahame Barn: As a parent, I would not be best pleased. The pressure would then be on the college to increase the number of spaces proportionately, so that it could take on all the young boys and retain the balance by getting more girls coming through, too. The foundation apprenticeship is employer backed, so there are employers out there who have signed up to give work experience to young people in the second year of that apprenticeship. Employers are not just after boys; they are after young women, too. We know what we have to do, but to answer your question: yes—as a parent I would be a bit miffed.

The Convener: I suggest that "a bit miffed" does not really help us.

Grahame Barn: As an industry, we need to look at the bigger picture.

The Convener: I am asking the question because the problem goes right to the core of the matter—to the need to encourage young girls to apply for such apprenticeships in the first place. I am trying to suggest that it is a question of ensuring that people—young girls, disabled people or people from ethnic minority backgrounds—understand that there is a role and a career opportunity for them in the industry. That is where the core problem is, and I wonder about the means by which you say you are tackling that core problem. Does the mechanism to help that you described actually deal with the core problem and get more young girls to apply?

Grahame Barn: We are having to play a long game, but I go back to what I said earlier about our work in primary schools. We are trying to inspire everyone and give them a feeling that there is a career for them in the industry, if they want it. It comes down to choice, in the end. The industry is not saying, “We only want boys.” However, there is a history of construction being a male industry and we have to break that down, so we have to work in primary schools and with S1 and S2 pupils to ensure that when the kids come to make their selections for foundation apprenticeships, everybody wants to do it.

The Convener: I agree with that. That is the point that I was trying to make.

James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP): I congratulate Grahame Barn on his attempts to break down the barriers, which must be difficult. I want to ask a couple of questions about apprenticeships. What are the main reasons or motivations of employers for taking on apprentices—in particular, young people between the ages of 16 and 19? Conversely, why might they decide not to take them on?

Phil Ford: The main reason why our employer members would take on apprentices is that they see the benefit in doing so. Many have been apprentices themselves; they have been right through the system and can see how it has helped them in their career. It is very much down to personal experience. Such employers can see the benefit that an apprentice can bring to the organisation.

Employers have an apprentice working for them for four years, which gives them time to shape them in the way that they want, in accordance with the company's values and culture. Usually, the apprentices will stay with that employer, so their retention is not so much of an issue once they have gone through the full training. Where possible, the employer will keep that young person on. They can see their career progression through

the company, perhaps into management positions; they see the individual's journey right the way through.

There were barriers during the recession, including lack of available work, which Grahame Barn touched on earlier. How is it possible to make a commitment to someone for four years if the order book has only three to six months of work? That has been a real problem—a number of apprentices were made redundant and we had to work quite hard to ensure that they were rehomed. Thankfully, it is less of an issue now—that particular barrier is much less considerable than it was two or three years ago.

Overall, the employers see the advantages, as opposed to the disadvantages, of apprenticeships. They get a lot of support from bodies such as the Scottish Building Apprenticeship & Training Council and the Scottish Painting and Decorating Apprenticeship Council, and the wage rates are set. They get a lot of support from CITB, and there is a strong and structured training programme there. From an employer's point of view, there is less of a risk from apprenticeships, because there is a clear support mechanism for the young person, including welfare, all the way through their apprenticeship.

Paul Mitchell: I will start with some of the positives. We have already touched on the culture in the construction industry to continue to recruit and employ apprentices, who energise and invigorate employers.

Employers are also concerned with succession planning; we mentioned earlier that 30 per cent of the workforce are aged 50 or over. Employers recognise that if they do not address that problem by recruiting apprentices, they cannot expect other people to do it for them.

Cost is a major factor in why employers might be a little hesitant to take on apprentices. The aggregate wage cost of taking on a construction apprentice across the four years of the programme is just north of £50,000. That is a significant investment, especially for small employers. There is also the off-the-job training element; the average construction apprenticeship involves losing the candidate for about 32 weeks as they go to college, so the firm needs to be able to plug the gap with other resources while the apprentice is on off-the-job training.

Furthermore, employers must be confident that they have a substantial pipeline of work for the duration of the four years of the apprenticeship, which can sustain the apprenticeship itself.

Barry McCulloch: For the small firms that engage in the programme, apprenticeships are a cost-effective route for tackling skills deficiencies. Paul Mitchell has aptly summarised all the main

benefits. For those that do not have apprentices, the time-cost pressures are particularly onerous.

We can look forward to some of the innovations in the apprenticeship programme and to embarking on shared apprenticeships or mixed apprenticeships, so that firms can create bespoke apprenticeships—although I am sure that we have differing opinions on that.

How can we enable firms that do not have appropriate capacity to do so to take on an apprentice for four years? The apprenticeship could be shared, especially in tourism for example, in which seasonality matters. There might not be enough work coming in to cover the workload, so how would a tourism employer work with another company in the central belt, say—such as a large hotelier—that has capacity to share that skill set and employees across the board?

Grahame Barn: To follow on from what Phil Ford was saying, I hope that we have made to the committee the point that the Scottish construction industry has a history of supporting apprenticeships. I do not see that changing in any way, but we must try to increase the numbers of people whom we take on and the breadth of apprentices that we employ.

