



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Education, Children and Young People Committee

Wednesday 3 November 2021

Session 6



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Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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EDUCATION, CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE COMMITTEE

7th Meeting 2021, Session 6

CONVENER

*Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)

*Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)

*James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)

*Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)

*Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green)

*Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab)

*Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con)

*Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Stephen Boyle (Auditor General for Scotland)

Tricia Meldrum (Audit Scotland)

Sharon O'Connor (Accounts Commission)

Rebecca Seidel (Audit Scotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Stephen Herbert

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Education, Children and Young People Committee

Wednesday 3 November 2021

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:30]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Stephen Kerr): Good morning, and welcome to the seventh meeting of the Education, Children and Young People Committee, which is being held virtually. The first item on our agenda is a decision on whether to take business in private. Are members content to take item 11 in private?

I am not hearing anything from anybody else, and I am getting “content” messages, so I think that we are all agreed.

Pre-Budget Scrutiny 2022-23

09:31

The Convener: Item 2 is evidence from the Auditor General for Scotland and officials from Audit Scotland and the Accounts Commission as part of the committee’s pre-budget scrutiny. Joining us this morning are Stephen Boyle, Auditor General for Scotland; Sharon O’Connor, Accounts Commission member; and Tricia Meldrum and Rebecca Seidel, who are both senior managers at Audit Scotland. I welcome you all—it is nice to see you with us this morning.

Before we move to the committee’s questions—as the witnesses might imagine, we have quite a few questions to get through—I invite the Auditor General, and then Sharon O’Connor, to give a brief opening statement.

Stephen Boyle (Auditor General for Scotland): Good morning, committee—I am delighted to join you this morning for your pre-budget scrutiny. I am responsible for the audit of central Government bodies, including the Scottish Government and the Accounts Commission, which is responsible for auditing local government bodies. Through our joint reports, we are able to look across the public sector and public spending in Scotland. Sharon O’Connor, who is a member of the Accounts Commission, was one of the commission’s sponsors for our joint report on “Improving outcomes for young people through school education”. Audit Scotland provides services both to me and to the Accounts Commission. Members of the audit teams that are responsible for our work on education outcomes, early learning and childcare and universities and colleges, and for our upcoming work on skills, are with us this morning.

Our report on improving outcomes looked at the national priority outcomes, how they were being achieved and how well public money was being used. The report found that, although outcomes have been improving, there is still wide variation across the country, and there has been limited progress in closing the poverty-related attainment gap, which remains wide. Of course, outcomes are not all about exams, and that is reflected in the national priorities and the national curriculum, but there are still gaps in the data that are available to assess whether those wider outcomes on health and wellbeing are being achieved.

The learning, wellbeing and economic circumstances of children and young people, in particular those who are living in the most challenging circumstances, have been affected by Covid-19, and addressing inequalities needs to be at the heart of the response to Covid-19, longer-

term recovery and improvement. Post-school education also plays a vital role in helping us to learn new skills and help Scotland's people to fulfil their potential. Scotland's colleges and universities make significant contributions to the economy and wider society, and our recent reports that focus on the financial position of the college and university sectors may also be of interest to the committee.

I am delighted to pause for a moment and hand over to Sharon O'Connor, and the four of us will look forward to answering the committee's questions thereafter.

Sharon O'Connor (Accounts Commission): I am very pleased to be here. I have been a member of the Accounts Commission for the past three years. My background is that I was chair of the Education Authority in Northern Ireland for five years, and previous to that I was a chief executive in local government. As the committee will be aware, the role of the Accounts Commission is to provide oversight of the performance of local government in Scotland. We do that in a range of ways, in partnership with our colleagues in Audit Scotland.

We are particularly interested in education and support for young people. As the Auditor General said, the work follows on from the previous review in 2014. Subsequent reviews have considered early years services and other areas that are related to the matters that are under discussion.

The Auditor General has already outlined the report's highlight findings, so I am content to leave it at that, convener.

The Convener: Thank you very much. I think that Tricia Meldrum was the lead senior manager on the March report, so we have a really good team of people from Audit Scotland with us.

James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP): I will ask a couple of questions about the Christie commission. The Auditor General talked about the pandemic. How has it led to "delivering 'Christie' at scale"? What are the lessons to be learned in policy approaches?

Stephen Boyle: I am happy to kick off and I am sure that Sharon O'Connor, Tricia Meldrum and Rebecca Seidel will wish to follow me with some examples.

You are right about the Christie commission. Like many organisations, over the past few months, we have reflected on the 10-year anniversary of the Christie report. There is a general consensus that its ambitions for moving towards a more preventative agenda, public sector reform and more clarity on what outcomes have been achieved from public spending have not yet been fully delivered.

We also referred to some of the barriers to the Christie recommendations being delivered. I will say a bit about those and how they relate to public services in a moment. We drew attention in particular to the fact that public bodies typically prioritise delivery of their activity around what their priority measures have been. That has acted as a barrier to some of the innovations that we would have expected to see in the delivery of public services.

However, the pandemic has changed that. There has been increased collaboration. The delivery of essential services to the people in the greatest need has disrespected some of the boundaries that had been barriers in the previous period. Public sector, private sector and third sector organisations have all worked collaboratively, set aside roles, responsibilities and, where appropriate, accountability arrangements and got services out to where they were most needed during the pandemic.

What that means in the future remains to be seen. We do not know whether it will act as a template for the sense that there is no wrong door—no wrong access point—to public services. We have to see where it will take us. There is some optimism that, if anything good can come out of the pandemic, the lessons of the past 18 months can act as a new accelerant to delivering some of Christie's ambitions 10 years on. We remain optimistic.

I will pause at that, because I am sure that Sharon O'Connor, Rebecca Seidel and Tricia Meldrum will want to say a word or two more.

The Convener: It looks like we are having challenges with the mute buttons this morning. Sharon, can you come in? I think that you are on mute.

Sharon O'Connor: Yes, I hope that I am unmuted now.

I echo the positive aspect of collaboration, which featured in the work that we did. It is important to remember that the report is a snapshot in time that was, unfortunately, interrupted by Covid. The big lesson is that progress was interrupted. The poverty-related attainment gap was wide and further exacerbated by Covid. One of the key messages is that we need to support collaborative working to give particular attention to closing that attainment gap.

Tricia Meldrum (Audit Scotland): Through our work on the education report and the things that the Auditor General mentioned, we increasingly saw such joint working not just within the education sector but with partners outside of education at national and local levels—for example, in social work, social care and the third sector. There was much more breaking down of

barriers, and funding was being used in ways that had not been intended—the money followed to where the needs were.

The funding for early years expansion was able to be used to target the areas where need was greatest; it could be reallocated to meet needs, as could the attainment challenge money. We heard of things such as schools delivering food and other essential items to families who were in need. There was a real breaking down of barriers and people were just doing what was needed in the best interests of the children and families that they were working with. I highlight those as some examples.

Rebecca Seidel (Audit Scotland): I will build on the theme of collaboration. One of the impacts of Covid was that colleges and universities worked very closely with local and regional partners to identify short-term solutions to some of the skills needs that emerged during the pandemic. They looked at things such as shorter, sharper courses, and ways that they could all work together with employers and other partners to equip people with the skills that were needed to fill some of those short-term skills gaps that were exacerbated by Covid. We saw good examples of collaboration.

James Dornan: Obviously, after the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development report and reports such as yours, there is likely to be a significant programme of reform in the coming years. The Scottish Government has already said that it is committed to learning from what it saw during the pandemic, particularly in the areas that you have been talking about, which was almost Christie in action. What key actions should the Scottish Government be taking to ensure that that programme of reform plans for good outcomes and reflects the Christie principles?

Stephen Boyle: Again, I am happy to start. You are right. The OECD report and the Government's acceptance of the recommendations and subsequent setting out of plans for the reform of some of the bodies in the sector will mean changes to the oversight of the assessment process, the curriculum and then the inspection model—all of which will happen over the next few years. As ever with changes in structure, there is some degree of risk that the focus will be overtly on the structure itself and not necessarily on the outcomes that are intended from that structure. It is important to guard against that.

There is a lot of learning, although there has not been a huge amount of public sector reform over the past 10 years. Arguably, changes in policing and fire have been the most significant reforms during that period. There are other, smaller examples in the education sector, through the reform of the college bodies. In making such

structural changes, that sense of distraction is a risk. What matters is that the focus remains on what is intended from the changes, and that the outcomes are clear.

For many years—you will be familiar with this, Mr Dornan—Audit Scotland has commented on the need for a clearer framework for how public spending translates into outcomes. We are starting to see some progress on that in the Scottish budget, through a closer connection between spending and the national performance framework. It is important that that is retained in the education sector—that all its connections to the national performance framework and public spending are clear.

The committee will be familiar with the fact that, in recent years, we have published various documents about planning for outcomes, the process around milestones and the need for any required interventions to map on to the intended longer-term outcomes. Guidance material is available, but it is clearly important to guard against some of the risks of public sector reform and continue the focus on what is going to be achieved for the people who use those public services.

James Dornan: You are saying that any changes should not primarily be structural changes. To be precise, should they be changes in emphasis or something else?

Stephen Boyle: Structural changes are inevitable, and we are politically neutral on that, because it is for Government policy makers to determine the structure in order to deliver public services. In recent times, we have seen that the change itself can become the focus, as opposed to the outcomes from the change, which are why the change was introduced. We encourage the focus to remain on the outcomes and for it to be clear, when a new structure is being built, what that structure is intended to achieve and what the public spending will deliver in relation to those outcomes.

