



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Education and Skills Committee

Wednesday 14 December 2016

Session 5



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Wednesday 14 December 2016

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EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE

15th Meeting 2016, Session 5

CONVENER

*James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)

*Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green)

*Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)

*Richard Lochhead (Moray) (SNP)

*Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)

*Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)

*Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD)

*Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

*Ross Thomson (North East Scotland) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Councillor Jacqueline Henry (Scottish Local Government Partnership)

Peter Macleod (Scottish Local Government Partnership)

Jane O'Donnell (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities)

Councillor Stephanie Primrose (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Roz Thomson

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Education and Skills Committee

Wednesday 14 December 2016

[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:00]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (James Dornan): Good morning and welcome to the 15th meeting of the Education and Skills Committee in session 5. I remind everyone to switch any electronic devices to silent mode for the duration of the meeting.

Under agenda item 1, do members agree to take in private at today's meeting our review of evidence and our consideration of our work programme, and at our next meeting our review of evidence from the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills on the draft budget and, separately, the Scottish child abuse inquiry?

Members *indicated agreement.*

The Convener: Thank you.

Education Authorities

10:00

The Convener: Agenda item 2 is an evidence-taking session on the role of education authorities. The committee agreed to hold this session following its overview sessions, which emphasised the central role of education authorities in delivering policies related to childcare and education.

I welcome our witnesses to the meeting. Representing the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities are Councillor Stephanie Primrose, education, children and young people spokesperson, and Jane O'Donnell, chief officer. Representing the Scottish Local Government Partnership are Councillor Jacqueline Henry, chair of the children and young people thematic board at Renfrewshire Council, and Peter Macleod, director of children's services at Renfrewshire Council.

I understand that both councillors wish to make short opening statements. We will start with Councillor Stephanie Primrose.

Councillor Stephanie Primrose (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities): Thank you, convener, and good morning. COSLA is pleased to have been invited to attend this meeting of the Education and Skills Committee. COSLA represents 28 of the 32 local authorities in Scotland, and I am the spokesperson for children and young people.

Our remit covers school-based education, early years, children's health and wellbeing, social care for families and young people, and youth employment and positive destinations. That is important because it reflects how we work as local authorities. Councils play a fundamental role in the lives of children and young people in Scotland, and our role as education authorities is only one aspect, as it is bound up with our wider responsibilities for children and family services and underpinned by getting it right for every child. That works in particular for those families and young people who are under the most stress, as we have a wide range of services to support them in every aspect of their lives. You will often hear me say that we cannot mitigate the impacts of poverty and chaotic lives in the classroom alone, and councils are uniquely placed to bring together a range of committed public service professionals who support families and communities.

There has been a lot of media coverage of the Scottish Government's education delivery plan and governance review. COSLA has agreed our response and we will make it available to you as soon as possible. There are a couple of tweaks to

be made, so it is not publicly available at the moment, but it will be published as soon as possible. I am, however, happy to discuss the detail with you today. We recognise the concerned voices elsewhere about the leading nature of the questions and we have therefore provided a response that focuses on the key principles and issues under discussion. We hope that it will be accessible to everyone and will encourage others to join the debate.

If we consider our principles, there is much that we agree on; the devil is in the detail. Without an evidence base for change, the real systematic change that we have seen over recent years risks being derailed.

We agree that we need to close the attainment gap, but we would widen that work beyond those who have experienced poverty and deprivation.

We agree that our workforce is a committed, talented and vibrant asset to Scotland and we believe that councils support the workforce by providing strategic support and locally elected scrutiny to ensure that, in the delivery of services, the quality that communities expect and need is there.

We agree that the parental voice is important to the achievement of positive outcomes for young people, and we know that we need to encourage those who feel disengaged to come forward in order to achieve equality.

We agree with the Christie commission principles of prevention and early intervention and, therefore, we note the importance of quality early learning and play in offsetting the attainment gap, which can exist by primary 1, rather than instead requiring classroom teachers to fix all the problems that exist. Further, we can put support around families in pregnancy and early infancy—that support is delivered by social care colleagues in partnership with health.

COSLA has agreed a cross-party position on the education delivery plan and governance review, and that consensus is further supported by meaningful dialogue and engagement with our wider local government family. I look forward to the discussion this morning. Thank you.

The Convener: Thank you. Councillor Henry, would you like to make some opening comments?

Councillor Jacqueline Henry (Scottish Local Government Partnership): I will make a very brief statement. For clarity, I confirm that I am actually convener of the education and children policy board. The thematic board is a committee of the community planning partnership in Renfrewshire.

I align myself and the Scottish Local Government Partnership with many of Councillor Primrose's remarks.

The Scottish Local Government Partnership represents a significant part of the population in Scotland and, therefore, a significant number of children. Like COSLA, we see education as being firmly within the wider children's services that are underpinned by GIRFEC. We would like to discuss that further with you today.

The Convener: Before we begin the questions, I want to thank Hillpark secondary school for allowing the time for my visit on Friday. I met the senior management team, teachers and pupils, and I found the visit very useful as there were some interesting responses to my questions. It was quite clear that collaboration between local schools is important—I think that they are called local integration groups in Glasgow. What came across was that when they work, they work. There is still a fair bit of work to be done to ensure that the relationships are as strong as they can be, but working collaboratively is clearly important. What also came across loud and clear was the importance of strong leadership in the school. In the case of Hillpark secondary, people at the school seemed to think that they had strong leadership with the current and previous headteachers, which was very encouraging.

My question will not surprise Councillor Primrose, in particular, as I am going back to early years funding. The last time that Councillor Primrose was in front of us, we said that there was quite a gap between what the Scottish Government said that the local authorities had received for early years funding, and what appeared to have been spent. Further correspondence showed that another £40 million or £50 million had been made available, but that there was still a gap of £86 million. The councils did not seem able to tell us where that money was, although they said that it had been spent on early years. Have we got any further on finding out where that money has been spent, or whether it has been put aside to be spent in the near future?

Councillor Primrose: The question comes as no surprise. Very early on in discussions, my colleagues in COSLA and I met the minister—we have discussed this with the committee before—and we expressed concern that only one local finance return was being assessed. We said that that did not encompass the whole spend on early years. For example, a lot of referrals for vulnerable two-year-olds come through social work, which would mean that that local financial return had not been represented. We started the discussion with the Scottish Government on the basis that it had not provided the full spend. In my own authority, as I have shared with you before, we had at least

three LFRs that came into play, but we were assessed on only one. Therefore, to start off with, we had a debate on the figures.

We have to accept a couple of things. The introduction of 600 hours of free childcare has been very successful. In a recent survey, 97 per cent of parents or carers who used the service said that it was good or very good, so I think that local government has delivered a very good service. I know that the national parent forum of Scotland has said that the service is not flexible enough and that it is still looking for flexibility. We have said that we have got our 600 hours in—we have done that very well—and we will now build in that flexibility. In order to build in the flexibility, we have to accept that there is still a lot of groundwork to do. We have to get more people in place and we have to get our buildings out of the ground.

I had a very long discussion with one of our finance officers, who said that a lot of the money is still sitting in uncommitted balances.

The Convener: What you did not mention was that COSLA was part of the group that signed off on those figures, so although COSLA might well have had some concerns at the beginning of the conversation, it signed off the figures along with ministers. Where is the £86 million in uncommitted balances, and why was it not recorded? Why did COSLA not say at the initial meeting, in further correspondence or even when the Government came out with the figures, that COSLA's share—I accept that there are two different groups now—of that money is this amount, and this is where it is?

Councillor Primrose: I was not on shift at that point in time. I will pass over to Jane O'Donnell.

Jane O'Donnell (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities): It is important to say that, during the discussions at an official level, we advised our colleagues in the Scottish Government that using the single LFR would be unhelpful and would not encompass a large amount of the spend. That position was not agreed, so when the report was published, COSLA officers did not agree that that figure should go forward. We had always had the position that—

The Convener: You added your signature to it. You agreed the report. You signed up with the Government.

Jane O'Donnell: To the financial return?

The Convener: Yes.

Jane O'Donnell: At every point, we mentioned that the figures were not accurate. We said that the spend was elsewhere.

The Convener: Why did you sign it off, then? If the Government claimed that you had a £135 million black hole in early years provision, why did you sign it off? Why did you not make it very clear at the time that, although you might accept the generality of the report, you were not willing to accept that point because it made your local authorities look as if they were not doing their job properly?

Jane O'Donnell: To be clear, COSLA took that position. We accepted the generality of the report but did not accept the LFR. I apologise if that has not been made clear to you.

The Convener: It has not been made clear to anybody.

Jane O'Donnell: We are happy to be clear on it now.

In addition to what Councillor Primrose said, when we agreed that we would provide the 600 hours—I agree that that is a real good-news story from the Scottish Government and local government; something marvellous has happened—the funding was not ring fenced because a number of local authorities had already started the spend on the early years. Therefore, they took some of that money to mitigate the spend that they had already made. Colleagues will be able to give you some detail on that.

Also, we agreed with the Government that it was important to get the 600 hours in place in a tight timescale—I think that we had about eight months to do that, and we did it successfully—but that the flexibility would come online later. I hope that that is what you have started to see. I believe that my colleagues sent you a report about that on 20 October. Our member councils told us that they felt that they were building on the flexibility in some areas—I hope that that information has been made available to you, but I am happy to go into it.

My colleagues from Renfrewshire might have some ideas as well.

Peter Macleod (Scottish Local Government Partnership): I will give you an example from the Renfrewshire Council part of the Scottish Local Government Partnership. In early learning and childcare, total expenditure is just under £14 million. Our quoted figure of uncommitted expenditure was £1 million—just under a quarter of the total allocation. As Jane O'Donnell indicated, we had already committed to the expansion of early learning and childcare before the grant funding became available, so it was not a question of underspending the grant funding. The fact was that Renfrewshire Council had already made the commitment and was delivering it.