We see a substantial workload ahead of us, which is encouraging. I am encouraged by the strength of the Scottish construction industry and can see us taking on many more apprentices in the coming years.

10:45

James Dornan: I am delighted to hear that.

You talked about small and micro businesses. I was going to ask how employers might best access the opportunities to take on apprentices, particularly with regard to young people leaving school, but I think that Barry McCulloch said that many of those companies do not see any value in apprenticeships. How do we address that?

Barry McCulloch: I would probably say that it is a case not of value but of fit. Around 66 per cent of our membership do not see the relevance of the model for their business. There is a belief that apprenticeships are for hard-hat industries only; I think that that is a very strong view in the business community. Businesses in the service sector, such as retailers or those in hospitality, do not see the model as the best fit. We see the foundation apprenticeship model as being one way in which we can better promote apprenticeships and introduce clear pathways through schools, colleges and into the workplace. It allows employers to engage early with schools in a tangible and focused way, in the hope that that will have the employment benefits.

The other part of the issue concerns what more can be done to offset some of the costs. If a micro business with five employees loses one of them to a college for 30 weeks, how can it fill that gap? That is a practical issue for our members, on which they seek support from Skills Development Scotland and others. The logistical elements are problematic. How do those companies address the payroll issues? Do they get contractors? How do they fill those gaps?

James Dornan: How do the companies that want to take on apprentices—particularly those who are just leaving school—access opportunities to do so?

Barry McCulloch: They do that primarily through training providers who contract out from Skills Development Scotland. We do less well with regard to those who are thinking about taking on apprentices but are not quite there yet. However, those who benefit from their apprenticeship programme are evangelists about it. There is no question about that. Others will go down a different route and will get involved in something more informal and more work based.

James Dornan: Will the companies that benefit from the apprenticeship programme evangelise to other members of the Federation of Small Businesses?

Barry McCulloch: Absolutely. Some of the most powerful change can come about through promotion and peer-to-peer support. That will achieve much more than can be achieved by any public sector organisation, because our members tend to recruit via word of mouth. If you can get apprenticeships working on that model, you will see an uplift in employment.

James Dornan: Does anyone else have a comment on that?

Phil Ford: With regard to engagement from small businesses, there is a lot of strong support within the construction industry. The situation is slightly different.

In terms of how we recruit, young people will apply for a construction apprenticeship through the bconstructive site. We have a team of 150 staff in Scotland, most of whom work from home in places from Dumfries up to Orkney. They work hard with employers in their area who have taken on apprentices or expressed an interest in doing so, and companies that they feel should be considering doing so. They will chap on doors, send out information and encourage employers to give young people an opportunity.

There are two main recruitment periods. The main one is around August and September, and there is another intake in January, linking in with the college timetable.

We really do not have an issue with employers not engaging with apprenticeships. We have a strong culture in Scotland of employers who wish to engage.

James Dornan: The commission for developing Scotland's young workforce recommended that there should be more focus on level 3 apprenticeships. However, Audit Scotland suggested that many employers are not seeking level 3 apprenticeships. Do you have any comments on that or solutions to the problem?

Paul Mitchell: The majority of apprenticeships that are offered in the construction industry at the moment are at SVQ level 3. What are often referred to as the biblical trades—brick laying, joinery, painting and decorating and so on—are all offered at SVQ level 3. Around 1,100 of the 1,500 apprentices that we registered last year were at SVQ level 3.

In contrast to SVQ level 3 apprenticeships, SVQ level 2 apprenticeships typically last two years rather than four, have a much shorter period of off-the-job training and do not usually end with what is known in the industry as a skills test. SVQ level 2 occupations include scaffolding, AMES taping, general building operations, being a steeplejack and a vast array of other construction specialisms.

At the moment, the SBATC and the construction community are fiercely protecting the qualifications offered at SVQ level 3. There has not been much of a campaign to dilute them, and I very much hope that they will stay at that level. In fact, I would like some of the SVQ level 2 occupations to be uplifted to SVQ level 3 apprenticeships.

Phil Ford: It is just a question of balancing what the industry requires. In the main, level 3 qualifications are the norm but, as Paul Mitchell has suggested, they are not appropriate in particular parts of the sector. In such cases, level 2 modern apprenticeships are used. Because all the construction apprenticeship frameworks are developed in full consultation with the industry, they reflect what the industry has asked for and requires.

Barry McCulloch: What the Audit Scotland report did very well was to tease out the tension between quantity and quality and the feasibility of ensuring quality where targets are in place. According to Skills Development Scotland, for example, a lot of demand is for level 3 qualifications and below. The question is how we have both and how the contributions can be changed so that, at a national level, we encourage those with level 3 and above, and get uptake in key sectors. Indeed, that is the process that SDS is going through at the moment.

James Dornan: My final question touches on an issue that we have already discussed. What is

the role of the apprenticeship programme in addressing the attainment gap?

Phil Ford: It is all about promoting to young people in schools a career in construction and the apprenticeship offer and making them aware of what is available. Sometimes the least able candidates are pushed into—or, I should say, are pre-selected for—a career in construction, but we want to offer the range of construction careers and apprenticeship opportunities to as wide a selection of young people as possible to ensure that they are able to make educated decisions about the career that is right for them.