James Dornan: I am happy with that. If anybody else wants to come in, that is okay.

The Convener: That is great. Thank you.

Stephen, you recently published a blog called “Christie’s clarion call can’t wait another decade”, and there has been another publication called “Christie—It Really Is Now Or Never”. Can you unpack that a bit more for us? Are you saying that we need concrete, measurable policy outcomes for measures that are intended to prevent, so that we can say, “Yes, this is working,” or, “It is not really working”? Is that what you are saying, or am I putting words in your mouth?

Stephen Boyle: That is a generally fair assessment of the opportunity that the interim chair of the Accounts Commission and I took, over the course of the past few months, to reflect on the delivery of the Christie commission and its ambitions. There is a general consensus across those who are interested in Christie preventative spending that the ambitions of the Christie commission 10 years ago have not been fully delivered. There has not been enough of a shift towards preventative spend, which is a more effective way of delivering improvements in services and public spending. There are a variety of reasons for that, and we highlighted that the constraints on public spending that followed the financial crisis of 2008 were undoubtedly one factor. However, in the blogs, we also drew attention to the point about measurement that the convener made. Public services will inevitably be delivered on a collaborative basis, and they happen best when that collaboration happens. However, the measurement of how public spending is delivered in Scotland is perhaps too narrowly focused and orientated towards one organisation, as opposed to a collaborative basis. Although there is no psychological objection to collaboration, the way in which the roles and performance of leaders of public bodies are determined is not reflected in performance measurements that support preventative spend or collaboration. Therefore, we are in favour of an opportunity to review those performance measures.

I will give a national health service example, which is often reflected. Although undoubtedly very important for people who are waiting for services in an accident and emergency department, A and E wait times are not necessarily the best performance measurement of how health services in Scotland are performing, so I was looking to place more emphasis on that wider suite of performance measures.

Sharon O'Connor: I echo the Auditor General's point about the risk that is attached to major change processes, but there is also opportunity. One of the findings of the report was that there was no clear relationship between spending and outcomes; it was really about how schools targeted and used money. A lot of what needs to follow through is engaging people in those processes and learning from what has worked and worked well. We have some good data around that, but there are also data gaps and, in order to have a direction of travel, we need to know what the targets are and get everybody engaged in pursuing success towards those targets.

The Convener: Both of you have highlighted the importance of measuring outcomes, and Stephen Boyle has mentioned milestones. I wonder whether I can get your input on one real-

time example that I would like to share with you. What will you be looking at with regard to the large increase in the number of teachers in Scotland? I refer the report that you published in March, which said that 1,423 new teachers and 247 new support staff had been recruited for Covid mitigation. What assessment have you made or do you plan to make of those roles, their permanence and so on? With the recruitment of all those teachers, what are the milestones or measurements that we should be looking at with regard to outcomes?

Stephen Boyle: Again, I am happy to say a word or two, and I am sure that Sharon O'Connor and the team, particularly Tricia Meldrum, will want to come in, too.

First, I echo Sharon O'Connor's earlier point. A wider issue is the parity and quality of data not just across the public sector but undoubtedly in the education sector, and one of that report's key findings was that, although there was a huge amount of data on the performance of the attainment system in Scotland with regard to exams, the other pillars of curriculum for excellence did not have the same level of quality data.

As for your question, additional money has been spent on Covid mitigation measures, with additional teaching and support staff coming into Scottish schools and learning environments. What you will probably see is data around attainment and literacy and numeracy rates across the curriculum, whereas other aspects of the curriculum will not have a robust measurement of how well that money is being spent.

Auditors will be auditing the additional money that has gone to local authorities, and I am sure that Sharon O'Connor will want to comment on that, too. However, until we move to a wider suite of data, we will not have that informed assessment of the performance of all aspects of the Scottish curriculum. One of our ambitions is that, when we follow up our reporting over the next couple of years, we see progress on that issue and an improvement in the parity of data across all aspects of the curriculum.

I will stop there, because I am sure that Sharon O'Connor and Tricia Meldrum will want to say a word or two.

Sharon O'Connor: I defer to Tricia Meldrum, who led the detailed work in that report, but with regard to what we are looking at in local government, the headline is that, although the gap between the most and the least deprived narrowed in the majority of councils, it increased in 10 areas, and we need to know why that happened. The challenges are many and various. Scotland is a large country, there are demographic issues and the challenges in local areas might be very

different with regard to the recruitment of teachers, support for leadership in schools and decisions on how money is spent. There are lots of areas that we need to give attention to, and what we need is a clearer understanding of what we are trying to measure. As the Auditor General has said, attainment is about much more than exams, and we need a more nuanced system if we are to capture the data that will help us improve the offer to children and young people.

I am sure that Tricia Meldrum can provide you with more detailed information.

Tricia Meldrum: I agree with what has been said about the broader outcomes. I note that the promotion of children and young people's wellbeing has been highlighted as a particular priority with regard to Covid recovery, but at the moment it is not possible to tell how that is progressing and what it looks like. That is an important issue.

It is not just about the number of teachers; it is also about the number of pupils, and it is about what teachers are doing. The national improvement framework identifies six drivers for improvement, which include leadership, teacher professionalism, use of data and self-evaluation. It is about making sure that teachers are able to work within that framework and have the support and training that they need to be able to progress in the areas that have been identified as priorities. The improvement drivers are the things that have been identified as most helpful in improving outcomes for children and young people. Therefore, we really want to see all those things happen together. It is not just about having a lot of additional teachers; it is about ensuring that teachers are doing the right things and have the right support and infrastructure around them. It is also about having broader data available on the outcomes that have been identified as priorities as we move forward with the recovery.

The Convener: You led on the interesting and well-put-together report that was published in March. Is revisiting that work in your work plan? I am interested in the difference that all the new teachers and support staff make. Do you have plans in your work schedule to revisit all that and consider what can be measured?

Tricia Meldrum: We anticipate doing further work but we have not identified exactly what or when. Those will be decisions for the Auditor General and the Accounts Commission as we develop the work programme.

The Convener: We have the Auditor General here. Do you want to come in, Stephen?

Stephen Boyle: It is worth highlighting that, in May, the Accounts Commission and Audit Scotland will publish our next Covid-19 public

spending report. The report will not be specific to education; it will reflect, in the widest sense, on how well public bodies have performed and how well the vast additional public spending over the pandemic has achieved its intended outcomes. That is probably the next milestone in our reporting.

Given its significance, the education sector and its performance will remain in our thoughts and in our work programme. In the light of the pandemic, we are undertaking quarterly reviews of our work programme, and education will remain prominent. We will keep an open mind on how that translates into consideration of the additional public spending on teacher numbers.

The Convener: Thanks. Kaukab Stewart wants to come in.

Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): Thank you, convener. I have listened with great interest to what has been said. I have questions on local authority funding, but before I ask them, I want to ask why the gaps in data exist. Is it not in the scope of the Accounts Commission or the Auditor General to collect that data?

Stephen Boyle: I am happy to start, and Tricia Meldrum and Sharon O'Connor will want to come in, too.

Unfortunately, the issue is not unique to the education sector. We have commented regularly that there are too many examples of policies being implemented when there is insufficient robust data from Government and public bodies to measure milestones and how well public spending has achieved its intended outcomes.

A key recommendation to the Government and public bodies in the legacy paper of the Public Audit and Post-legislative Scrutiny Committee in session 5 was that they should have more robust data so that it is possible to track how well public spending achieves its intended outcomes. We have continued to focus on the need for action from public and Government bodies to resolve the issue.

There is plenty of data in the education sector. A huge amount is recorded, but it is skewed towards attainment, as opposed to the wider pillars of curriculum for excellence. Like the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, we found that there is not enough comparable, measurable data. That perhaps informs some of the behaviour around league tables and barriers to parity of esteem when it comes to attainment and wider achievements—there are a range of factors. The issue is being pursued in our work and in the Parliament, to ensure that there is clear data when it comes to what public spending is intended to achieve and the actual outcomes that those moneys deliver.

Tricia Meldrum might say more about the data in education.

10:00

Tricia Meldrum: There is definitely a lot of data, but not necessarily on all the issues that have been identified as national priorities. Our starting point was to ask what priorities have been set and whether we can tell whether they are being achieved. That was where we found some gaps.

In the report, we were able to use some one-off pieces of information and data that had been gathered to look at the response to Covid in particular. Those included the Scottish Government's equity audit, which looked at how Covid had impacted on potentially more vulnerable children and young people, and surveys by the Scottish Youth Parliament, the Scottish Children's Parliament, third sector bodies and academic departments. We used that information to provide a snapshot of how Covid was impacting on children and young people's wellbeing and other outcomes. However, when it comes to looking forward and being able to track back, there has not been good data in this area.

The Scottish Government had plans to carry out a census, but that was delayed because of Covid. We understand that it is happening at the moment, so there will be data soon. On wellbeing, some data is available, but it comes from snapshots and is not survey data, so it is limited and not necessarily timely. Some of it relates back to 2018 and has not been updated since. Further work is definitely needed in that area.

I also highlight the finding from the OECD around the disconnect between the stated ambitions of curriculum for excellence and the data that is available to test whether those are being delivered.

Kaukab Stewart: Thank you. I will move on to the area that I am particularly interested in. Overarching policies and budgets are set at the Scottish Government level, but local authorities ultimately deliver and implement the policies and services in education. You said that your analysis had not found a link between spending per pupil and educational attainment. However, there is an expectation that a significant amount of funding will go towards supporting education. What are the policy implications of the finding that pupil spend does not correlate to performance? Can the panel share any observations on the characteristics of local authorities that perform well, in terms of culture or policy and delivery approaches?