In the context of the policy, the council had also taken some early steps in expanding different models of early learning and childcare. One model in particular, which was led by Councillor Henry, was the families first programme, which has been evaluated by the University of Glasgow as one of the most positive programmes implemented in Scotland to date.

Our position is clear: we had already committed expenditure before the grant funding was made available. It was not a question of underspending; it was, in effect, a recognition that the local authority had taken early steps to put in place the measures that the policy indicated that it should put in place through the funding mechanism.

That is one example of how Renfrewshire Council had already put in place the measures that were subsequently funded through the grant that became available.

The Convener: You are saying that, if you have done something in the past and are given something to do in the future, you should be allowed to say that you have done it in the past and just keep the money.

Peter Macleod: I am not sure that that is what we are saying. I am indicating that we recognise that some authorities had already moved before the policy was implemented and the grant funding became available. My colleague Jane O'Donnell has already pointed out to the committee that there was a ring-fencing issue. In addition, the needs of the young people involved spread across different categories of service. For example, our children's service is integrated with children's social work, and clearly our health partners play a significant role in the provision of services to all in early learning and childcare, particularly children with additional needs.

I am indicating that we use the money to best effect, based on our analysis of the needs of our local population. It was not a question of keeping the money to do something that was not in line with the policy; it was a recognition that we had already identified the need and were meeting the provision for which the policy subsequently put the grant in place.

10:15

The Convener: I do not want to hog the meeting, but you were given money for a specific purpose and local authorities do not seem able to justify that they spent it on that specific purpose. This is probably more for COSLA because it represents more local authorities, but I originally asked whether anybody at local authority level oversees the money that comes in from the Government for specific subjects such as the early years. I suspect that the answer is no, although I

never really got a clear answer. The money goes to local authorities, but COSLA does not know how much each local authority is spending on that issue and, therefore, COSLA really should not take a position on it—the position should have come from each local authority at that point.

I suggest that the best thing would be some sort of monitoring exercise through COSLA to make sure that the local authorities that it is responsible for are doing what they are meant to with the money that the Government has given them. COSLA should not otherwise make a public comment because it does not really know the facts.

Councillor Primrose: There is a fundamental issue here. I represent 28 local authorities—I represent them, but I do not police them.

The Convener: Should you then be making statements that you are confident that the local authorities have done something when you cannot possibly back that up with facts because you are not—as you say—policing them?

Councillor Primrose: Local authorities come in and tell us what they have done and because we cannot go and police them, we need to take that as evidence. I do not have—nor should I have—the authority to go to 28 local authorities and ask them for their budget lines.

The Convener: Okay.

Jane O'Donnell: To support what Councillor Primrose was saying, when that financial report was pulled together, we officials said that we would be more than happy to do some of that work. That would have allowed us to do a bit of monitoring and to identify the baseline position. We have worked with the Scottish Government in that way in the past and it has been very successful. We link in with our professional colleagues, such as directors of finance, education and children's services, so we can get a sense of what is going on and identify whether, on a national basis, there are things that local authorities should be looking at. Unfortunately, we did not get the opportunity to do that this time, but we are willing to consider in future looking at how the money is spent in order to be accountable and transparent.

The Convener: Okay. I am going to move on, but Councillor Primrose wants to add something first.

Councillor Primrose: I have one last point and it is on what is, I am sure, a shared issue. COSLA has concerns about the uptake of the provision for vulnerable two-year-olds. I was in discussions with the previous Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning about that. I stand to be corrected on the statistics, but I think that across

Scotland uptake was around 25 per cent; in my own authority it was 33 per cent—and that was seen as good.

We have some work to do to tackle the families of those vulnerable two-year-olds. We all share the commitment to early intervention, but we need to drill further into why take-up for vulnerable two-year-olds is not where it should be. Some of the things that I am hearing anecdotally suggest that we have not been clear enough about the link with the Department for Work and Pensions. A lot of parents are worried that there is a link to their benefits—that if they come forward, if they get a job, or if their child does not perform or whatever, somehow that will affect their benefits. I just want to raise that point.

The Convener: You may well get an opportunity to do so again through the questioning. Just before I finish on this subject, we have not figured out where the £86 million is, but I want to congratulate the local authorities on all the good work they have done to make sure that the 600 hours target has been achieved.

Councillor Primrose: Thank you.

Ross Thomson (North East Scotland) (Con): The committee had a submission from the fair funding for our kids group, which talks about the expansion of childcare from 600 hours to 1,140. It says:

“Even if councils used every single space to deliver the promise of 1,140 free hours by the end of 2020, Scotland would still be 26,000 places short. With an average of 40 children in a nursery, this means 650 new nurseries minimum”.

Do COSLA and the Scottish Local Government Partnership agree with that estimate?

Councillor Primrose: We are not in a position to agree with that—we would need further reference back, because I do not know where the figures are coming from. I know that the fair funding issue has come up.

I may have mentioned earlier that we still need to build in flexibility. We have our 600 hours, which I think has been delivered very well. I am going to go on about it, but it really bites into what we are trying to do. Increasingly, we will build in flexibility to our 600 hours and we need to build in flexibility to the 1,140 hours as well. I make the plea here and now that we need to get on with that.

Mr Scott asked me before whether I am concerned about the workforce and the pace of getting to the 1,140 hours. I think that I did not quite answer his question. We need to get on with that. We need a blended approach. We need to get young people trained and get older people back into the workforce. The issue of the 1,140

hours and flexibility is one that we really need to drill into.

Councillor Henry: I agree that we do not know where the figures are from, so I cannot comment on them. I should perhaps set the context that for 38 years, before I came into this post, I was an early years specialist, working in education at local and national level. I am delighted to see the expansion of early years provision, although I have some concerns—for example, do we have enough places at the moment? No, we do not.

In Renfrewshire, we are working with Children in Scotland to review childcare provision within the authority. It may be that we need to build some additional places or extend but, at the moment, we have no idea where that money will come from. To have that 1,140 hours provision in place within three years of 2017 will not always be easy.

As an early years professional, I feel that the recent advice that we should utilise spare accommodation in museums and art galleries is quite insulting to young children. There is an issue of quality there that we need to address. Certainly in my authority, where we have extended nurseries—in fact, we are building a new nursery at the moment as part of an additional support needs school—the quality of the learning environment is crucial.

The other thing that I am concerned about is what it means when we have blended provision. One suggestion is that childminders and nurseries share the care, as we used to call it. It used to happen all the time, but we were very clear on early education—and I will say early education instead of early learning, because I believe that you can learn not to put your hand in a fire but it is much better to be educated about it. We need to be very clear on what the balance is and what a parent's right to that allocation will be. That needs to be sorted out for the 1,140 hours.

We need to look very carefully at young children under five being in care provision for a longer day than our 18-year-olds are in school. I agree with Naomi Eisenstadt, the Scottish Government's poverty adviser, that young children will not make cognitive and social gains from two compressed days, particularly when they are living in poverty. All the research shows that we need five days of consistent education and care to make a difference.

I fully recognise that parents need care—

The Convener: Councillor Henry, are you making an opening statement?

Councillor Henry: No. I am finishing off answering the question that I was asked.

I realise that parents need care provision, but we need to be careful about what we provide for

them, and at present we do not know what we can provide for them.

The Convener: I think that Jane O'Donnell wants to come in.

Jane O'Donnell: It is in response to the question that Ross Thomson asked. I was struck by the idea that we will need 650 new centres. I think that officials across the public sector are concerned that we are going to measure the policy's success by looking at the number of shiny new centres that we build in our communities. We need to look at the blended approach that we have discussed, in which our colleagues in the private sector and our childminders all play a key role. We are concerned that we might build a number of fantastic new early years centres but they will not be populated by children. As our early years colleagues say, what we want is a lively, noisy, busy, happy environment for young children. There is concern that we will just focus on building a certain number of buildings, which is not really what we are trying to do.

What has emerged from the discussion that we have had at COSLA is that we need to look at the quality of early learning. We need to provide childcare and help people to get into work, as that is the wider economic responsibility that we have as local authorities, but we need to identify the purpose of the policy. If it is to provide quality early learning, we need to think about how we provide that and the resources that are associated with it.

Ross Thomson: Thank you for your answers. As you intimated, there will be a need for some capital investment, whether it is for new facilities, expansion or other processes.

No doubt you will be aware that the convener of the Scottish Local Government Partnership, Councillor Jenny Laing, stated on Monday in relation to the expansion of childcare:

"we have not had one single piece of information on what the capital investment will be or when the government will even begin to put milestones in place so we can at least start planning."

She said that, because of the reluctance to communicate details,

"it will now be impossible to implement the policy in the time promised".

I ask the SLGP to say what information is lacking and what impact that is having on capital plans and the ability to plan budgets. Given the promised timelines, how far behind are we?

Councillor Henry: We have no information on the amount of capital that will be available. Until we have that, we cannot plan in any detail. When we plan new facilities, we plan with parents. They are involved right from the beginning in the design of all our new education establishments. That

takes time and process, and then there is building time. We have to plan the building programme. It is therefore unlikely that we would have it all completed within four or five years. Another factor is the availability of contractors to build facilities.

Ross Thomson: Is that also COSLA's experience?

Councillor Primrose: COSLA is in a slightly different position in that both my officers and I are involved with the Scottish Government. We sit on, I think, all the strategic-level boards that look at the matter, so we perhaps have a better understanding of what might be coming down the track. Would that be fair to say?

Jane O'Donnell: I am aware that a lot of work is going on, and we are reassured that this is being considered at the highest level. There is awareness of the timescales at both the official and political levels. We would have to agree that there is a concern across all local authorities. If we were going to be asked to deliver the entirety of the programme by 2020, that is becoming more and more difficult as delays continue. However, there is recognition of that, and I expect that we will see some progress in the new year.

