

02 February 2023

Sue Webber MSP
Education, Children and Young People Committee
The Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
EH99 1SP

Via Email - ecyp.committee@parliament.scot

Dear Sue,

Draft Scottish Budget 2024-25 Budget Settlement

I understand that the Education, Children and Young People Committee discussed the Scottish Budget at their meeting on 17th January 2024 and I wanted to take the opportunity to set out COSLA's views on a number of issues which were discussed.

In December 2023, COSLA set out our concerns that the draft Scottish Budget for 2024/25 would mean a major blow to communities and has put councils at financial risk with a cash cut to Local Government. As we have set out in our ['Budget Reality' document](#), the funding for Local Government announced within the draft Budget will mean a £62.7m cut to core revenue funding and a £54.9m cut to capital funding. The Budget also doesn't factor in the impact of inflation nor is there any additional funding to support a pay award for 2024/25. At the same time, we have set out to the Scottish Government that the Council Tax freeze is not fully funded.

Local authorities have [protected education spending](#), which increased almost 20% between 2010/11 - 2021/22. However, the draft budget as it stands creates an incredibly challenging environment for local authorities to set budgets within.

Verity House Agreement

In line with the [Verity House Agreement](#), we continue to hold constructive discussions with the Scottish Government on the development of new assurance arrangements to support our shared commitment to improving outcomes for children and young people across Scotland. The commitments within the Verity House Agreement to build trust, use evidence-based approaches and respect for each other's democratic mandate will be important as this work develops. We understand that the establishment of these arrangements will be key to further discussions on baselining funding that is currently ringfenced.

We are aware there the committee discussed education improvement and assurances on outcomes for children and young people. We want to be clear that all local authorities take their responsibilities for the delivery of education extremely seriously and we are disappointed that there was any inference otherwise. Our colleagues in ADES have demonstrated Local Government's continued commitment to improvement through the peer-review Collaborative

Improvement programme co-led with Education Scotland, which all 32 local authorities will have completed by October this year.

Teacher and pupil support staff numbers

In terms of the funding for teacher and school support staff numbers, as the committee will be aware, COSLA have been consistently clear in our position that councils need flexibility of funding to deploy within schools to provide the right support for the diverse needs of children and young people across Scotland.

For 2023/23, the local authorities who saw a reduction in in teacher numbers under the 2023 teacher census have set out the reasons for this in detail to the Scottish Government. There were a number of common factors in these responses including the changes to the distribution of Scottish Attainment Challenge funding, longstanding recruitment challenges, allocations of probationers, and falling school rolls. Many of these issues had been highlighted to the Scottish Government when the approach to financial sanctions was introduced in 2023. COSLA's position is that there should be no sanctions to any local authority.

As you may expect, we are also of the view that sanctions relating to teacher numbers should not be applied to any local authority in 2024/25 as this not outcome focused and is not in line with the Verity House Agreement. Councils are currently facing uncertainty in terms of potential ringfencing and direction of funding for teachers for 2024/25 and the Scottish Government's position in relation to this must be confirmed as a matter of urgency.

Breakfasts, meal debt and empowerment

In terms of the committee's discussion of the Scottish Government's commitment to provide a free breakfast on a universal basis, COSLA were not aware that there was a suggestion that local authorities and schools should meet this from existing budgets. There is no statutory duty on councils to provide a free breakfast, nor has there been any agreement between the Scottish Government with COSLA on provision. It is one of our core principles that any new commitment initiated by the Scottish Government must be fully funded by them. The delivery of free breakfast cannot be met from existing resources due to the financial constraints on Local Government set out above.

Last year, COSLA agreed [principles for school meal debt management](#), which are aimed at finding a sustainable approach to managing this longstanding issue. There have been no substantive discussions with COSLA on how the Scottish Government's proposed £1.5m fund would operate. From the committee's discussion, the approach to provide funding for clearing school meal debt is not in line with the provisions of the Verity House Agreement.

COSLA continues to be committed to implementing the school empowerment agenda, recognising that all partners in the system have important contributions to make towards progress. We understand that the example of the closure of a school building was discussed. We wanted to highlight that under the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010, local authorities meet strict requirements (including detailed consultation with stakeholders) before being able to make a decision to discontinue a school permanently, establish a new school or relocate a school.

I hope that this information is useful to the committee as it continues to consider these important issues.

Yours sincerely,

Cllr Tony Buchanan
Children and Young People Spokesperson