Stephen Boyle: I refer entirely to Sharon O'Connor on that point.

Sharon O'Connor: We routinely review the performance of councils, as I said, particularly in terms of the poverty attainment gap. There is evidence that the gap has narrowed in the majority of councils, but there are a number in which it has not. We examine the good practice that we see. We are not necessarily about finding where things have gone wrong and highlighting those cases; we also draw out the good practice. That is a routine part of our discussion with councils about their performance.

Clearly, you and I both know who the high performers are, but there are different aspects to interventions. For example, there are nuances in how the funding that supports narrowing the attainment gap impacts on rural areas and how the criteria relate to those areas. In general, we have a watching brief on educational performance. We are there to examine what the issues are, and they are many and varied. Some councils have particular and striking issues in recruiting school leaders and professional staff in key areas in the education environment. Other councils are extremely well provided for financially but have particular local issues. One size does not fit all, because Scotland has a great degree of diversity and variation in local needs and challenges. We routinely try to find what is good and what is not working so well, and give attention to supporting improvement.

Kaukab Stewart: How do you share what you find? We have your report, but are briefings or documentation shared with councils in order to spread that good practice or, indeed, to shed light on councils that require a bit more support?

Sharon O'Connor: Recently, the team from Audit Scotland and I presented at the Scottish learning festival, where we shared with school leaders the report's findings. However, we routinely work with councils directly. The audit team will produce a report and, if education is an area that needs particular attention, that will be examined by the audit team. Findings will be produced and the Accounts Commission will review those and produce further findings, if necessary. We also meet councils in order to interrogate their situations and find out what the issues are. We might then make further recommendations on actions that a council needs to take. That interaction with councils is the Accounts Commission's routine work.

As I said, we are also about highlighting good practice, of which there are many examples. It is worth recording that the evidence on literacy, for example, is good overall but that there are particular areas in particular parts of the country that need further attention. The report is therefore not wholly positive, although there is lots of positive stuff in it. If members are interested, they

can see the reports on individual councils and the information about performance that is contained in them.

Kaukab Stewart: Thank you.

I have a final query on the report's reference to the private finance initiative. Is information available on how much money councils have spent on PFI? I know that the private finance initiative was used to fund a certain amount of school estate building. Is any data available on how much money is still being spent on PFI?

Sharon O'Connor: With the convener's permission, I will refer that question to the team who do the work on the ground and are better placed to answer it than I am.

The Convener: Would that be Tricia Meldrum?

Sharon O'Connor: Probably.

Tricia Meldrum: Yes, that data will be available, but I do not have it to hand. We can provide it to the committee later. The data is available through the local government financial returns.

The Convener: I have a question for you, Tricia, while we have you on screen. One of the recommendations in the report, on which you are the lead, is that Education Scotland

"should work with schools, councils and RICs to ... understand the factors that cause variation in performance across schools and councils".

Does that mean that, as auditors, you were not satisfied that Education Scotland was already doing that work and understood what those factors were?

Tricia Meldrum: That is a key part of Education Scotland's role, and it is doing that work. With Education Scotland's agreement, we visited a number of council areas and saw how Education Scotland was working with councils, schools and regional improvement collaboratives. Our point in the report is that, given the scale of the variation that we saw across and within councils for different groups and different schools, more of that work needs to be done more consistently, because there are still big gaps and variations.

The Convener: I think that "could do better" is the nature of your recommendation.

Tricia Meldrum: More needs to be done.

The Convener: I will bring in Fergus Ewing, because his area of concern directly relates to all that.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): Good morning to all our guests. I represent Inverness and Nairn, the city and the town, and I have done so for 22 years. Most of my constituency, however, is rural. In fact, Highland

Council covers an area that is nearly the size of Belgium and 20 per cent bigger than Wales—it is 10,000 square miles or, if you prefer, 26,000 square kilometres. The point is that the costs and challenges of providing public services, including education, in a largely rural authority are considerable. Indeed, 98 per cent of the land mass in Scotland is rural, as is 17 per cent of the population, so the point is not unique to the area that I represent.

As far as education is concerned, there are 203 primary schools and 29 high schools. Having been around the block a few times in parliamentary terms, I think that I can safely say that politicians from every party feel that the needs of rural Scotland—particularly the costs of providing services, especially in education—are, at best, perhaps not sufficiently understood and, at worst, neglected.

Do Audit Scotland and the Accounts Commission feel that sufficient regard has been had to those issues in their work?

Stephen Boyle: Good morning, Mr Ewing. I am happy to start with your question. I am sure that Sharon O'Connor and colleagues may also wish to say a word or two.

I will start with some of the specifics of our findings from the education report. I draw attention to the Scottish attainment challenge funding and its application. It is an additional funding mechanism, driven primarily on the basis of the Scottish index of multiple deprivation, to improve outcomes through school education. One of the findings that we make in the report is that it is perhaps too blunt a tool in that it does not necessarily take account of other instances of deprivation, such as rural challenges, in particular, where there are pockets of deprivation in otherwise more affluent areas—which speaks to the point that Mr Ewing made.

In the evidence that the director general for education gave to the Public Audit Committee a few weeks ago, he shared that the Government is planning to adopt a more targeted mechanism in relation to children in low-income families as perhaps a better tool for identifying how to allocate public funding in different areas.

More generally, we are also conscious of the findings that the former Public Audit and Post-legislative Scrutiny Committee made in its report in relation to examples of rural inequalities and how we might capture those in our work. We have commented a lot on inequalities in public spending over the course of the past 18 months; it is a central part of our thinking.

We develop our work programme on a national basis. I am sure that Sharon will want to come in to say a bit more about the extent to which our

work is tailored. Our audit work on individual public bodies across the NHS and councils certainly captures how well public money is being spent.

I will pause there to let Sharon come in.

Sharon O'Connor: It is worth noting that the Accounts Commission has members who come from quite remote areas of the country. There is therefore a good understanding of the particular challenges of education in rural contexts. I also note that I am, in fact, married to an islander from the Western Isles, so I have some understanding of those issues.

We work directly with the councils, visiting them and talking to them about their particular issues, and we try to reflect that back in the work that we do and in the reports that we produce. Personally, I am entirely sympathetic to the points that have been made in relation to those challenges.

We make the point in the report—which the Auditor General just covered again—about policy being nuanced and appropriate and recognising the particular financial and other challenges of providing for areas that are not within the central belt. It is at the front of our thinking on those matters.

10:15

Fergus Ewing: I will pursue the issue further, both generally and more specifically, if I may. I will give a few examples. A high school in my area, Grantown grammar school, has an excellent record. I have attended prize givings—if that is what they are still called—and have seen the success that the pupils, teachers and parents have achieved by working together. However, a systemic problem that they and many other rural high schools face is providing all the relevant subjects—such as all the science subjects—as well as other subjects off the mainstream curriculum. If there is no physics or chemistry teacher, how can a child in rural Scotland have access to the range of careers and university places, such as in medicine, for which advanced higher success in those subjects is a sine qua non for access? How do we prevent rural inequality from being systemic? I stress that the topic has been raised with me over the years, although relatively infrequently. I am trying to find out what regard the Accounts Commission and the Auditor General pay to the issue.

I have a different general point to make, but I might leave it until after I hear the answer to my question on the specific issues.

As well as the universality of provision, which can be dealt with in various practical ways—such as teachers visiting schools other than the one in which they are permanently based, and using

other sharing and swapping mechanisms, difficult though they are to organise—the second specific issue is the endemic challenge of repairs and renewals to the 203 primary and 29 high schools. Although some success has been achieved recently in the allocation of funding, for which I am very grateful—not least for the replacement of Nairn academy in four years—that leaves a huge backlog of draughty, old, inadequate buildings, often from the 60s, when the common sense of the construction world when putting up the buildings seems to have momentarily departed the planet. The problem is shared in perspective across all political parties and among those who have none. A great many senior independent councillors would make the point that I am making.

Do the Auditor General and the Accounts Commission feel that they have really given sufficient mind time to those two specific matters?

Stephen Boyle: I am happy to come in, and I am sure that Sharon O'Connor will say a word or two as well.

We are aware of the challenges to which you refer. There are probably limits to our role in respect of the judgment that our regulators will make. More specifically, the scope of the curriculum probably extends beyond our remit, and I would defer to Education Scotland and the inspectorate on the quality of learning and teaching that takes place in individual establishments.

In a wider sense, we are conscious of the point that you make around equality and equity of opportunity. That is clearly part of our work programme on a national basis through the work that I lead. Sharon O'Connor will, no doubt, want to say more about how that translates into the audit work that takes place in individual local authorities.

While I have the opportunity to do so, I will speak to your point about how education spending is consumed by repairs and maintenance, which touches on the private finance initiative question from earlier. We have reported on those challenges, and our recent work on the overview of further education colleges in Scotland similarly found that the longer-term sustainability of the model requires that all those costs are known and factored into longer-term planning.

We are very aware of and alert to the issues, and we are capturing them when auditing the response of the 200-plus public bodies that we audit. The issues also feature in our forward work programme on the specifics of how they relate to your local authority area. I will pause there and invite Sharon to say a few words.

Sharon O'Connor: Clearly, the Accounts Commission's job is to have oversight of councils'

performance on education. We are not involved with policy making for the educational framework; our job is to review how councils perform. Local decisions are about how local funds are spent to deliver education.

I am sure that that will not be a satisfactory answer to Mr Ewing, but we do not have a remit in the matters about which he asks. We can comment on the delivery of educational service. We will comment on its successes and deficiencies, point out areas of improvement and talk to councils directly about how those improvements are being undertaken.