Ross Thomson: My final question is on a slightly different theme. In its submission, the fair funding for our kids group points to a case study of a lady whom it calls Jane, who could not get her son into a partnership placement with a private nursery. In the end, West Lothian Council advised her that she could use a council one that was near to her home. She got a placement about 10 minutes away in Edinburgh, because there is a relationship between the City of Edinburgh Council and the bordering councils, and West Lothian is reimbursing Edinburgh for that. She found it bizarre that that happened. Why do we have that situation in local authorities? In the case that I described, a resident had to go to a neighbouring council for something that she could not get in her community, but her local authority is paying for it. It seems a bit strange.

10:30

Councillor Primrose: I think that that issue came up when I previously gave evidence to the committee, and the colleague who was with me then said that we have arrangements in place for cross-boundary placements. The situation that you cited is an example of that. The written submission that COSLA sent to the committee the other day has examples of other local authority areas where the arrangements are more fluid. In particular, I think that there is an example from West Lothian.

Jane O'Donnell: Just to be very open, I am a resident of West Lothian and also a working parent. I accept the validity of the perspective that

Mr Thomson described. My perspective is that my youngest child had high-quality early learning, plus wraparound, which was available to me to buy as additional hours. That is definitely what we want in local authorities, and I think that it is a strength as well. The point is that there are also good stories across all local authority areas.

You would expect us to ensure that there are cross-boundary arrangements so that if a resident of, for example, East Ayrshire travels to North Ayrshire for their work and it is easier for them as a parent to put their child into an establishment in North Ayrshire, the local authorities are able to make that happen. That we are committed to that and building it up is a real strength. I hope that that will help to alleviate some of the concerns experienced by the lady who was mentioned and others.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): I will begin by following on from some of Ross Thomson's questions. On the lead-in time for new facilities, I totally accept that it is not all about brand-new shiny buildings. However, Councillor Henry outlined a bit of a timeline. From what I have learned from my informal discussions, it seems that four years is an aggressive timeline for getting new facilities and the timeline for the new childcare provision is possibly three years. Would you say that those timelines are reasonable rules of thumb for the time that you need to build new facilities and so on?

Councillor Primrose: I am fortunate that I have frequent discussions with the minister. I had a meeting with him a few weeks ago when he made it quite clear that he does not expect there to be a point in the calendar when we will go from 600 hours to 1,140 hours for childcare provision. The development will be undertaken in a number of tranches. It is difficult for COSLA to answer your question on timelines on behalf of its members. For example, Clackmannanshire will need a lot less time than Edinburgh will. The timelines are a matter for each individual council, but I know that all the councils that I represent are committed to the additional provision for childcare. Each council realises that health, educational and GIRFEC benefits will come from having 1,140 hours of childcare provision. I know that each of them will do its best to provide that and that they are already planning for it. We have builds coming out of the ground that will encompass what is necessary to provide 1,140 hours, and staff are already planning for that. However, we have to up the pace a bit.

Daniel Johnson: According to the figures that I have seen, only a minority of local authority childcare facilities can offer lunch at the moment, which gives us a sense of the scale of investment that is required. Do you need capital plans in place

within the next six months, 12 months, 18 months or whenever? Roughly when do you need them to be in place so that you can be sure of being able to provide the 1,140 hours by the end of this parliamentary session?

Peter Macleod: It is difficult to answer your question definitively, but we will have the plans in place as soon as we can. It is about more than just the capital investment. A number of us who are here are involved in major school estate management programmes. Clearly, the lead-in time from planning to building to having operational buildings is quite considerable. The proposed expansion involves a doubling of hours for childcare and about 20,000 more early years and childcare workers in Scotland. The capital investment aspect to which you referred is clearly critical to the three or four-year timeframe for the lead-in, but the workforce required to deliver the doubling of the hours is a critical aspect, too—I suppose that the two things go hand in hand.

As Councillor Henry and Councillor Laing have confirmed, the position of the Scottish Local Government Partnership is that, if we continue to have uncertainty about not only the capital element but the elements of workforce and revenue, we will be up against it, despite our ambition and commitment to delivering the policy's aims. The sooner we get confirmation about the available funding the better. Otherwise, as Councillor Laing has said, we will struggle to deliver the policy in the timeframe indicated.

Daniel Johnson: Thank you very much; you have neatly anticipated my next question, which is about workforce. Doubling up the hours means that we need more people as well as more facilities. What sort of capacity do we need for training those people—are you confident that we have that in our colleges? Also, what reflections do you have on the balance between trained childcare professionals and teachers within the learning context?

Councillor Henry: Perhaps I could take that question, because immediately before I became a convener I was responsible for both undergraduate and postgraduate early years courses at one of our universities. It would take two years at college to train those 20,000 nursery workers at the basic grade. We need to be sure that our colleges have that capacity. We will also require staff at management level, which is something that we have not looked at. We have looked just at the basic nursery provision—the 20,000 nursery workers. They need two years at college, or they can be trained on the job. However, that requires a mass of workers who have already been trained to assist and assess them.

As nurseries get bigger, their management will need to be led by degree-educated staff. Day care nurseries can be managed by people who are educated to ordinary degree level. If the nursery is in a school, that brings much greater management provision. We then need to look at job sizing, and the job-sizing tool is not accurate for nursery provision. There is also the issue that headteachers and teachers are not there for 12 weeks. If there is flexible provision in the nursery, extra staffing is needed. The hours are different and, as has already been alluded to, there are additional catering and cleaning costs. There is therefore an issue concerning the 20,000 workers, but there is also a management issue that needs to be looked at.

The difference between a BA professional childhood practitioner and a teacher is that the former will typically have come through the college or Scottish vocational qualification route, taking an additional SVQ and carrying out a year at university—which could be done part time over two years—or doing some further vocational qualification assessment. A teacher would have completed the general four-year BA honours course, which would have looked in much more depth at education processes.

Councillor Primrose: I have a couple of points to make. Our local authorities are already thinking about that. Modern apprenticeships will be critical. I know that I am not here representing my own authority, but we have already gone out to get more modern apprentices. Local authorities have a critical role in nurturing their own people as well.

I have already raised with both Jamie Hepburn and Mark McDonald the idea that in developing the young workforce, which is a very good piece of work, we already have a framework for how to do this. If we think about all the work that has been done in science, technology, engineering and mathematics—the amount of work that has gone into the vocational and the academic stuff—I think that we have a scheme that we could use.

As I have said before to this committee, we have to have a blended approach. We may struggle to get 20,000 young people interested, so we have to look at our workforce at large. We have parents who have brought up their own children; the hours might suit them. We should be encouraging older people back into the area, as they have expertise and so on. I agree that it is something that we need to get on with, but some good work has been started already.

Daniel Johnson: We could go on for a long time on that topic. If you have any assessment of the capacity that is required in terms of people and the timelines for capital, it would be interesting to see it.

We talked about the gaps in numbers, and there is one in take-up. The Care Inspectorate has just released figures that show that the take-up of funded childcare is about 70 per cent, but the Government's recent figures claimed 99 per cent. Within that detail is the rather remarkable fact that Argyll and Bute has 115 per cent take-up. Which of the two figures—70 or 99 per cent—is closest to reality?

Councillor Henry: That depends on which age group we are talking about.

Daniel Johnson: It is four-year-olds.

Councillor Henry: With four-year-olds, I think that take-up is more likely to be nearer 97 or 98 per cent. In fact, we have 108 per cent, but part of that is double counting because of children attending more than one facility.

Daniel Johnson: If we want to consider the number of children who benefit rather than the number of places that are taken up, the Care Inspectorate figure is more likely to be right, is it not?

Councillor Henry: I cannot say for definite.

Councillor Primrose: We have not had time to reflect on the matter. However, we must take into account the fact that parents are not required to put their children into early years education. A lot of it is parental choice; we are not a nanny state. I can no more force a parent to put their child into early years than I can force somebody to put them into the vulnerable two-year-olds group.

There is work to do on whether we have a rate of 75 or 115 per cent. I would go for somewhere in the middle.

The Convener: I suggest that every council should look for 115 per cent. That would be a very impressive figure.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): My question follows on from themes that have been touched on and concerns access to nursery teachers. In recent discussions that I have had with trade unions, they have expressed a lot of concern about the definition of access to a teacher. Some media coverage this week showed that just over one in four pre-school pupils do not have access to a nursery teacher, but some of the concerns that have been expressed to me relate to access being defined as broadly as having a nursery teacher who has no direct contact with children but who advises or directs childcare workers. Is the issue that access to nursery teachers is not well defined or is it simply the reality of budget constraints over recent years?

Councillor Henry: It is both, to be honest. There is a lack of definition of what a nursery teacher does. As a former nursery teacher and

educator of nursery teachers, I find that a source of some regret.

There has been a move on nursery teachers for a number of years. In Renfrewshire, we have taken the position that nursery teachers are a valuable part of the nursery team. They provide particular skills, especially during children's transition into primary. We have improved the number of teachers in our nursery team. One of the first things that we did when I became convener of the education and children policy board was to increase that number by 50 per cent, but we still do not have enough.

All our centres have regular access to a teacher, depending on the needs in the centre. Some of our centres have a higher concentration of deprivation or particular problems, so some of them have a teacher who works directly with the children and the staff whereas, in others, the teacher is more of a consultant who guides the childcare staff. That depends on the facility.

10:45

Councillor Primrose: I have just confirmed with my colleague Jane O'Donnell that nursery teachers are not within the protected teacher numbers, so Ross Greer is right to ask about budgets. I dare say that we will come on to budgets but, if that is not part of the protected amount in the budget, there will be an element of budget constraints, because we have to protect stuff such as private finance initiative payments and our teacher numbers.