James Dornan: I return to a point that Siobhan McMahon made. Have you done any specific work to find out whether you should target schools that do not have a great academic attainment record and give some of the kids in those schools a better chance of a good lifestyle by making them realise the importance of going into, say, construction?

Phil Ford: We look at skills requirements and shortages on an area-by-area basis and then promote the career opportunities in those areas that will lead to sustainable employment. That is at the core of everything that we do. Construction is slightly unique, in that apprentices have to be employed for the full duration of the apprenticeship programme; in other words, they are paid from day 1 and are employed throughout their apprenticeship, which gives them a fantastic opportunity. We talk to young people from disadvantaged backgrounds about the available opportunities, but we do the same for all schoolchildren. Our focus is on promoting the jobs and opportunities in a particular area, based on the work that we know is coming through the pipeline over the next four or five years.

James Dornan: Does anyone else wish to comment?

Grahame Barn: The only other point that I would add is that because of its focus on health and safety, the industry has regulated competence. When someone who might have had low achievement at school is taken on, the company helps them to develop the skills and competence—and, in some cases, to undertake the lifelong learning—that they need to operate safely in the industry. A young person's learning does not finish when they leave school; the employers carry on with it, because that is what the industry demands through all its different card and competence schemes.

George Adam: I go back to Phil Ford's point about looking at the work that is available in certain areas and trying to recruit on that basis. How do we address the situation in which many of the young people that you might need to recruit to

deal with the amount of construction that is going on in Aberdeen are likely to be in the central belt?

Phil Ford: A lot of young people in school in Aberdeen will go into the oil and gas sector, which is very strong.

We need to explode some of the myths. We have talked about pay, and construction pays well. It is competitive compared to other industries. I highlight the scale of the opportunities. We are not saying, "Well, they're all just going to go into oil and gas, so we may as well just try to recruit from other parts of the country." We will promote the construction career opportunities in Aberdeen first and foremost, to encourage people in. We encourage clients who are procuring work to advertise through local employment vehicles and to engage with the DWP, schools and young people in the area in relation to the projects that are happening there.

People may have to come from other areas, but we would start in the area concerned—particularly when we are in Aberdeen—to encourage enough young people into the available opportunities.

George Adam: I ask only because I spoke to a construction company that is involved in some of the contracts in the Aberdeen area, and it has a demographic issue. It is trying to get young recruits, but young people in Aberdeen either go down an academic route or go into oil and gas. Again, the issue is to do with parents and with everybody's perceptions. That company's big issue was that it did not have the flexibility to recruit young people from the central belt to meet that need.

Phil Ford: It is a question of balance. Through the youth employment strategy, which we have talked about, there is an opportunity to have engagement between schools, colleges, employers and clients, to try and bring everything together a bit more coherently than perhaps has been the case. I recognise that there is a real challenge in the Aberdeen area, but we are keen to do what we can to help.

The Convener: In recent years, there has been a trend for young people to stay on at school longer than they did in the past. When I was at school, quite a lot of people left at the end of fourth year—that was a perfectly normal thing to do—most people left at the end of fifth year and very few stayed on until the end of sixth year. That is no longer the case; the pattern of leaving school is very different. Has that change in recent years impacted on the construction industry's ability to recruit young people in the 16 to 18 age range?

Paul Mitchell: In recent years, I have seen a change in the profile of the age at which a candidate starts an apprenticeship. You are right to identify that the entry age has increased. Far

more apprentices are starting at 18, 19 or 20 years of age, having experienced some form of senior school.

In the construction industry we try to promote the fact that apprenticeships are not just for young people. The majority of construction apprenticeships that are offered—almost nine out of 10—are for school leavers, be they 16, 17 or 18, but we also have an experienced apprenticeship route, which is available to anybody aged over 22 years. The apprenticeship is reduced from four years to two, but it is the same college course and qualification. The door remains open for candidates to start an apprenticeship, regardless of age.

The Convener: Has the change in school leaving ages impacted on anybody else? Traditionally, people went into many of the construction industries at 16 and learned on the job. Modern apprenticeships are the modern version of that, to a great extent. Has the change in age profile caused any difficulties?

Grahame Barn: The change in age profile might also have something to do with the recession that we have come through. There may not have been the jobs for those young people at the age of 16. Young people had the option of leaving school and not having a job or not leaving school and trying to get more qualifications. That was probably the advice that they were given at the time; those that could stay on would have done so.

Employers are realising that we need to show young people that there is a career for them from a young age, that it is a lifelong career in which they can go as far as they want, and that they can go in different directions. That is where we are as employers. We need to make that change and try to repair whatever damage was done by the recession.

The Convener: Thank you very much.

I thank all our witnesses for taking the time to speak to us this morning; it has been a very welcome and interesting session. The more that we go into the subject, the more complex it becomes—that is unsurprising, maybe. We will carry on next week, when we will have another session on attainment.

The committee has agreed to hold the next agenda item in private, so I close the meeting to the public.

10:59

Meeting continued in private until 11:58.

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