I am constantly struck by the innovation that happens at a local level. I visited a tiny little primary school on the Isle of Mull to see a science project a couple of years ago in a personal capacity. The work that is being done even in tiny schools to prepare people for careers in science, technology and engineering is impressive. If matters need to be addressed, those are above my pay grade. However, we have an understanding and appreciation of the challenge and are keen to be part of the conversation about trying to improve matters for rural children.

Fergus Ewing: I am grateful to both witnesses for their answers and their willingness to take a constructive approach. However, I want to make a couple of points.

Stephen Boyle said that, with regard to the attainment fund, there would be a further look at hidden poverty and deprivation in rural areas to find out whether there is more inequality that needs to be addressed by additional funding and whether the Auditor General and the Accounts Commission, as advisers on financial performance, should include in their criticism of the Scottish Government the point that more needs to be done on that. I welcome that, but the point that I am making is more basic. It is that inequality is inherent in the system of cost allocation because it costs more to provide the same services in an area of sparse population. More buildings are needed and there are smaller rolls so the cost per head is obviously greater.

I contend that inequality is a systemic issue, and I did not get the impression that either witness accepted that point. I read the report prepared by both bodies, which is entitled "Improving outcomes for young people through school education". I am not necessarily a top-grade student—I never detained the judges' time much when they made decisions on prize giving—but, in the 149 paragraphs and 49 pages, I can find no reference at all to rural cost issues. The word "rural" does not appear anywhere, as far as my reading of the report over the past 24 hours reveals. I put it to the witnesses that that appears to be a neglected area. It is an omission, a lacuna and a gap.

On a constructive point, I urge the witnesses to take the matter away and look at it again to see whether their bodies' approach needs to be amended. Although Sharon O'Connor is correct that they are not policy-making bodies, their role is essential to good policy making and their advice informs it, as I know from my 14 years as a minister.

Stephen Boyle: I am happy, Mr Ewing, to accept your points and suggestions about, in effect, factoring a focus on rural poverty into our forward work programme. I confirm that that is clearly part of our thoughts and builds not only on your comments but those in the former Public Audit and Post-legislative Scrutiny Committee's legacy paper and that committee's enthusiasm for further audit work on rural inequalities and rural poverty factors. I am happy to confirm that it will be part of our forward work.

I think that this brings us back to that grey area or boundary with regard to the choices made by policy makers in what will inevitably be a competitive public spending environment and ensuring that they capture rural factors as well as issues such as urban poverty and concentration. For many years, Audit Scotland has been addressing the point that the Scottish budget should have a closer connection with the intended national outcomes, and we have seen progress in that in the most recent budget. We have also seen more transparency over the past 18 months, with a summer budget revision and increased expectation that future budgets will have a much closer connection with what will be achieved through public spending instead of just setting out a quantum of what is being spent.

I am happy to reiterate to Mr Ewing that our work and focus on inequalities across Scotland very clearly form part of our forward work programme.

The Convener: We have a couple of supplementary questions on this subject area, which we have been discussing for 20 or 25 minutes now.

Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): Thank you very much for all the answers that we have had so far. It has been really interesting to hear the comments about data, the sharing of good practice and local issues and challenges, but I think that, quite often, all of this comes back to the ability to properly reflect all our children's strengths and skills, not just the academic achievements, and to deliver the policy ambition on the ground. How does all of this knit together and join up with the move to put vulnerable citizens at the centre of decision making and involve them in that process?

Stephen Boyle: I will pass your question to Tricia Meldrum, who has seen some examples in that respect and knows about some of the challenges with regard to the issue of users of public services being able to shape the services that they get, which you have rightly referred to. In the context of our work on education, we have seen some examples of children and young people being able to give feedback and shape the service that they get, and our report contains some survey data on the experiences of Scottish children and young people during Covid. However, we absolutely agree that citizens and service users such as children and young people should be able to feed back and have their voices heard on how well public services are delivered.

That was just a comment on the issue in its widest sense. I am enthusiastic to hear Tricia Meldrum's examples and perspective.

Tricia Meldrum: Again, we found quite a lot of variation in that aspect across the country. All schools and councils have arrangements for engaging with parents, pupils and learners, but some of them work better than others. Moreover, although there might be engagement, the question is whether it is making a difference and whether schools and councils are feeding back to children and young people on what has actually changed as a result. We have certainly identified areas for further improvement in that respect.

With regard to the initial response to Covid, concerns were raised, particularly by the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland, about the rights of children and young people not being taken on board as they should have been, and we know that it was not until October that young people were able to join the education recovery group and a separate recovery group was set up for children and young people. Some things happened a bit later than they ideally should have done, but things are certainly happening.

We know that there was a lot of engagement with children and young people on how they were feeling during the pandemic and what the key issues were for them, but that engagement did not always translate into action or feedback to children and young people on what had happened on the back of the information that they had shared. An important part of engagement is that you not only talk to people but act on what they say and, crucially, feed back on what you have done and the changes that you have made as a result.

10:30

The Convener: Michael Marra has a supplementary question on this issue, but I see

that Stephanie Callaghan wants to say something first.

Stephanie Callaghan: What Tricia Meldrum said is interesting. There was comment about the pandemic leading to the delivery of the Christie recommendations "at scale". What lessons can be learned from that in terms of policy approaches?

Stephen Boyle: Fundamentally, we have seen some of the scenarios that we have talked about this morning across the piece. Public bodies and organisations in the third sector and the private sector were able to set aside some of the more traditional boundaries of who was responsible for which aspects of public service delivery, bureaucracy and performance measures so that, at a time of crisis and greatest need, services were delivered to people in a way that we had not seen in the 10 years since the Christie report was published. That perhaps gives us cause to be optimistic that things can change. However, as you have suggested, there is a possibility that we can learn lessons from some of the behaviours that were displayed, the steps that were taken and the ways in which responsibilities were shared, which led to the interventions around the delivery of those services over the course of the pandemic. We can think about why that happened then and why that did not happen in the preceding years.

I am left with a degree of optimism about the possibility that, if the conditions that led to the collaboration—not the pandemic itself, of course, but the ways of working—can be sustained, we can set aside some of the barriers that exist, whether they involve performance measurement or organisations not agreeing on who is responsible for particular aspects of work, for example, so that we can make the kind of preventative interventions that have served us well over the past 18 months.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): Fergus Ewing's line of questioning was useful. Across the United Kingdom, we have the Barnett formula, which delivers an additional £14 billion of spending to Scotland, specifically to provide services across our broader geographic area. I suggest to the Accounts Commission that it would be useful if the piece of work that it is doing looked at the school building programme that was provided by the Scottish Government via the Scottish Futures Trust to see what the match-up was between the aspirations of the policy and how it was delivered.

Kaukab Stewart made a point about private finance initiative building schemes and other such models. It would be useful to ensure that work on that includes non-profit-distribution models and all the various forms of private finance initiative that the Scottish National Party has used since it came to power in 2007—I know that Audit Scotland has

previously identified those models as being forms of private finance initiative. It would be useful if the committee could see the full scale of those models.

The Convener: That was more a point than a question. We will move straight to Willie Rennie, who will ask questions on another area.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I want to talk about colleges and regionalisation. Do you think that the regionalisation has achieved the objectives that were set out in 2011?

Stephen Boyle: I will start. Rebecca Seidel, who is our expert on colleges, can then supplement my contribution.

I am not sure that we are able to say definitively whether the policy has achieved the objective. I have seen examples of where there have been challenges around integration in relation to the regionalisation model. The committee will be aware that, in the Lanarkshire region, there are issues around whether the regionalisation model has been a success and that there are moves away from it.

Our audit work on colleges remains. We have commented that there are still financial challenges in that area and that there have been governance and leadership challenges.

This morning's theme has been that there is still a need for public spending to translate more clearly into outcomes. We draw on the report that the Scottish Funding Council recently published on the need for a clearer model to be in place around outcome agreements, and the Government's response to that. That will be the fundamental basis for how well public spending in our education sector is performing.

I am not sure that we have yet seen the full benefits that were initially intended from regionalisation. I invite Rebecca Seidel to say a few more words about that.

Rebecca Seidel: To build on what the Auditor General has said, it is very difficult to assess whether all the intended benefits of regionalisation have been met. In 2018, we looked specifically at the three multicollege regions—Highlands and Islands, Glasgow and Lanarkshire—and we found that, although the regional strategic bodies were fulfilling their core statutory duties, progress was mixed when it came to meeting the wider aims of regionalisation. We recommended that the Government and the Scottish Funding Council review those arrangements.

The Scottish Funding Council took that matter forward as part of its recent review of tertiary education. It found that, for various reasons, the current arrangements in those three multicollege regions were not really working as intended, and it

made recommendations on reviewing and refreshing them. That has now been taken forward, and discussions about that specifically are on-going in those areas.

The wider aims of regionalisation—to make the sector more efficient and more responsive to the needs of students, local employers and local areas—are reflected in the recommendations of the Scottish Funding Council's recent review of tertiary education, whose range in that sense is ambitious. They include pathfinder projects, which are intended to explore options for better strategic planning at the regional level.

In its response to the review, the Government encouraged the SFC to move those projects on at pace, in order to identify learning and share those lessons more widely to help to improve regional collaboration on a wider scale. We will closely watch what comes out of those pathfinder projects, the ways in which they are taken forward and the types of lessons that come out of that.