A more positive point is that, by 2018, more nurseries in deprived areas will have a teacher, which I think will make a difference. A lot of them already have a teacher, but in more deprived areas, that will start to make a big difference. The issue is about both elements.

Councillor Henry: I am sorry; I do not want to correct my colleague Stephanie Primrose but, by 2018, there will be a teacher or a BA childhood professional in place—it will not necessarily be a teacher. That is an issue if it is one or the other because, unless we know what the remit is and what the difference is, how do we allocate people appropriately?

Ross Greer: That makes a significant difference, particularly in the transition to primary school, and even with things such as the identification of additional support needs. We will get on to that later.

I have one final question on this topic. How do you expect the ratio to fare as we move towards the increase in hours? Currently, roughly one in four children do not have access to a nursery teacher.

Councillor Primrose: That has to be seen against the backdrop of the workforce and we have to take this back to basics. When we increase our workforce to step up to 1,140 hours, what will we be looking for? Will we be looking for nursery care workers or qualified nursery teachers? Jacqueline Henry will correct me if I have used the wrong terms—I apologise; I am a secondary teacher, so I am not as up to speed on the early years qualifications. The position will depend on how things shape up in the future.

Councillor Henry: We have an opportunity to look carefully at nursery education and at what we mean by nursery education and care. It is time that we had some evidence on what difference having a teacher can make. There is evidence from other countries—there is evidence from Kathy Sylva, who was a Scottish Government adviser some time ago—that having a teacher makes a qualitative difference to young children. From my reading of recent research, that is still the case. We need to look at that.

That is not to denigrate the work of BA childhood professional or childhood practitioners, who do a marvellous job. However, we need to recognise that there are differences in skills and differences in their knowledge and experience. We need to utilise all that to promote the education and care of young children.

Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP): I have a question for Councillor Henry. You clearly have a lot of views on how provision should be delivered and on the issues with providing the 1,140 hours. What engagement has the SLGP had with the Minister for Childcare and Early Years?

Councillor Henry: To my knowledge, there has not been a great deal of engagement with the minister.

Gillian Martin: Why is that?

Councillor Henry: For a number of months, we were not really recognised, because our authorities were previously part of COSLA and then we moved away from COSLA.

Gillian Martin: Have you asked for a meeting with the minister?

Councillor Henry: I am not sure. I would need to check that with the SLGP's leadership.

Gillian Martin: It strikes me that, if I had strong views about the delivery of the hours, the first thing that I would probably do is engage with the minister. Are you willing to say on the record that you would like to have a meeting with the minister?

Councillor Henry: Yes, and I have engaged with previous ministers on a number of issues—

Gillian Martin: But not in this case—not at this crucial point, when you say that you cannot plan.

Councillor Henry: I was part of a recent meeting that COSLA hosted, when I questioned the cabinet secretary, John Swinney.

Gillian Martin: To have a frank and open discussion of your concerns about the delivery of the programme that the Government has pledged to deliver as part of the Scottish National Party manifesto, a meeting with the Minister for Childcare and Early Years—such as the meeting that Councillor Primrose had—would surely be the number 1 priority for a group such as the SLGP.

Peter Macleod: As we indicated, we expect an announcement from the Government about the level of resource, the timeframe and the programme towards the provision of 1,140 hours. The issues that COSLA and the SLGP have raised, which are being relayed to the committee now, anticipate what the programme will look like and what the resource commitment will be. When we know that, engagement will have more meaning, as we can discuss what we believe that we can deliver against the backdrop of the resource.

That is not to deny your question, and I will ask that we go back and check what the interaction has been with other parts of the SLGP's leadership. I take your point that the concerns that our colleagues in COSLA have indicated are well known by ministers and the cabinet secretary. Indications of resource commitment are to be made soon and that would be an apposite point at which to engage in further discussions about the reality of delivery against the timeframes.

Gillian Martin: I am glad to hear you say that because, although I am hearing about direct engagement between ministers and COSLA, I am hearing from you, "We cannae dae this, we cannae dae this, we cannae dae this."

Councillor Henry: No—

Gillian Martin: I have to be frank with you—that is the impression that I am getting.

I will come on to the question that I had planned to ask. Does the current childcare offer from local authorities that COSLA and the SLGP represent meet parents' need for flexibility? What formal engagement have you had with parents to ascertain whether they think that it is flexible?

Councillor Primrose: I have already given the statistic that 97 per cent of carers and parents are satisfied or very satisfied with the service that they are provided with. We understand that we need to build in more flexibility, but our agreement and commitment were to get the 600 hours up and running, and councils are looking at flexibility now.

My authority has three trials going on—one is from 8 am to 8 pm—so we are actively working on that.

The voice of parents is very important; perhaps Jane O'Donnell would like to come in on that.

Jane O'Donnell: To support what Councillor Primrose said, COSLA officials have been having discussions with national parent groups, which are more representative than individuals, although individuals can raise their concerns locally. A concern relates to the fact that working parents require as much flexibility as possible in order to continue to work. We have a responsibility to our children and young people, but we also have an economic responsibility to ensure that people have access to work—we are not ducking that at all.

We have started on a strong basis with the 600 hours, which will build, and there is a place for our colleagues, childminders and other service providers to support us in doing that.

Some of the discussions about how the 1,140 hours of provision will be funded will be important to how local authorities provide their high-quality service. The childcare account option would prohibit local authorities from meaningfully planning and delivering a service for all parents, whether they work or not. That is about equity across the piece.

We need to know the number of children who are coming in so that we can identify how many establishments we will need and how many trained colleagues of whatever calibre we will need. That is our plea regarding the blueprint that is out for consultation. Great groundwork has been started but, in relation to the 1,140 hours, we will need clarity about funding to ensure that we deliver what we as local authorities are required to deliver.

Gillian Martin: The approach to funding could be informed by work that you could do now to ascertain the provision that people will want to access with regard to flexibility, location and whatever else. What are COSLA and the SLGP—my question is to Councillor Henry, too—doing to ascertain what parents want?

Councillor Henry: First, I apologise if you thought that we were saying, "We cannae do this." In fact, Mr Macleod and I have been talking about what we have done in advance of implementation of the Government's policy. We and my colleagues in the SLGP are at the forefront of developing policy. We do have engagement with ministers. We are a much smaller organisation than COSLA and most of our engagement with ministers comes through our leaders committee, which education conveners feed into, but we also have direct engagement with ministers.

On what we are doing with parents, we have just completed a survey of parents that showed that 50 per cent would prefer the traditional part-day provision for three to five-year-olds but 50 per cent would prefer more flexibility. In addition, we commissioned Children in Scotland to do a more involved piece of work that looked at not only early years childcare but out-of-school care, and the University of Glasgow has just completed a piece of research that we commissioned in which researchers spoke to parents on our behalf. We are therefore doing a lot with parents.

We also undertake biannual surveys of parents and I meet parent council chairs every six weeks to discuss issues such as early years childcare. Quite a lot of discussion with parents is going on.

Gillian Martin: Convener, it would be helpful if we could see the reports of those surveys.

The Convener: I am sure that that can be done.

Councillor Primrose: I have a quick point about that. Councils have a statutory duty to go out to parents for feedback every two years, which is what we do.

Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab): I am interested in the uptake of childcare by two separate groups. Stephanie Primrose says that we are not a nanny state and that we cannot make people send their children to nursery, but I have not come across a lot of families who say that they are not interested in the free childcare that is available. Figures from the fair funding for our kids group show that 89 per cent of all council nursery places for three to five-year-olds are for half days only. Do you think that that might have some impact on uptake?

Councillor Primrose: That is probably part of the issue. We need to have flexibility, which I think will be part of our next phase in going from 600 to 1,140 hours. I take your point about not being a nanny state. Some parts of my council ward have a high Scottish index of multiple deprivation rating, and I have met parents from there who have said to me, "It's not worth me taking my child in." We need to tackle that attitude, so we still have work to do on that. We are not a nanny state, but we need to do more to encourage such parents.

We have to start that engagement when children are in their very early years, and we need to involve health visitors and general practitioners in that, because GIRFEC involves more than just the education department. We all know the point that Harry Burns made very public, which is that if we can access such youngsters much earlier, we will have more chance of getting them into provision.

Johann Lamont: I have two different points to make. First, half-day nursery provision is an issue

for working parents. I abandoned taking my child to nursery because it was too complicated for me to fit in the half-days—and that was 20 years ago. I was fortunate, however, because I was able to arrange other provision. We need to think about working parents and we need to be reasonable.

I hear what Councillor Henry says about youngsters being in care—do not make me feel any more guilty than I used to feel—for 24 hours a day, or whatever. However, families balance their children's care in different ways. To be realistic, people are trying to manage their working life and look after children, so their childcare package has to reflect that. Having just two and a half or three hours of childcare in a morning or afternoon does nothing but add complications in that respect. I am interested to hear what you think could be done to deal with that.

11:00

Secondly, we need to consider people who are not in work. Do you have figures on, for example, youngsters who are registered to attend nursery but are less likely to attend for their full hours? The two things that we want childcare to do are support parents so that they can work and support youngsters who may be in difficult circumstances to learn. How do we address that?

Councillor Primrose: I absolutely agree with you about working parents. We are not in a perfect world, but if we were, childcare would be rolled out further. We all know that the need for childcare does not stop when a child reaches five—my boy is 18 and a half. In an ideal world, there would be provision up to, maybe, primary 7. I am more than aware that we are in financially difficult times, but we need to take that on board.

We are considering flexibility—I have mentioned services that are open from 8 until 8, wraparound care and so on. We have buildings that will be open for 52 weeks of the year. I, for example, do not have teachers' holidays any more—unfortunately. We need provision seven days a week, 52 weeks of the year, and that is where flexibility and the trials will be important.

On Johann Lamont's second question, I do not think that we have those numbers to hand.