To go back to themes that we have touched on during the conversation, when it comes to taking forward the recommendations in the review—in particular, those on regional collaboration—we highlight the importance of clear and robust governance and accountability arrangements, clear and simple funding streams, clarity of intended outcomes, the ways in which progress towards those intended outcomes will be measured and assessed, and action that will be taken if progress is not made. Effective collaboration between partners will be essential.

Willie Rennie: You are both being very diplomatic. The danger with all of this is that the changes are big-bang changes. Many will know that I was a critic of the centralisation of the police. We have, in effect, a form of centralisation for colleges, and we are about to go into a form of centralisation through the national care service. The more diplomatic you are about whether objectives have been achieved, the more difficult it is for us to make the right decisions about further big-bang reforms, as I would call them. I therefore encourage you to be a little blunter about whether college regionalisation has been effective. If it has not been a success—even if you are not clear on whether the objectives have been achieved—surely that in itself should cause us to pause. A little bit more of a direct response from you would surely help us, because we have big decisions to make.

I might be wrong about all these things, but I do not think that I am. My fear is that we will end up with another set of reorganisations that will not deliver and that we will be back here with you in five years' time saying that it is not clear whether the objectives for the national care service have

been met. I encourage you to be a little bit blunter, as we have big decisions to make.

Stephen Boyle: I am happy to accept Mr Rennie's invitation to be direct. I reassure him and the committee that we do that where the evidence is clear and supports it. I suggest that much of our work on public sector reform has identified either that the intended objectives were unclear or that they had not delivered as expected.

Mr Rennie referred to police reform. On the back of what had been—[*Inaudible.*]*—*seven successive rounds of statutory reporting on police reform, we have been very clear that the intended benefits in that arena had not been delivered as intended.

If we have been a little bit more circumspect in respect of regionalisation, I note that—as Rebecca Seidel said—the intended benefits have not been delivered yet. It is pretty clear that we are being direct in our judgments, and we will continue to do that to reassure the committee, in the widest sense, on the delivery of public services.

We have touched on an on-going theme a couple of times this morning: that structural change must be clear in its purpose to improve outcomes for people who use and rely on public services. We have seen in all the work in which we have commented on planning for outcomes how the milestones have a bearing on the intended benefits and opportunities for intervention, such that public spending is mapped in all places—particularly in the Scottish budget—to the national performance framework and to what will be delivered from the significant amounts—[*Inaudible.*]

I am grateful for the invitation to be more direct. We will continue to do that.

Willie Rennie: Forgive me for being a bit provocative.

The Convener: Bob Doris also has a line of questions about colleges.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): I have a few brief questions about college regionalisation and some of the underpinning budgets of colleges more generally.

I remember, many years ago, being at what was then Springburn College, where the then minister, Alasdair Allan, was talking with students ahead of the regionalisation process. One of the ambitions was that curriculum planning would be a lot clearer, so that students could move seamlessly between colleges in the one region, where courses would not duplicate each other but would complement and align, and where course credit requirements would articulate with each other. That would empower students. I do not know what progress has been made on that, but is it

something that you have considered? Has that ambition been realised? I will turn to finances and future reforms in a moment.

Stephen Boyle: I invite Rebecca Seidel to take your question, Mr Doris.

Rebecca Seidel: That is not something that we have specifically considered in our work on colleges. Unfortunately, I do not have information on that. We could certainly speak to the Scottish Funding Council, and we could see whether we could offer you any additional information on that in due course.

Bob Doris: That would be helpful. Given that we are talking about essential further reforms, I was wondering whether that initial ambition had been realised.

I turn to another aspect of college regionalisation. We have Glasgow Kelvin College, Glasgow Clyde College and the City of Glasgow College, and my constituents go to and benefit from all three of those colleges, although the offers are slightly different at each college. We also have a regional board in Glasgow, which has a staffing budget of around £300,000 to £320,000 a year to run the board.

I had always thought that the colleges in Glasgow could have direct relationships with each other and that they could have the capacity to develop their own workstreams in relation to a strategic approach to courses within the city. Does Audit Scotland have any thoughts as to whether the structures in place after regionalisation are—I would not use the expression “fit for purpose”—appropriate in the current environment?

10:45

Rebecca Seidel: With regard to whether the structures are fit for purpose, in our 2018 report, we highlighted concerns about some of the arrangements in the multicollege regions, including Glasgow, around how well they were working in relation to governance and accountability. As part of its review of tertiary education, the SFC looked more closely at the arrangements and, last year, recommended that Glasgow Colleges Regional Board look at how the colleges might be able to work more efficiently and effectively in a regional setting. Discussions around that are on-going, and the role of Glasgow Colleges Regional Board will be considered as part of those. However, I cannot comment further on the progress on that or the specific actions that might be taken forward.

Bob Doris: That is helpful. I will follow on from some of Willie Rennie's comments on regionalisation. I shared some—not all—of his concerns, including that there could be

centralisation. Glasgow Clyde College and, in my constituency, Glasgow Kelvin College, are anchor organisations and community-based colleges. I have praised City of Glasgow College but, such is its scale, it is more of a large, west of Scotland regional college. Many members of the Scottish Parliament would have concerns if we were to lose the community-based college aspects that Glasgow Clyde College and Glasgow Kelvin College offer. Has Audit Scotland looked at the strength of community-based colleges under the regionalisation model? I will turn to the finances in relation to that in a moment. First, has Audit Scotland looked at how the structures suit that community-based approach to college education? That is vital in my constituency.

Rebecca Seidel: We have not looked at that specifically, but we recognise that communities are at the heart of college provision and that it is important for colleges to provide services according to the needs of their local community, which include those of young learners who want to go to college, as well as local employers. As I mentioned previously, we have seen examples of colleges working closely with stakeholders at a local level in order to meet the needs of their local areas, so we recognise the importance of that, but we have not looked at it specifically in our work on colleges, which has focused on college finances.

Bob Doris: I hope that you do not mind my raising that, but, as a Glasgow MSP who represents Maryhill and Springburn, I would be concerned if Glasgow lost three independent colleges. Although two of them are smaller in scale, they are absolutely grounded in the communities in which they are based and we would lose something if they went—that would not be efficiency, because we would be throwing something out.

The funding position of colleges is interesting. In 2019-20, there was a 2 per cent real-terms increase in the revenue funding of colleges and, in 2020-21, there was an additional £70 million, mainly in response to the impact of the Covid pandemic and to tackle the problems faced by students. I also got a bit confused over the undoubted financial challenge that still exists for colleges. A £54 million deficit is mentioned, which is predominantly due to pensions and other liabilities that sit there, but once that is stripped away, although colleges had been looking at a £9 million deficit for the past financial year, they are now saying that that has turned into a £3 million surplus.

I am sorry for throwing the numbers that you have reported on back at you, but I am looking at a 2 per cent real-terms increase, an additional £70 million for the year 2021-22 and your report of a financial position that is better than colleges

thought that it would be, yet on the one hand there is a £54 million deficit, while on the other there is a £9 million surplus. When the Scottish budget is published, this committee has to consider whether the settlement for Scotland's colleges is adequate, but those numbers do not really give us clarity on the financial position for Scotland's colleges.

Rebecca Seidel: The Auditor General might want to say something about that before I come in.

Stephen Boyle: All those numbers are correct. I recognise the point that you make, Mr Doris, about their somehow appearing contradictory. The committee will be familiar, through its work and through Audit Scotland's reporting, with the financial challenges that the college sector has been experiencing for a number of years. It was anticipated that Covid would exacerbate those financial challenges for almost all public services. I think that this was teased out at the round table on colleges' financial sustainability that the Public Audit Committee held a few weeks ago: the reality is that, given the dominance of public funding in the college sector—it is the sector's primary source of funding—it has been a bit more insulated than other sectors. The direct comparison is with the university sector, which has been more adversely affected by Covid, given the presence of other sources of income relative to that sector's total income.

However, the picture is not entirely rosy in the college sector. As you said, Mr Doris, there are still financial challenges. There are still concerns across the sector about pay arrangements, pensions, the increase in national insurance contributions and the quality of the estate, all of which bring financial challenges.

Rebecca Seidel mentioned the Scottish Funding Council's recent review of tertiary education in Scotland. One of the SFC's recommendations was a move towards a multiyear financial settlement. The Government has accepted the recommendation, and I am sure that the committee, as part of its pre-budget scrutiny, will be interested in what the new approach looks like. Audit Scotland is in favour of long-term and medium-term financial planning, as you would expect, and has promoted such an approach for many years. The advent of multiyear settlements will give the college sector a better opportunity to plan the delivery of services beyond the 12-month planning horizon. That should give the sector more scope to respond to challenges that are not met with direct increases in funding.

I hope that that is helpful to you, Mr Doris. I will bring in Rebecca Seidel, in case she has anything to say on the specifics.

Rebecca Seidel: Thank you. As the Auditor General said, the figures that you quoted, Mr

Doris, are all correct, but we recognise that a number of different things are at play. We reported on the difference between income and expenditure, to highlight the increasing financial pressures on colleges, and we recognised that there were factors at play in that regard that are outwith the colleges' control, such as depreciation of assets and pension contributions, so we stripped those out to present an underlying operating position that we think gives a slightly more accurate picture of the sector's financial health. That is where the surplus figure comes from; that is the figure after we have stripped out some of those elements.

It is worth noting that, in recent years, the increases in revenue funding from Government have primarily covered additional costs that came from harmonising staff terms and conditions; those costs, alongside contributions to pension schemes, remain one of the biggest financial pressures on colleges at the moment.

Bob Doris: That is incredibly helpful. Thank you for taking the time—

The Convener: I can let you have one more quick question on this area.