Jane O'Donnell: I am sorry—COSLA does not have those numbers.

Johann Lamont: It would be interesting to look at access to provision among youngsters whose families are not working. How does the nursery pull them in if there is no support to get them into nursery? It is a challenge in schools, so I wonder whether it is also a challenge in nurseries.

Councillor Henry: We have been looking at provision within the community. We are quite lucky

in Renfrewshire in that our partnership provision and local authority provision are at almost the same level—the numbers are 34 and 33—and within the local authority provision we have 12 extended-day nurseries that are open from 7 or 8 in the morning until 6 pm 52 weeks a year. We need a range of provision in communities in Renfrewshire, and we have that. As I said, about half the parents who responded to our consultation still want part-day provision for three to five-year-olds. It may be that not every nursery will provide the full range, but within each community there will be a range of provision. We are looking at that just now, and at further work with child minders.

Johann Lamont: I have two brief final questions. The first is for clarification. I understand that it is expected that social care workers get the Scottish living wage. Will care workers in nurseries also get it? Does that have an implication for your budgets?

Secondly, in the context of there being significant cuts to local government funding, what capacity is there in the system to deliver childcare? Delivery of childcare is not just within education departments—planning departments and other bits of local government deliver it. What impact will budget cuts have on your ability to deliver the programme?

Councillor Primrose: All our staff are on the living wage. That is a big benefit.

We have to look at budgets. However, the 600 years—[*Laughter.*] It feels like that. The 600 hours are fully funded, so we hope that the 1,140 hours will also be fully funded.

Jane O'Donnell: It is important and valuable to ask about the degree to which we have funding for things such as delivery of early learning. We need to take into account the very integrated way in which we work in local authorities. The fact that a number of services support children and families might be the key to making sure that we get better take-up. As services are cut because of the level of local authority cuts over the past few years, there is less capacity in the system to make sure that we are delivering at the level that we want.

Johann Lamont: It is not just about funding for childcare. We also need to consider all the softer bits of the system—an example in schools is classroom assistants—that have gone. If your planning department is stripped away, what capacity will you have to deliver a programme of building nurseries?

Councillor Henry: I alluded to that earlier when I spoke about the capital programme.

My understanding is that the Scottish Local Government Partnership and my authority pay the Scottish living wage or more to our staff. However,

it is my understanding that in childcare—unlike in social care—the living wage is not a requirement, although many nursery care workers in the independent sector are paid the living wage. Budget cuts have had, and will continue to have, a massive impact on local authorities and on our ability to deliver everything that we would hope to deliver.

Richard Lochhead (Moray) (SNP): I have some quick questions on teacher numbers. We saw the statistics this week, which in some ways are welcome—for example, the increased teacher numbers in Scotland. However, the numbers have fallen in some councils, which shows that there are particular pressures in some parts of the country. I represent Moray, which I think showed the biggest decline—one of the biggest in recent times, at least—in this week's statistics. What fresh thinking is taking place in local government about attracting teachers into the profession?

Councillor Primrose: I agree that the teacher statistics that came out yesterday are very positive; we welcome them. I realise that Moray, Highland and Shetland are authorities that would have been sanctioned last year. There will be no sanctions this year, which is a very positive step. The underlying issue is about the workforce and a lot of good work has been taking place on that.

I will mention one piece of work in particular. The northern alliance is very proactive. It is a regional grassroots organisation that has looked at real problems. I read on the BBC website last night that there is a school in Fort William that offers higher computing studies, but has no computing teacher. That is the sort of thing that we are looking at.

There is a lot of very good practice around—in the northern alliance in particular. Within the northern alliance, schools have agreed to stop competing against each other and are looking at the whole issue. There used to be a lot of golden hellos and so on, which are perhaps not so popular now. The schools are seeing the situation as an issue for them all.

We need to work better within our schools. For example, if one school cannot offer advanced higher chemistry, we have to let another school do that. I think that our schools will increasingly move into specialist areas, so we will have to expect that children may need to go to a different school to have specific education. Not every school can deliver every single advanced higher: we have to accept that.

We have a lot of work to do to encourage people into the sector. When I was teaching, we were starting with a new curriculum and so on. It was very new, very shiny and very exciting. However, at the moment, when we look at

newspapers and at the media in general, education is up there all the time and there are bad news stories about budget cuts, bad behaviour in schools, buildings not being up to standard and so on.

As a profession—with the unions, COSLA and parliamentarians—we need to get education back on a firm footing. Look at lawyers: they are great—they help the underdog. Doctors save lives, and nurses are wonderful. And teachers? Well—they just take a lot of stick. We need almost to reinvent teaching as a profession. We need to encourage younger people to come in. We encourage into the profession people who have already had a career. That is being done in Aberdeen, where a lot of people—members are probably more aware of this than I am—who have come from the oil industry have been retrained and are going back out as teachers. We really need to be proactive—we need to get teaching back up there as a profession that people want to be in. It is a great job and we need to get that message out.

Richard Lochhead: I am glad to hear that, because I agree that the image that is broadcast and promoted by local authorities of teachers and education is very important. Often, our local headlines are dominated by the cuts, so young teachers who are looking at their map of Scotland perhaps have the wrong impression of certain parts of the country when they are thinking about where they may wish to work. In the future, I would like to hear more about the kind of approach that Councillor Primrose described.

Jane O'Donnell: I want to support what Councillor Primrose said. A number of things are actively being done by local government. Our colleagues in Aberdeen City Council and Aberdeenshire Council are working specifically with former oil and gas industry employees. We are also working on bringing into retraining council workers whose jobs might now be less necessary in the wider local government sector but who have a lot of skills.

We need to see the issue in the light of the wider issues around our rural and remote areas, where there is depopulation. We need to encourage people into rural and remote environments and communities through the real benefits that such areas can bring, which are often lost. We need to work with the initial teacher-training providers and the universities to encourage people from those communities to go into teaching. We also need to make sure that teachers in their probation year get the opportunity to work in rural areas so that they can benefit from being in that environment.

When I am doing my work with COSLA and I speak to teachers and headteachers in rural communities, it always strikes me how close they

are to their communities and the real benefits that that brings not just to the communities but to the teachers and their profession. We need to work with our wider partners to encourage people into our rural areas.

Councillor Henry: I agree with that. Local authorities are doing a lot to promote teaching as a positive profession. We call it “grow our own”. Every day, we are talking to young people in a much more positive way about the job of teaching. We also are in a relationship with one of the teacher education institutions, where we are becoming more involved at an early stage and hoping to have teaching students see our area as a positive place to go.

Councillor Primrose mentioned the northern alliance. It is a Scottish local government partnership of which Aberdeen City Council is part. Every local authority has voluntary partnerships. Certainly, in the ones that Renfrewshire Council is involved with we are beginning to work together on promoting teaching and on how to get more people coming forward to be teachers. I agree with what has been said; that is exactly what is happening.

Richard Lochhead: I have a more general question about allocation of resources. I fully appreciate that local government has difficult decisions to make. Today we are discussing the need for resources for education, but one concern that I have is that teachers are always expected to solve all of society's problems and to close the attainment gap, as if that will be made to happen only in the classroom. It will not be made to happen just in the classroom; it will be made to happen in wider society. How does local government join up all the policy objectives? What happens to ensure that when we are talking about closing the attainment gap, it is not just about what happens in the classroom? Local authorities look at the local housing situation, other deprivation factors and so on, so how is all that joined up?

Peter Macleod: I will start with that one, if that is okay. One of the heart-of-the-matter issues in the debate is the wraparound system. It is my very clear view that the policy that drives this is GIRFEC—getting it right for every child. I have said already that we in Renfrewshire are fortunate to have very deliberately put together an integrated children's services system. The answer to the question is that children's services planning is a commitment in each local authority that is discharged by its children's services planning partnership through the community planning arrangements to which Councillor Henry referred earlier.

We must avoid the danger that fragmentation of policy intent will take us back to a world before—as we did several decades ago—we integrated

services to replicate the conditions of the families that many of us live in, with children, in our communities and societies. Teachers are not going to fix poverty. What happens in classrooms is incredibly important, but it must not happen in the absence of social care—which is a key responsibility of mine—and in the absence of the application of the Christie principles on prevention, of housing provision and of all the other parts.

For example, our families first programme for the early years has generated £3 million in previously unclaimed benefits. Putting that money into the pockets of impoverished families has made a huge difference to the outcomes for their children—as much of a difference, potentially, as what happens in the classroom—but the two things need to join up.

I have a £200 million budget, which is led by me and Councillor Henry. We deliberately consider all the spend in terms of our population's needs. Renfrewshire Council has a well-developed needs analysis of our population—for example, we have just completed a survey of 11,000 young people. That is a unique thing that we do. The point is that local authorities have to join up their financial intent and children's services planning in order to ensure that GIRFEC, and not just what happens in schools, is the delivery point. That is the heart of the matter.

11:15

Richard Lochhead: Your point about the benefits is a powerful illustration. I am trying to understand in my head the wider issue of how a local authority joins up all the policies across the council. If a catchment area has a particular challenge with attainment, how does that link to inward investment strategies and benefits take-up, and not just to children's services? How are the council's wider responsibilities joined up?

Peter Macleod: The answer relates to community planning and the council's plan. I will not speak for all of the Scottish Local Government Partnership. In Renfrewshire, we have had a tackling poverty commission, which examined in great detail the kind of issues that you describe. We have absolutely clear views about where the issues lie in our communities. We join up our housing investment and job creation decisions and take account of all the measures that we need to have in place to ensure that we close the gap in all senses and not just in education. We have done through the tackling poverty commission and through lining up the strategic intent with investment of the money that we have available. In children's services, that is about planning. Council plans do that for the local authority as a whole, but we must also be aware of needs in an area and ensure that all the policies that the council talks

about are aligned towards need. We believe that we do that in Renfrewshire and I think that the Scottish Local Government Partnership would claim the same for its other participating authorities.