Bob Doris: Convener, I will try to keep it brief. I know that I have had a lot of air time. Rebecca Seidel's explanation about stripping out some liabilities to get a more accurate, real-time assessment of colleges' finances was helpful. As we scrutinise the budget, it is helpful to understand that there is an estimated £9 million surplus rather than a £54 million deficit.

Finally, I turn to attainment, which I have not yet mentioned. We know that attainment gaps exist in colleges as well. I am conscious that the fantastic Glasgow Kelvin College, in my constituency, has an attainment rate of 60 per cent and has strong positive destination outcomes. There are other colleges with higher attainment rates, but Glasgow Kelvin is top-heavy in terms of students who come from Scottish index of multiple deprivation 10 and SIMD 20 areas.

I see that the Scottish Government wants attainment levels to reach a target of 75 per cent over the next few years; attainment is currently at 66 per cent across Scotland. When Audit Scotland and others look at the outcomes for colleges and the attainment gaps, do they take into account the poverty-related attainment gap in Scotland's communities as it presents in colleges? There might be a case for additional funding—perhaps a system of pupil equity funding—for colleges, in order to address that. Any comments on that would be helpful.

I will not come back in after this question, convener.

The Convener: Thank you, Bob.

Stephen Boyle: As Rebecca Seidel has said, our work during this year in particular has focused on finances, but in our previous reporting on the college sector, we have explored wider performance. As Bob Doris rightly says, there are measures of performance such as positive destinations, course completion rates and the performance of individual sections of society within the college sector, so there is a wide degree of performance assessment already. In our work, we think about where best to add value through our reporting on how well public money is being spent and what outcomes have been achieved from that. Attainment in colleges remains in our thoughts—I offer you that reassurance, Mr Doris—and we will continue to explore not just what has been spent, but what has been achieved by that, including across the college sector.

I am happy for Rebecca Seidel to add to that if she wishes to do so.

The Convener: Please be brief, because I need to move the discussion along.

Rebecca Seidel: Absolutely, convener. I will just say that attainment rates for identified different groups of students are collected and reported on. With regard to students from more deprived areas, that information is available and the Scottish Funding Council reports on that. To give you a sense of the difference in the attainment gap, in 2019, attainment rates for students from the 10 per cent most deprived areas were sitting at around 67 per cent, which can be compared with around 71 per cent for students overall.

The Convener: We have a brief supplementary question from Willie Rennie, and then we will go straight to Michael Marra.

Willie Rennie: I want to touch on universities, which are under—[*Inaudible.*]—and, in particular, are more reliant on potentially volatile international student numbers, because the world is volatile. The finances in those institutions, which are otherwise amazingly successful, are still unpredictable. That means that there is quite a significant demand on the public sector, although those institutions nevertheless are, and have been, quite independent, which is in large part why they are so successful.

How do you go about doing your job with universities? I noted a little bit of frustration in one of the remarks, about being unable to measure effectively, because it is not so easy to do. How do you strike a balance between those institutions' independence, and therefore their success, and the need for the public sector to be able to measure and scrutinise what is happening in them?

Stephen Boyle: You are right when you say that I do not appoint the auditors for Scotland's university sector. Unlike the further education sector, the national health service and—*[Inaudible.]*—bodies, university institutions are independent, autonomous organisations, and that is reflected in their audit and scrutiny arrangements. However, Audit Scotland has retained an interest in, and reported on, the university sector. Most recently, in 2019, my predecessor reported on Scotland's universities, in the widest sense, under the powers in the Public Finance and Accountability (Scotland) Act 2000. That reflects the point that you make, Mr Rennie: there is still a very significant amount of public funding that goes into Scotland's universities, and that deserves—*[Inaudible.]*—and the opportunity for the Parliament to scrutinise it. It remains part of our thinking and on our agenda to continue to report on the university sector where necessary and where it will add value.

11:00

We agree with your points about volatility and the impact of the pandemic. That impact will be shown by individual universities' reports. One theme of the 2019 report is that universities that rely on international students will have to deal with challenging volatility and the need for long-term planning.

My other point is about the Scottish Funding Council's report and the Government's response. There is a question about how best to translate that into judgment-led outcome agreements. The process had not been an effective; vast sums of public money were invested in the university sector but it was hard to establish what had been achieved. A more straightforward process is needed. Our point is that there must still be transparency and an opportunity for public scrutiny. Scotland's public services are investing in universities and it must be clear what they are delivering.

Michael Marra: I have a question for the Auditor General about his report on education that was produced prior to this year's Scottish Parliament election. The report concluded that the equality gap in education remained far too wide and fell far short of the Scottish Government's aims. We have been living through the pandemic since that work was done. As far as we can tell, there has been huge disruption, the impact of which has been very unequal and has affected some of the most deprived and least privileged groups in society.

Do you have a sense of whether any work is being done on the impact of the pandemic on the sorts of outcomes that you looked at in your report?

Stephen Boyle: I stress that "Improving outcomes for young people through school education" was produced jointly by me and the Accounts Commission.

I recognise your point. One of the report's clear findings was that, although the national poverty-related attainment gap was closing as a result of improvements in attainment levels in some of the most deprived communities in Scotland, the gap remained wide and had not closed at the rate that the Scottish Government had set. The Government had used the term "stretch aims". Those aims had not been met at the pace that the Government had wanted. Sharon O'Connor may want to say more about how that translated into the work of individual councils.

When we published the report, we sought to update the figures to reflect the impact that Covid had had on schooling for Scotland's children and young people. We can all recall lockdown and home learning, and the need for a supply of digital devices that that caused. We referred to all those factors in the report. There were instances of digital exclusion and digital poverty, and it was challenging to sustain an education system during successive lockdowns.

Our overall conclusion was that matters had improved by the time of the second lockdown, when digital devices were more readily available. Schools and education providers had also made progress in learning by the time of the second lockdown. Nonetheless, the impact of the pandemic undoubtedly fell more on the most deprived children in Scottish society. There were various factors. While some were education related, others were to do with the household, such as health concerns and concerns about the availability of work and parental support. All those factors had an impact.

Michael Marra: Are you aware of any work to quantify the general impact of lost learning across Scotland? I understand your description of how local and national education authorities reacted to deal with the immediate impact of the pandemic. Do you have a sense of whether any work has been done to assess the longer-term impact on children and young people?

Stephen Boyle: I will invite Tricia Meldrum to answer that. She can best describe the analysis that education authorities have done and, perhaps more importantly, the assessment that the Government and Education Scotland have undertaken of the impact on Scotland's children and young people.

Tricia Meldrum: I have already mentioned the equity audit that was published in January, just before we published our report. That joined together a lot of information about how the

pandemic had impacted on the more vulnerable children and suggested priorities to be taken forward, such as health and wellbeing, which was seen as an area in which there had been an impact on children and young people.

We know that the new national improvement framework, as well as the progress report and update on all the relevant data, is due to be published towards the end of December, so we will look at that to see how things have moved on and, again, what priorities are reflected in the updated version.

One of the things that we flagged in our report concerned discontinuous data. We have the exam results for this year and last year but, obviously, they have been compiled on a different basis from previous years. We need to think about how we factor that into our consideration of what those results mean in terms of progress towards the trajectories and stretch aims that have been set out. It will be interesting to see how that has been reflected.

There have been gaps in the collection of data around the curriculum for excellence levels. That data is being collected this year, but there is a gap for last year, and the basis might be a bit different this year. There are quite a lot of factors involved in that. The big thing in that regard will be the publication of the new national improvement framework in December this year, which will show us how all of that has been pulled together and what the priorities are.

Sharon O'Connor: As a matter of routine, we review educational performance with individual councils, and those reports are available publicly.

It is important to recognise the hard work of everybody who is involved in education. One of the big opportunities that arose out of the pandemic, particularly with regard to children who are socially and economically disadvantaged, concerns the fact that parents were involved in their children's education. One of the big pieces of learning for me is that we have an army of supporters of the educational process. We should think about how we can keep parents directly involved in the education of children who are perhaps more disadvantaged.

Michael Marra: More data in this area would be helpful. I know that the equity audit was not quantitative. We need to see more information on the area so that we can assess, in the kind of work that you are involved in, whether the current policies and spending priorities of the Government actually address what has become a far greater problem in terms of the level of need.

That brings me to two specific areas. One is around pupil equity fund spending. I would like colleagues from the Accounts Commission and

Audit Scotland to comment on the availability of that money and the transparency of how it is allocated in different areas. As a councillor—which I will continue to be until May—and as a member of the Scottish Parliament, I find it difficult to find out what that money has been spent on and to what end, at a local and a national level. It would be good to hear some comments on that, after which I will turn to the question of school buildings.

Stephen Boyle: I am happy to say a word or two on that before inviting colleagues to supplement my response.

The report on education outcomes prominently features the issue of how the additional pupil equity fund money was allocated across Scotland's local authorities. The overall conclusion was that the data was not clear enough to see the impact of PEF spending on attainment levels across the country.

You and the committee will be familiar with this, Mr Marra, but, in addition to our work, Education Scotland has—if my memory serves me correctly—undertaken three separate reports, in which it has scrutinised how PEF has been used across the country and made recommendations on good practice and the sharing of learning across different Scottish local authorities. What happens next will be important, given the Government's commitment to spending a further £1 billion on the Scottish attainment challenge over the course of this parliamentary session.

That brings us back to the report's key themes. With public spending of such a scale, we need clear outcome measures, and the data must support scrutiny—and interventions, if required—to ensure that the spending is being properly targeted at those in greatest need and that the outcomes reflect that scale of spend.

As for some of the specifics, I will pause at that point, because I am sure that Sharon O'Connor and Tricia Meldrum will want to make further comment.

Sharon O'Connor: I endorse the Auditor General's remarks. We have previously reviewed the matter and continue to take an active interest in it. It is all about measuring the right things.

Michael Marra: I have to say that I am slightly worried by those answers. After all, we are talking about £1 billion of taxpayers' money, but at times I have found how it has been allocated impenetrable. I have seen the Education Scotland reports, which are case studies of best practice that might be copied elsewhere, but the fact is that practice across Scotland is hugely variable. Moreover, going back to my learned colleagues' earlier comments, I think that there is very little about how we tie all this up with the outcomes. As politicians and policy makers, we need greater

granularity on such matters; we need to know an awful lot more about what the money is being spent on and how it is delivering change for some of the most vulnerable young people in our society. At the moment, it is pretty difficult to find that sort of thing out.

I have one last question to ask, if I may, convener.

The Convener: Please be very brief.

Michael Marra: I appreciate that. With regard to spending on ventilation, £10 million was recently allocated to recording the amount of CO₂ in classrooms so that teachers would know whether to open the windows. Has Audit Scotland or the Accounts Commission looked at the question of whether school buildings are now prepared for the pandemic that remains with us and how public spending is being used to adapt them in order to prevent infection?

Stephen Boyle: I am sure that colleagues will want to comment on your question about ventilation, but to go back to the issue of PEF, I would say that one of the fundamental points in our report was that, with regard to public spending on PEF and the attainment challenge, it was just not clear enough what was being achieved. The outcomes were felt to be too anecdotal, with a reliance on surveys and the perspectives of headteachers. I am not challenging those views, which I am sure reflect the reality of their situation, but given that we are now allocating a further £1 billion of public spending, we need more robust data on what is actually being achieved. As I have said, that was one of the clear judgments in the report.

I am not sure that we will have an answer to your question about ventilation in schools, but I will just check with Sharon O'Connor and Tricia Meldrum as to who might be best placed to answer it.

Sharon O'Connor: I do not have an answer to that question. As far as I am aware, we are not currently looking at the issue, so I am sorry to say that I have nothing further to add.

Michael Marra: That is fine. Thank you.

Stephanie Callaghan: I am sure that we all agree that we want our children to have the best start in life and that the provision of 1,140 hours of free early learning and childcare has been a bit of a revolution in Scottish childcare. Previously, only 412 hours of such childcare was available, and I know as a parent of school-age kids that it would have made a huge difference to me to have had those nursery hours available.

Although the pandemic delayed things by a year, it was an incredible achievement to get that rolled out. Around 97 per cent of children get 600-

plus hours and 87 per cent get the whole 1,140 hours. The Scottish Government has committed to providing wraparound childcare for before and after school and to expanding early years education for all two-year-olds. How should the evaluation of the expansion to 1,140 hours inform future policy making in the area?

11:15

Stephen Boyle: I will say a word or two before inviting Sharon O'Connor and Tricia Meldrum, who was one of the authors of the report, to contribute.

We agree that the expansion of early learning and childcare to 1,140 hours is a hugely significant policy programme. We reported on early learning and childcare in March 2020—I think it was our last report before the pandemic—and progress on the policy was explored by the Public Audit and Post-legislative Scrutiny Committee and others. With regard to the overall delivery of the policy, it was found that, although it fell short on some aspects, the programme had been successful and the anticipated benefits were considerable. The judgment that we have reached, which is informed by what has now been reported by the Government, is that the programme is complete—all local authorities in Scotland now offer the service.

In relation to Stephanie Callaghan's question about evaluation, one of the judgments that we made in the report was that, as the Government undertook its evaluation of the programme, there were opportunities to explore some of the wider economic implications and benefits, such as what the policy meant for employment opportunities for parents who were able to enter the workforce when they had previously been prevented from doing so. We recognise that evaluating other implications, such as the implications for family wellbeing, is harder to do—that is evident from the discussion on the education outcomes report—given the significant change that we are talking about.

We recognise it as a supportive report on the implementation of what is a significant part of education policy. I highlight that as the evaluation takes place, there is scope to broaden it out to capture those wider factors. I will pause there, as I am sure that Sharon or Tricia will want to say a word or two.

Sharon O'Connor: It is a matter of refinement and review, and I endorse what the Auditor General said. The policy is an important development that is welcomed by parents and educators. It is at the heart of giving children the best start that we can, so we will continue to take an active interest in it.

Stephanie Callaghan: That is great. I am a councillor on South Lanarkshire Council, so I was delighted to hear the positive comments about the collaborative work on education that the council has been doing.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): I hope that you are able to hear me. I apologise, but, because of the size of the event, the ventilation is on strong, so if the background noise is—

The Convener: We should explain that you are at the 26th United Nations climate change conference of the parties—COP26.

Ross Greer: Yes. I realise that I explained that in the pre-brief but not when the meeting went into public session. I apologise to our witnesses that I have to drop out. I will not go on for too long, because—[*Inaudible.*—]—questions have already been asked. I am interested in the part of your submission that mentions the work that you are planning on the provision of additional support for learning in schools. Could you lay out what you envisage for the scope of that work? Is it a look into the provision for additional support needs in mainstream schools? Will you consider specialist schools or will you look across the board at all ASN provision in tertiary education?

Stephen Boyle: Good morning, Mr Greer. As ever, I am happy to kick off, and I will then invite colleagues to come in.

We have retained an interest in ASN provision for many years. [*Inaudible.*—]—encouraged to undertake further audit work by Angela Morgan—[*Inaudible.*—]—part of her review on the quality and content of additional support needs provision across Scotland. We have signalled our interest in that. However, we have not yet got to scoping out the nature of our work. As ever, we are grateful to receive recommendations and comments from Angela Morgan and the committee before we settle on the timing and scope of our activity.

We recognise how important an area of education policy this is, given some of the changes that have taken place in the provision of special schools and in more mainstreaming of education, as has been alluded to. Similarly, we are thinking about how best to undertake public audit in this area.

I am not able to say much more than that at this stage. As ever, Sharon O'Connor and Tricia Meldrum might wish to add something.

Sharon O'Connor: I will defer to Tricia Meldrum, as she is directly involved in the work and can give you a better response than I could.

Tricia Meldrum: As the Auditor General said, we have not done the scoping work yet, so it could go in a number of different ways. We are considering issues around the transitions from

early learning into primary and secondary education, and then potentially into post-school destinations. Links with colleges provide a potential area of focus, given that we can look across the whole range of public services and the whole learner journey. We have not made any decisions yet, but those are the kinds of things that we think could be important.

Ross Greer: Stephen, I recall that, quite a few years ago now, I met your predecessor to discuss the scope of a potential inquiry into ASN services. My office has built up quite a lot of data on that over the years, with various freedom of information requests, written questions and so on, and I would be more than happy to pass that to you.

My other question concerns a different area. In paragraph 9 of your written submission to the committee, you make a point about measuring against the wider objectives of curriculum for excellence, the lack of data and the lack of systems for measuring against those wider objectives, rather than just considering attainment in assessed subjects. If you could expand on that, I am keen to know what areas of data you think are missing in those wider—[*Inaudible.*—]—health and wellbeing, and other areas, too. In what areas is there a significant lack of data that inhibits your ability to conduct your work?

Stephen Boyle: You are right, Mr Greer. In our submission and in our report—

The Convener: Did you catch all of what Mr Greer asked, Auditor General?

Stephen Boyle: I think I did. Just to clarify—

The Convener: Stephen, did you catch all of that?

Stephen Boyle: I think so. I think that Mr Greer was asking about the difference in the quality of data between attainment and the other pillars of curriculum for excellence.

The Convener: Yes.

Stephen Boyle: We recognise that—it is one of the main findings from the report. There is an abundance of data in the Scottish education sector on attainment levels. That is a key feature at the primary phase and for secondary schools. Broadly mirroring the finding of the OECD report, however, we do not see the same extent or quality of data on the other components of curriculum for excellence. That perhaps informs some of the views, judgments and commentary that are offered around education, with an appetite in some places for league tables on attainment. As educationalists tell us, and as we noted in our own report, they are only one component of Scotland's education system, and they represent a potential barrier to parity of esteem, #NoWrongPath and so on.

We particularly discussed health and wellbeing in our report, with a lack of data around those factors. We note that the Government has plans for a health and wellbeing census—the director general for education talked about that in evidence to the Public Audit Committee. We are keen to see progress. I do not think that there is any dispute that there is not the desired consistency or quality of data across all aspects of education in Scotland. There is a need for progress.

We were heartened by the Government's recognition in that evidence session and Education Scotland's recognition of the intention to make progress. As part of our forward work programme, we will continue to comment on the impact of subsequent activity—[*Inaudible.*]

Ross Greer: I have a final question on that theme. You mentioned the similarities between comments that you have made and what is in the OECD report. The OECD report offers another level of detail, and it is specifically critical of the value of the data produced by the Scottish national standardised assessments. I would be interested in your view on that. Do the SNSAs produce data that is useful to you for your objectives at the national level? An area of interest for our predecessor committee was trying to get a handle on the value of SNSAs as individual formative data for teachers interacting with individual pupils versus their value as a national or even a local authority level dataset. Do you find the dataset at either a regional or a national level to be useful? Are there better ways to collect such data?

Stephen Boyle: To be frank, I am not sure that we have gone into that level of detail on that particular aspect of the dataset. For the purposes of our report, we were keen to track public spending to outcomes. We had a sense rather than—[*Inaudible.*—]dataset, and I am happy to defer to the OECD's judgment in its reporting.