Richard Lochhead: I am tempted to ask the big question about why the attainment gap is so big if all those policies are joined up, but it would take a few hours to answer that.

The Convener: You will not get the chance to ask that.

I ask the witnesses to make their responses shorter because we still have quite a lot to get through. I apologise to Daniel Johnson that I will not be able to let him have a supplementary.

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): I thank the witnesses for coming in. I will start off with quite a simple question. For the committee meeting, we were asked to speak to a school in our constituency. Do you think that local authorities should engage with Parliament committee processes such as this?

Councillor Primrose: It is critical—I said that in my opening statement. We are not far apart—we are all politicians to a greater or lesser extent—and, as a society, we want the same thing, so it is critical that local authorities engage. We have to have a free and open discussion. I said at a national conference that I spoke at that we sometimes get too bogged down in the things on which we do not agree. I have tried very hard to get away from discussing teacher numbers, for example, because we just will not agree on the matter. However, there is no point in throwing the baby out with the bathwater; we have to accept the fact that we will not agree on the issue, park it and move on.

I am in a fortunate position because, through my COSLA job and through East Ayrshire Council, I have regular meetings with parliamentarians. It is important that the local authority has a voice because we want exactly the same thing, and committee meetings such as this are an ideal opportunity.

Fulton MacGregor: I am really glad that you answered that so positively because, as some of my committee colleagues know, I had real difficulty getting North Lanarkshire Council to agree to its teachers speaking to me about today's committee meeting, although we had a line of questioning that the clerks sent to the local authorities in advance, so that it was clear and transparent for them. The difficulty came as a surprise to me because I have a great working relationship with the schools in North Lanarkshire. I set up a meeting with them but as soon as the political figures—the education convener—became involved, tremendous barriers were put

up and the meeting did not happen. Do you have any idea why North Lanarkshire Council acted in such a manner?

Councillor Primrose: I could not answer on behalf of North Lanarkshire Council. I am very fortunate in that I know all of my teachers and have a very good relationship with them, so I have never encountered that. I am not sure that we could give you a definitive answer on the specific question of North Lanarkshire.

Jane O'Donnell: No; just to be clear, I do not think that COSLA could comment on that. However, our position is that we would encourage parliamentarians to liaise with their communities in the same way as we would expect elected members to do. We offer apologies that that happened—I am sure that it is a one-off incident; it is certainly not a position taken across local government.

Fulton MacGregor: I reiterate that it is important to have that relationship. I was looking to speak to teaching staff in high schools so that I could come to the committee prepared to highlight the concerns of teachers in my constituency, and I feel really disappointed that that did not happen. The schools in the area do a fantastic job, working—as we have discussed and as other members have said—in difficult circumstances. I have a lot of faith in headteachers.

That brings me to my next line of questioning. Should headteachers have more say in the delivery of education, given the plans, and will that help to meet the attainment gap challenges? I address that to Councillor Henry.

Councillor Henry: Speaking for my own authority as well as the SLGP authorities, I think that it is right that our headteachers have the greatest say—in fact, the say—on learning and teaching in their schools. As a former headteacher myself, I consider headteachers to be the leaders of learning—that is what they want to do.

Councillor Primrose: Could I say something, very quickly, about Fulton MacGregor's first question?

The Convener: Yes.

Councillor Primrose: I was fortunate to be at one of the North Lanarkshire schools recently with Mr Hepburn and Mr Swinney, as part of DYW, and we could not have been made more welcome, to be honest. I think that maybe Fulton MacGregor caught them on a bad day.

I would agree with what Councillor Henry has—

The Convener: Can I just come in there? To be fair, the point that Mr MacGregor made was not about the schools, because his relationship with them has been excellent.

Councillor Primrose: I beg your pardon.

The Convener: His point was about the education authority and the fact that it stopped him from going to the school, so those are two different points, Councillor Primrose.

Councillor Primrose: Okay, I take that on board.

Within what we would call the local government family, it is becoming increasingly clear that there is an agreement—our response on the governance review is not out at the moment but will be out as soon as possible; it was agreed yesterday—that headteachers are happy with what devolved management they have. That goes back to what Councillor Henry was saying.

The devolved school management toolkit has devolved 95 per cent of the budget. Headteachers do not want to be business administrators; they do not want to have to do things that we do—they do not want to have to interview every single headteacher or have responsibility for human resources or all the finance stuff. They want to lead learning communities.

Another issue that I would have with putting the pressure on headteachers is that if we are serious about tackling bureaucracy at one level—which is something that I think we have all signed up to and which is going ahead—we cannot add bureaucracy at another level. We cannot tackle bureaucracy and then add more; it just does not add up. Increasingly, our teachers have seen that.

Going back to some points that were made earlier on, I am concerned that if we put more and more pressure on headteachers, who do a difficult job and do it very well, and headteachers do not want that, we will have problems with recruitment. If we cannot recruit, we cannot attain. What we have at the moment is ideal: we have checks and balances. That is where headteachers, and certainly local authorities, want to be.

Fulton MacGregor: Can I come in on a slightly different point?

The Convener: Yes.

Fulton MacGregor: It still relates to the attainment gap. Our witnesses will be aware of the programme for international student assessment results that were announced last week—"Uncomfortable reading" is the term that quite a few people have used about them, and I agree with that—and will know that John Swinney brought the matter to the chamber and dealt with it head on, which I felt was the right thing to do. Various stakeholders are involved in ensuring that the education system is as good as it can be. How will councils respond to the PISA results?

Councillor Primrose: I will respond to some of that, then hand over to Jane O'Donnell. We must accept that the PISA results make for difficult reading—I do not think that anybody has welcomed them with open arms—but the message that I want to get out today is that they are only one piece of work that was done 18 months ago and tested only one specific thing. The PISA study compares apples with pears, because the Scottish education system is completely different from the Chinese education system—so PISA is comparing matters that probably cannot be compared. The PISA study is just one piece of research, and two of the Deputy First Minister's international advisers have more or less made the same point, which is that it makes interesting reading but cannot be viewed as a complete picture of Scottish education, as it is just a snapshot.

Councils are not complacent about the results, though, and have identified that we have work to do—we are not shying away from that. We have taken the results on board, although we have reservations about how the research was done.

I will pass over to Jane O'Donnell.

The Convener: No. I want Councillor Henry to respond first.

Councillor Henry: I agree that the PISA results do not make for pleasant reading for anyone in Scottish education, never mind those in this room. However, a lot of the PISA results do not come as a great surprise to us. We have known for some time that there are problems in literacy, numeracy and science. However, local government is attempting to improve matters; for example, my local authority has invested money in a literacy development programme with the University of Strathclyde that works with not only our primary school colleagues but teachers in secondary schools. We are starting to see results from that, although it is very early days. We are also beginning to look at numeracy and are having discussions with university colleagues about that, because we need to look at evidence.

However, we cannot consider literacy, numeracy and so on in isolation from children's services and the team around the child. We also need to look at the context of what has happened in Scottish education: we have lost 4,000 teachers, and we cannot make a cake with only half of the ingredients. We are improving the situation at the moment. In my local authority, for example, we have used our own resources to increase the number of teachers significantly, and across Scotland teacher numbers have increased by 253. To put that in context, though, when the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Constitution was the leader of my council, the authority lost 250 teachers.

There have been issues like that and major cuts to council budgets, all of which have affected teaching and learning. In addition, the number of classroom assistants has been cut throughout Scotland. The reduction in all those resources has had an effect. What we need to do now is to look at the best evidence to see how we can improve.

Fulton MacGregor: I thank the panel for their responses. I know that the question on the North Lanarkshire Council situation was difficult to answer. I will make available to our committee convener the letter that I will be sending to the education convener of the council and its chief executive.

The Convener: Thank you. We will discuss that at some point.

Liz Smith now has a question for the panel.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Councillor Primrose, on the back of the PISA results and the education secretary's statement to Parliament about them, COSLA commented in a newspaper:

"There is nothing in these results that suggest a change of governance will lead to improvement in these particular curricular areas."

COSLA said in its letter to the committee that it believes that the governance review is based on "flawed assumptions" and is "not based on evidence." I take it that, in its contribution to the governance review, COSLA will argue for the status quo.

Councillor Primrose: I do not think that we are arguing in favour of the status quo; we are arguing for time to embed some of the things that have come through already. The national improvement framework has just come in and childcare provision is being increased from 600 to 1,140 hours. Education will not change overnight—local authorities, schools, headteachers and teachers need some time to let all those things bed in.

11:30

Liz Smith: Will the evidence from your headteachers back up that point and your belief that headteachers are not in favour of having more devolved responsibility?

Councillor Primrose: You will find such evidence in the submission from the Educational Institute of Scotland, which is public.

Liz Smith: Will we get it in the COSLA submission?

Councillor Primrose: Is it in our submission, Jane? We put that through yesterday.

Jane O'Donnell: On a point of clarification, our submission does not include survey findings.

Since the announcement of the governance review, we have brought the local government family together on a regular basis and have asked the question, “What is holding you back?”—I am talking about the organisations and trade unions that represent our teachers and our headteachers in primary and secondary schools. That is an important discussion to have. We have asked what is holding them back from delivering, and the representative organisations are not saying that the local authority is holding them back. Support is being provided.

We have questioned people quite closely on that, because it was important that we took that position to our elected members so that they understood it before they signed it off. We have had a number of discussions and the position has been that the local authority is not holding our teachers and headteachers back.

Liz Smith: Thank you for that. You have criticised the Government quite strongly for not having an evidence base. That is why I am asking whether COSLA’s position is evidence based. As a committee, we want to work out what the best thing to do is, and that must be based on evidence.