Tricia Meldrum can, by all means, contradict me if there is anything that we have seen on—[*Inaudible.*]

Tricia Meldrum: We did not look at that dataset in particular, and we did not ask about that when we did our field work, so we do not have any feedback from others on how useful they have found that data or how they use it. I am afraid that I have nothing to add on that.

Ross Greer: That might be an area of interest for the committee in the future. In so far as the Government has explained it, one of the intended purposes of the SNSAs is to measure our progress in narrowing the attainment gap, given the targeted funding through the attainment challenge fund and so on. If SNSAs are working as intended, we should, in theory, be able to use the data that they produce to measure whether the

targeted funding interventions are working. I encourage committee colleagues to consider that area—[*Inaudible.*] It would be helpful if further thought could be given to whether they are fulfilling that purpose in relation to the targeted funding.

The Convener: We are almost two hours into the meeting. I hope that Stephen Boyle and his colleagues will bear with us for a little longer. We have at least one more round of questions before we conclude.

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): We have already heard that more than £1 billion of taxpayers' money has been put into the pupil equity funding scheme. You have talked a lot about the importance of being clear about the policy objectives. On a number of occasions, the Scottish Government has attempted to position the policy as being about giving headteachers greater autonomy at the same time as enhancing equity. Have you reflected on that and on whether it is possible for one policy to have two different aims?

Stephen Boyle: You are right. As was said in the discussion with Mr Marra, we reflected in the report that it was not clear that the intended outcomes were achieved in increasing public spending and the education spending attributable to PEF. We see the data and how it reflects how the various levels of performance of the attainment challenge councils relative to the non-attainment challenge councils have changed since the programme was introduced.

11:30

On the wider point, although recognising that headteachers were found, through surveys and discussion, to be both satisfied and optimistic that PEF would deliver equity outcomes and allow them to target spending as they best saw fit—the delegation of authority point that Mr Mundell makes—I do not think that the two things are mutually exclusive. There can still be effective support and guidance for spending at delegated levels, but there must be an appropriate framework around that spending. Perhaps it could be built on Education Scotland's work on how best to target interventions while still giving headteachers the level of autonomy for the policy objectives that they know best fit what their schools and young people need.

Oliver Mundell: That is helpful. I wonder whether you have reflected on a point that is linked to the point that Mr Ewing made. There is a small group of predominantly smaller rural schools that tend to end up being ineligible for any of those funds and, anecdotally, headteachers in those schools say—I think that most reasonable people would accept that this is the case—that there is

significant poverty, deprivation and exclusion from opportunities in rural areas. The headteachers of those schools do not have the opportunity to ensure the provision of educational equity for their pupils. Is that something that you would look at when considering the success of a policy?

Stephen Boyle: It has certainly been a theme through the report and the subsequent evidence session that the Public Audit Committee had with the Government and Education Scotland that the SIMD mechanism to allocate public spending is perhaps too blunt and does not take account of aspects of rural poverty or pockets of poverty in otherwise affluent areas. As a consequence of that model, some schools, as Mr Mundell described, and some children and young people who would have benefited from additional funding were not eligible to receive it. We wait with interest to see what happens next from the Government's intention, as it was set out in the evidence session at the Public Audit Committee, to refine the funding model for the £1 billion.

Oliver Mundell: You recognise that there is a tension between a policy objective to give headteachers autonomy and a group of headteachers not being enabled to take decisions in relation to their pupils. There is a tension between the policy objective of equity funding and, because of where the threshold is set, that opportunity not being available in all schools.

Stephen Boyle: That is a clear finding in the report, which found that PEF allocation mechanisms did not address all aspects of poverty in Scotland, given the two factors that you described, Mr Mundell, of rural poverty and pockets of poverty in otherwise affluent areas. That lack of refinement in the funding meant that those children and young people have not benefited from the funding and headteachers have not been able to direct it. The Government described its plans to adopt the Department for Work and Pensions methodology for children in low-income families because it is a better tool for allocating funding. We will watch that with interest and factor it into our forward audit plans.

Oliver Mundell: That is helpful. I have a question about college funding, which is an issue that other members have brought up. You have said that the college sector has not experienced the same unpredictability as the university sector. However, there is a long-standing feeling in the college sector that it has not had the same funding flexibility and that, over time, that makes it more difficult for colleges to make strategic decisions. If colleges are under significant financial pressure from day to day, it is more difficult for them to reshape matters. Do you accept that, given the Covid pandemic, it is not fair to expect colleges to react nimbly and quickly when they do not have

the funding capacity or reserves to reconfigure their offer?

Stephen Boyle: I will take those points in reverse order. The arm's-length foundations that colleges set up in the restructuring that took place often support some of the structural changes in colleges that you describe, particularly changes in employment arrangements—[Inaudible.]. However, those reserves are dwindling so, as colleges seek to change their operations and how they deliver services, they will not have that ability in the future.

We were enthusiastic to see the better opportunity for the roll-out of medium and long-term financial—[Inaudible.] The Scottish Funding Council's review and the Government's response to it signalled that multiyear financial settlements would be consulted on and potentially rolled out. That mechanism would provide colleges with better opportunities to plan the delivery of their services and give them the flexibility that you describe, Mr Mundell.

Oliver Mundell: I have a question on the 1,140 hours workforce. You have covered the matter extensively previously, but I continue to hear about concerns from the private, voluntary and independent sector that it is not able to recruit early learning and childcare workers and that people who work in that sector are often displaced into the local authority sector. Is that still a risk to the success of the policy?

Stephen Boyle: We recognise the issue and the concerns that the private sector raised about its ability to compete with local authorities to attract and retain staff. If there is a disparity in terms and conditions and pension arrangements, that will be a barrier.

As the policy and the report mention, there is a neutrality in provision between the public and private sectors. Nonetheless, the private sector is an essential component of the policy's delivery. That point will need to come back into the Government's thinking as it evaluates the policy, the evidence behind recruitment and retention rates and the private sector's ability to assist in delivering the policy.

I will pause there, as Tricia Meldrum probably wants to say a word or two of update on the matter.

Tricia Meldrum: We identified the issue as a risk when we published the March 2020 report. It is fair to say that it remains a risk, and we plan to do further audit work next year in which we will examine how the roll-out happened and whether children and young people got the 1,140 hours if they wished to. We will consider the workforce that delivers that service and the impact that it has had on the private and voluntary sector.

Oliver Mundell: That is reassuring. The sector will be worried about the timing and the vulnerability of a number of settings, but I accept that you work to the timescale that you have.

Willie Rennie: My question goes back to early learning and childcare. Councils have done an amazing job in rolling out the 1,140 hours, but I was a bit concerned by the reference to our now being into refinement when there are big questions about the viability of private nurseries based on the rates of return that they are getting. They are getting only about a third of the entitled two-year-olds into nursery, and the flexibility that it was claimed would be integral to the scheme when we set it up has not been achieved.

What are your reflections on that? It is more of a point than a question, but I was alarmed that the witnesses thought that we are into refinement when there are major problems with aspects of the roll-out.

Tricia Meldrum: Those are all areas that we will look at when we do further work next year on how the roll-out was delivered. One of the issues is around flexibility. When we published the 2020 report, we thought that there was a risk that some councils might have to use contingency arrangements because their premises were not available on time. That may have happened in some councils and, therefore, children and families will not have had the same flexibility as when the council moves out of contingency arrangements into more permanent arrangements. We will watch out for things such as that.

We know that the Government is working with the UK Government on getting better access to data about those who are entitled to the provision for two-year-olds for reasons such as having access to various benefits. We continue to have discussions with the Government around some of those risks and how the situation is being taken forward. We will report on all of that next year.

The Convener: My final question is for the Auditor General for Scotland. We are at the start of our journey of scrutinising work in session 6 and would welcome your advice. What issue or consideration could the committee most usefully pursue or keep in our thoughts as we continue our scrutiny?

Stephen Boyle: I was grateful for your invitation, convener, and my colleagues and I have been delighted to spend time with the committee. The fundamental point, which has come up a number of times this morning, is that what is achieved from public spending matters as much as assurance around what is spent. Outcomes need to be clear and the Parliament needs to focus on that as it considers Scotland's budget over the next few weeks. Public spending needs to

be mapped to the national performance framework outcomes that are intended from it.

I have no doubt that you have clear interests for the work of the committee. Our activity, as Tricia mentioned, will include following up the 1,140 hours provision and continuing to look at education outcomes. Early next year, we will publish a report on the alignment of Scotland's skills system and the work of the Scottish Funding Council and Skills Development Scotland. As we come out of the pandemic, there will be opportunities and the inevitable need for training and retraining as Scotland's economy and industry changes. That may well be of interest to the committee, too.

Finally, extending the outcomes theme, it is worth highlighting that I and my colleagues in the Accounts Commission have recognised that Scotland is not an equal society. Many people rely on public services to a far greater extent than others; inequalities surround how many of us live our lives. We will continue to focus on that through our audit work on what has most fundamentally been achieved from public spending.

As ever, convener, I welcomed the chance to join the committee and I look forward to doing so again, at your invitation, as we produce more reports that will be of interest to the committee.

The Convener: I thank Stephen Boyle, the Auditor General for Scotland, Sharon O'Connor, from the Accounts Commission, and Tricia Meldrum and Rebecca Seidal, who are senior managers at Audit Scotland, for being with us this morning.

11:44

Meeting continued in private until 12:11.

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Published in Edinburgh by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, the Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP

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