I want to ask about the powers issue. Are there powers that you feel ought to be further devolved to schools?

Councillor Primrose: We have been in frequent discussions with our trade unions and the evidence that we have is that, generally speaking, headteachers are comfortable with where they are, although they would like more money. The decision on that will be made later, but the devolved school management toolkit is there and headteachers have control over what they want to have control over. Generally speaking, they have 95 per cent of the budget, so they have control over learning and teaching; and they have control over things that go on in the classroom, which is important. Councils maintain the checks and balances, which is important, too, but trade union colleagues are telling me that headteachers are happy with the responsibility that they have and, as I said earlier, they are happy with their role. They do not want to become business managers; they do not want to have any more responsibilities that take them away from the role of headteacher, which is to lead learning and teaching.

Liz Smith: If that is correct, why have there been successive declines in the standards in Scottish schools, which nobody wants to see? Why are people content with the system that we have when standards are declining?

Councillor Primrose: To an extent, Councillor Henry has answered that: we have budget issues. That cannot be taken out of the debate.

Councillor Henry: There have also been issues to do with the pressures that teachers have felt in relation to the implementation of curriculum for excellence, which I know the committee has discussed. At times, the national advice has not been the clearest. I am told by our headteachers that they have had concerns about the curriculum and about the assessment process that the Scottish Qualifications Authority originally put in place.

We have had a period of budget cuts to services that support schools and in schools, such as classroom assistants, and 4,000 teachers have been taken out. In addition, the information and advice on the new curriculum has not always been the clearest, and the position has sometimes changed very quickly. The national organisations have changed over the same period: Learning and Teaching Scotland and Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Education have come together as Education Scotland.

There has been a period of significant change and downward pressure on resources—that is an issue. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development report on Ontario noted the need for increased resources and how those allowed schools there to flourish.

Liz Smith: My final point is on exactly that. You are right to say that there has been confused guidance. One of the most interesting statistics that came out yesterday concerned the comparison between local authorities in getting to level 4 by S3. There was a huge variation across the country. I do not believe that that is to do with any differences in the pupils and the staff in those local authority areas; I firmly believe that it is to do with delivery of the curriculum for excellence, which is different across different regions. As the two groups that represent local authorities, do you accept that delivery of the curriculum for excellence has been a fundamental problem in raising standards?

Councillor Primrose: We have to look at why curriculum for excellence is there and be careful that we do not assess education’s success purely in terms of exam passes. We have seen good exam passes this year—the second-highest pass rate ever—but the curriculum for excellence is designed to broaden the experience, so that schools do not just focus on academic skills but consider the whole person, including their need for vocational skills. You will be aware of the four capacities.

We are still bedding in and there are still things to iron out. Some of the issues that have been raised recently about trying to cut the bureaucracy that is involved in curriculum for excellence are helpful. However, I believe that the curriculum for excellence is a good piece of work. A couple of

weeks ago, I had visitors from France who had come over specifically to talk about curriculum for excellence, and they are replicating it in their area of France. I think that COSLA would be of the opinion that the curriculum for excellence is the way forward.

Liz Smith: I am not saying that it is not the way forward; I am saying that there are serious issues around its delivery. There are some very good councils that normally perform extremely well against the national average, but yesterday we saw that they were not performing well. That was not because of the teaching; it was because of the timing and the structure of courses. That is surely an issue for COSLA.

Councillor Primrose: I would think that it was more of an issue for Education Scotland.

Councillor Henry: We need to be careful that we do not have a simplistic analysis of the reason for a decline in standards. The issue is multifaceted and multilayered. There are perhaps issues with parts of the delivery, but there are other issues as well. What we are looking at is almost a perfect storm, where everything has come together at the same time.

On delivery, I would use a teaching analogy. If you teach a class something and four children do not get it, you might want to target those children; if 11 or 12 children do not get it, you might ask yourself whether your delivery has been adequate to enable the content to be delivered properly; and if 25 children do not get it, you need to start looking at your own communication and the way that you taught the lesson. The ups and downs across Scotland are perhaps a result of issues with the communication and delivery of the content.

Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD): On the same theme, was COSLA on the curriculum management board?

Councillor Primrose: Yes.

Tavish Scott: You will, therefore, be familiar with the 20,000 pages of guidance that teachers have been subjected to over the past nine years on the curriculum for excellence.

Councillor Primrose: I have been a teacher and I am aware of that, yes.

Tavish Scott: What did COSLA do on the curriculum management board to try to ease back the amount of guidance, given the very fair point that you made in response to Richard Lochhead about the teaching profession?

Councillor Primrose: I do not sit on that board, but Jane O'Donnell does.

Jane O'Donnell: It is an officer-based board and I represent COSLA on it. We have

acknowledged the concerns that teachers and headteachers have raised about that, and we have received a number of assurances that our colleagues in the other agencies are considering the issue and taking it seriously. To be fair, we have allowed that process to take place. With the recent interventions by the Deputy First Minister, a degree of pace has been introduced to the process, and there has been a full commitment—which I think has now been upheld—to reduce the huge amount of documentation that goes to our teaching colleagues. Our colleagues in the trade unions and on that management board tell us that that means that we now have a new set of guidance, and we must give that time to bed in—that picks up some of the points that have been raised.

COSLA was concerned that our teachers and headteachers had a large amount of bureaucracy to deal with and we accepted that we had a role, to some extent, in helping them with that. We also asked our colleagues in the SQA and Education Scotland to assist. They were doing so, and a degree of pace was then injected by the Deputy First Minister—

Tavish Scott: They did so only after John Swinney got a grip of the situation this summer. We have had nine years of this. As a teacher, you will know how long this has been going on. Nothing had happened over the past eight years until this summer, had it? How many statistics have been presented to the committee on how much teachers have had to deal with, including the 1,820 experiences and outcomes and the latest 600 pages of benchmarks? How is any teacher meant to cope with all that?

Councillor Primrose: I take that on board. I am a teacher, and I think—

Tavish Scott: What did you do about the situation with the SQA and Education Scotland?

Councillor Primrose: Can I make a couple of points?

Tavish Scott: No. With respect, I think that you could answer the question.

Councillor Primrose: Okay. The teachers were not responsible for the 20,000 pages of documents—that was an Education Scotland and SQA responsibility, and I agree that it was cumbersome. We have agreed with the DFM that the information must be streamlined. There was support and councils did act to tackle the bureaucracy.

Tavish Scott: How did they act?

Councillor Primrose: I am trying to recall the date of the report.

Jane O'Donnell: It was October 2013.

Councillor Primrose: That was when initial responses started to take place. I agree that we had to up the pace, and the DFM was absolutely right—we agreed with him.

Tavish Scott: You accept responsibility for the situation that teachers find themselves in today. On Monday, in Shetland, teachers showed me the 600 pages of benchmarks that have just been issued. You would have known about the bureaucracy—you have been aware of it all—and you accept that it was part of your responsibility through your relationships with the Government, the SQA and Education Scotland.

Councillor Primrose: I would add one caveat. We do not issue the benchmarks—that is the responsibility of the SQA and Education Scotland.

Tavish Scott: I am well aware of that.

Councillor Primrose: We do not have control over—

Tavish Scott: You just passed it all on—you fed it all to teachers.

Councillor Primrose: With support from the centre. We do not have control over the content of exams or the assessment.

Tavish Scott: Obviously, I am well aware of that.

Jane O'Donnell: It is a useful point to raise. It is fair to say that there is a degree to which local authorities wanted to get it right, too. If we are advised by the professionals in Education Scotland and the SQA that that is what is required, our councillors have a responsibility to their communities and their children to make sure that they do not withhold that advice and guidance from teachers. We had a real concern for our workforce and a concern that our children and families should be getting what they needed from those—

Tavish Scott: I take your point, which is a very fair point, except that headteachers are your responsibility—as are teachers—and, to a man and to a woman, they were asking why you were sending them all that guidance. Why did you not reflect their views back into the system, where you have a role to challenge such things?

Jane O'Donnell: I think that discussions on that did happen in the CFE management board, and they involved not only us but other partners. Those discussions did happen.

Tavish Scott: Okay. I take your point.

I have one other question. COSLA's submission says:

"As the attainment fund has grown, core funding for local government in 2016/17 has reduced".

Does that mean that you have made a different argument before tomorrow's announcement of the budget to Parliament?

Councillor Primrose: Sorry—could you repeat the question?

Tavish Scott: Your submission to the committee says:

"As the attainment fund has grown, core funding for local government in 2016/17 has reduced".

Have you made a different submission to the Government in respect of the budget that will be announced tomorrow?

Jane O'Donnell: There has been on-going discussion between COSLA and the Scottish Government about local authority budgets and the education spend within those. I do not think that we are in a position to comment on that at the moment.

Tavish Scott: Okay. Thank you.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): I thank Newbattle community high school for hosting me on Monday, and I thank the Midlothian education authority for facilitating that. Their input has been very useful to my understanding of the issues.

The mainstreaming of pupils with additional support needs has been broadly successful, but there are issues around that. I am looking at a paper that says that 22.5 per cent of pupils are recorded as having additional support needs. There is probably a fairly wide spectrum, but that seems an awful lot—it is almost one in four students. According to the same paper, something like 4.6 per cent of all students have a co-ordinated support plan, which means that they have social, emotional and behavioural difficulties.

How are schools coping with that? Are they managing to balance the mainstreaming of pupils who can be challenging with the needs of the other pupils, for example?

11:45

Councillor Primrose: That is a fair point. We have discussed this before. I do not want to make it obvious, but recently I dealt with an incident involving one young lad who had severe emotional and behavioural difficulties. His behaviour was at the point at which it could cause harm to the rest of the pupils so those pupils were taken out of the classroom.

We agree with mainstreaming, but we always have to revert to GIRFEC. Every child has the right to have that education. The issue is very challenging and it will be no surprise that we come back to budgets. You know as well as I do that, in our core teaching budget, our teacher numbers

are preserved, which means that when education conveners and officers have to look at their budgets, we have to take our fair share of that. It means that we are losing ASN teachers and that is a real challenge. How do we keep looking after our most vulnerable children while we have to cut back and cut back? We have real challenges there.

Colin Beattie: Last year, spending on additional support for learning increased by £24 million, so more money was made available.

Councillor Primrose: I would need to see a breakdown of that. I do not have that figure broken down for me at the moment, but I would be happy to come back on it.

Colin Beattie: There is a statutory presumption that students will be educated in the mainstream but there are some qualifications around that such as whether it is incompatible with the education of the other children or whether it gives rise to significant unreasonable public expenditure. Can those things be quantified? How do you reach the conclusion that public expenditure is unreasonable or that the impact on other children's education is unreasonable?

Councillor Henry: In Renfrewshire, we have a developed system that includes a multidisciplinary group that looks at the needs of that child. Additional support needs provision is driven by the needs of the child. We have a presumption of mainstreaming, but we have a number of facilities, such as autism spectrum disorder bases in primary and secondary schools, and social, emotional and behavioural needs provision. To support pupils in the mainstream, we also have a number of support systems and 200 additional support needs assistants. We have a home link team, whose members go out and work with the parents of children who have special needs. We have a looked-after children link team and, of course, our children's services inclusion team and psychological services.

There are central local authority supports to assist schools in keeping children in the mainstream. In answer to the question about the governance review, local authorities do well in helping schools to deal with very difficult situations. The central resource is used cost effectively by not having £72,000 being spent in one school on two children.

Colin Beattie: Would it be correct to say that such support is becoming more centralised? You referred to that when you talked about all the other areas that are supporting children with difficult needs.

Councillor Henry: It is not centralised as such. There is a central resource that is utilised in schools through agreement with the headteacher

and the multidisciplinary team around the child, if there is one. The centre is the resource and the developer of the service, but the service is utilised in schools.

Councillor Primrose: I agree. We hold central teams, if you like, which are deployed to schools.

A strength of local authorities is that we wrap care around the child. If we have a youngster with ASN, we involve social work. We also have home care, and educational psychologists and speech and language therapists can be brought in to support the child. The child is at the centre. That takes me back to the point that I have been making every two seconds: GIRFEC operates at that level.

Councillor Henry: That support is only one phone call away. The school does not have to go round different agencies or services to arrange it; there is a single point of contact.

Colin Beattie: My discussions with Newbattle community high school have indicated that extreme behaviour in the classrooms is increasing. The school is located in an area of considerable deprivation and about 69 per cent of the pupils come from such an area. I was told that the behaviour is becoming more extreme and common, it is disruptive and time consuming for teachers to deal with and there is an impact on other pupils' learning. Do you acknowledge that such behaviour is becoming a more common problem?

Peter Macleod: Yes. In our discussions with primary and secondary teachers, we recognise the challenge in the system around additional support needs. As Councillor Henry said a minute ago, the central resource attempts to meet children's needs. There are a number of reasons why those needs are increasing. It is partly due to issues with diagnosis, and it is partly to do with the impact of poverty in particular areas, which can manifest itself in parental mental health and substance misuse issues and so on, which in turn have an impact on children.

My key point follows on from Councillor Primrose's comments. Should we seek to devolve more power to schools such as Newbattle, they could be left holding all that resource within the context of the school, the school management and the school community. Given some of the extreme challenges that you have heard about, we have a concern in the local government family about whether we should devolve more responsibility, particularly around additional support needs, to the unit of the school, rather than trying to manage a demanding agenda across a whole local authority area. The wraparound team in the child support system is working, despite the strains in the system.

Colin Beattie: Even without the more disruptive students, we are talking about 22.5 per cent of children having additional support needs. That seems a very high proportion.

Councillor Henry: The number of children with unrecorded additional support needs is thought to be much higher.

Councillor Primrose: Again, this is where early intervention comes in. If we look at speech and language therapy, a statistic that hit my desk a couple of months back was that, in one area, 70 per cent of children were not speech ready. At the point at which they enter education, they would be 10 to 18 months behind those who were speech ready.

Additional support needs vary—children may need SLTs or have behavioural needs, and there can be severe to moderate disabilities. If people have behavioural issues, we need to get in early. We can then help the child, which would be our ultimate goal, and close the attainment gap. Another consequence would be better behaviour.

Ross Greer: It would be interesting to know what role you hope to have in next year's review on the presumption of mainstreaming.

Mr Macleod touched on the point that I wanted to ask about: diagnosis. There are considerable inconsistencies between local authorities in the proportion of young people who have been identified as having an additional support need. Councillor Henry suggested that there may be huge numbers of children with unidentified additional support needs. Between local authorities with similar demographics, there can be a difference of 20 per cent or more in the numbers of those who are identified with additional support needs. Why is there that level of inconsistency? Surely there is not a genuine difference in the number of people with ASN.

Councillor Primrose: One of the points that we need to examine is the number of people who are coming through with additional support needs for language. For example, the big inner-city areas in Glasgow, Edinburgh or Aberdeen have a higher proportion of people who need support in English as a second language. If we go further afield to, for example, my authority, we find that the number of people who have additional support needs for language is considerably lower. Of course, as you know, all local authorities are signed up to addressing the refugee crisis, but with that comes the need for ASN provision. That partly explains why there is a difference.

Councillor Henry: I agree. Mr Macleod and I have referred to the families first programme. One of the things that we have learned from that programme is that children are often referred first about behaviour and it is only once the team gets

to know the child that they find all sorts of other problems behind the behaviour, some of which are related to poverty and some of which are not. For all the reasons that Councillor Primrose mentioned about the differences in authorities' demographics, we are becoming better at realising that children come from families, that the tensions and dynamics within a family sometimes have an impact on the child and that we need to address that.

Peter Macleod: Another matter that we need to consider is autism spectrum disorder. There have been changes in the diagnostic process for, and perceptions about, autism spectrum disorder in the past 10 years. The exponential, year-on-year increase in the numbers of children with ASD—I cannot quote the figures but I can find them and, perhaps, supply them to the committee later—tells a story, which is partly about variation because the system's diagnostic ability quickly to respond to concerns of that nature has been tested. There is a real issue in that field alone. That means that the partnership with the health service is critical.

Jane O'Donnell: Mr Greer asked whether local authorities would be part of the work going forward. We are a member of the advisory group on additional support for learning and will support the Scottish Government as it considers the matter early in the new year.

Ross Greer: To return to my previous point about nursery teachers, does the lack of genuine access—that is, contact time with a qualified nursery teacher—prove a barrier to early diagnosis and identification?

Councillor Primrose: We have to consider the new workforce that is coming in. We have to bear it in mind when we consider modern apprentices, for example. That is why it is critical that we have all partners on board. We sit on the advisory group for early years and we raise the issue. Such issues increasingly need to be built not only into the training for modern apprentices and people who are coming into early years education, but into basic teacher induction. We are in discussions with various people about that.

Councillor Henry: It is not a barrier. Childcare practitioners liaise daily with health professionals on issues to do with children's speech and language. Teachers come in with a particular skill in how they develop that and help to do that with other colleagues such as speech and language therapists and childhood practitioners. It would be a different discipline and a different look at it.

The Convener: The witnesses will be delighted to know that I have one last question: how would you spend the £100 million attainment fund?

Councillor Primrose: That is a lovely question for this time of day. Although nine authorities have

attainment challenge fund money, we have to recognise that there is poverty in all 32 local authorities. We have rural poverty and poverty in all stretches. Therefore, although £100 million is wonderful, I would want more to ensure that we target every local authority that has children who live in poverty.

You asked how we would spend the money. It would need to be spent across all services—

The Convener: How would you allocate it?

12:00

Councillor Primrose: I would ask a head of service to do that.

The Convener: How would you like to see the fund allocated across local authorities, never mind within the local authorities?

Councillor Primrose: I would like to see it allocated across all the services that go into schools. I would like to see it go to home care link workers, because they have a critical role.

The Convener: How would you decide how much of that £100 million goes to each authority?

Councillor Primrose: That would be a matter for the distribution and finance committee. Have I sidestepped that question?

The Convener: Beautifully.

Councillor Primrose: Sorry.

Councillor Henry: When it comes to allocating the money, all I would say is that I hope that Renfrewshire gets its fair share and our population is recognised in a way that it is not currently recognised.

The Convener: Remember that you are not here as a local politician.

Councillor Henry: We need to recognise deprivation and the real issue that it presents. At the moment, super sparsity has a greater weighting than deprivation in the allocation of the education budget. I do not minimise the expense that rural authorities, or authorities with large rural areas, have, but deprivation and the concentration of deprivation is a major issue. We have schools in our local authority area where 96 per cent of children live in SIMD 1. We have the poorest area in Scotland.

The Convener: Would you be supportive of anything that targeted the funding on those schools that had the greatest concentration of deprivation?

Councillor Henry: We need to look at universality and targeting. There are poor children at every school in my authority—even in those schools where there is 1 per cent or less SIMD.

There are two things to consider. First, teachers and staff move, so we need staff to be trained, regardless of where they are, so that they can benefit children throughout their career, across different schools and authority areas. Secondly, an element of targeting is necessary. That is the approach that we have taken in our authority, in our tackling poverty commission, which gave us £3 million, and in our plans for the attainment fund, to which we have at last gained access.

The Convener: I have a couple of things to say before we finish. The committee will write a letter to North Lanarkshire Council based on what Fulton MacGregor has said. I ask the SLGP to write to us about any contact that it has had with ministers on the matters that we discussed earlier.

Thank you very much for your time and patience and for your responses to the committee's questions.

12:03

Meeting continued in private until 12:12.

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