



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Education, Children and Young People Committee

Wednesday 8 December 2021

Session 6



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EDUCATION, CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE COMMITTEE
12th 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:

Dr Natalie Coull (Abertay University)

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con)

Clare Haughey (Minister for Children and Young People)

Professor Mark Logan (University of Glasgow)

Denise McKay (Scottish Government)

Rachel McLean (Disclosure Scotland)

Lynne McMinn (Disclosure Scotland)

Karen Meechan (ScotlandIS)

Paul Mitchell (Scottish Building Federation)

Nicola Taylor (ScotlandIS)

Leon Thompson (UK Hospitality)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Stephen Herbert

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Education, Children and Young People Committee

Wednesday 8 December 2021

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:30]

Subordinate Legislation

Protection of Vulnerable Groups (Scotland) Act 2007 (Applications for Removal from List and Late Representations) Amendment Regulations 2021 (SSI 2021/379)

The Convener (Stephen Kerr): Good morning, and welcome to the 12th meeting in 2021 of the Education, Children and Young People Committee.

We have received apologies from Oliver Mundell, and we welcome back Meghan Gallacher, who is joining us as one of our substitute members. We have also received apologies from Willie Rennie.

The first item on our agenda is evidence on Scottish statutory instrument 2021/379. Oliver Mundell has lodged a motion to annul the instrument. The motion will be moved by Meghan Gallacher.

As is the usual practice in such circumstances, we will first have a brief evidence session with the Minister for Children and Young People, to allow members to ask questions and seek clarification.

I give a warm welcome to Clare Haughey, the Minister for Children and Young People. The minister is accompanied by Lynne McMinn, who is the director of policy, customer engagement and communications at Disclosure Scotland; Rachel McLean, who is the Disclosure (Scotland) Act 2020 implementation manager at Disclosure Scotland; and Rosie MacQueen, who is a solicitor in the Scottish Government legal directorate.

Denise McKay (Scottish Government): I am here in place of Rosie MacQueen, who is not here this morning.

The Convener: Good morning, Denise, and welcome. Are you also a solicitor from the Scottish Government legal directorate?

Denise McKay: That is correct.

The Convener: We got that bit right. It is good to have you here with us. I invite the minister to make some short opening remarks.

The Minister for Children and Young People (Clare Haughey): Thank you for inviting me to speak to the regulations. I will not go into the technical detail of what they do, because that has already been explained in the accompanying documents that have been produced by Scottish Government officials, which are complemented by the Scottish Parliament information centre paper.

I point out that the Protection of Vulnerable Groups (Scotland) Act 2007 has always included provision to allow barred individuals to make an application to be removed from the barred lists. Removal is contingent on ministers being satisfied that the applicant is no longer unsuitable to work with vulnerable groups.

To be absolutely clear, I point out that the policy proposal allows people aged 18 to 25 to apply to be removed from the barred lists sooner, but such an application does not lead to automatic removal. A thorough and well-established process for considering removal applications, which replicates the process for inclusion in the barred lists, is carried out by Disclosure Scotland's protection services. The proposal in the regulations is also consistent with the situation in the rest of the United Kingdom, where individuals are able to ask for a review of a barring decision by the disclosure and barring service.

The system of state disclosure that we have today is in direct response to the tragic Soham murders of August 2002. This Government will never forget why the service is so important. Indeed, my predecessor introduced the bill that became the Disclosure (Scotland) Act 2020. Once fully implemented, the 2020 act will deliver a range of reforms to the protecting vulnerable groups scheme to strengthen the national barring service.

The Scottish Government is committed to giving everyone a better chance of overcoming early adversities, including youth offending, in order to allow people to become productive and valued citizens in adulthood. Our policy proposal in the regulations is in keeping with the wider reforms that have been achieved by the 2020 act, and it strikes a balance between safeguarding and proportionality by enabling people with offending in their past to move on—where safeguarding considerations allow it—into work, employment or volunteering.

Disclosure Scotland has been engaging with relevant academics and experts in the formulation of policy supporting the measure. There is a clear association between age and desistance from crime, and the evidence supports recognition in policy of that association. However, in every case it is right that the individual circumstances be considered in order that a safe decision can be made about whether it is right to remove a person from the barred list.

We know from the responses to the 2018 consultation on protection of vulnerable groups and disclosure of criminal information that there is stakeholder support for the changes that the amendment regulations will make—particularly for how they will benefit care-experienced individuals, who are more likely than their peers to have experiences with the criminal justice system. Who Cares? Scotland said in its consultation response, which can be viewed on the citizen space website, that it welcomes the change, which is

“motivated by an understanding that those who commit crimes at a younger age are often trying to move on when coming into contact with PVG processes.”

I invite Ms Gallacher, on Mr Mundell’s behalf, not to move his motion to annul. If the motion is pressed, I ask members not to vote in favour of it.

The Convener: We will start with questions from Meghan Gallacher, who has just been mentioned.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): Will the minister outline the justification for amending the legislation? Where does the five-year limit originate from?

Clare Haughey: The regulations will amend the prescribed period that must pass before a person has the right to make an application. They will increase the age threshold for what is referred to in the principal regulations as the shorter prescribed period from under 18 to 25 and under . That means that an individual who is included in the barred list when they are aged between 18 and 25 will be able to apply to be removed after five, rather than 10, years have passed since the date of inclusion.

I make it absolutely clear that the amendment regulations will not lead to individuals being removed automatically from the barred list; they will simply amend the circumstances in which an application for removal will be competent. As I said in my opening remarks, the proposed changes are consistent with the approach that is taken in the rest of the United Kingdom to when individuals can ask for a review of the Disclosure and Barring Service’s decision.

The Convener: Why is the age of 25, rather than 24 or 26, proposed?

Clare Haughey: The proposed threshold is consistent with that in the rest of the UK, where the ability for individuals to ask for such a change applies up to the age of 25. It is also in line with corporate parenting responsibilities as they apply under the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014, because we in Scotland acknowledge that parenting does not stop at the age of 18. That is why the age of 25 was chosen.

The Convener: To be honest, I am still not clear about that. I hear what you say about the rest of the United Kingdom, but we have a devolution settlement and we can differ in Scotland, as is right on many occasions. Why was the specific age of 25 chosen? I am not sure that I heard an answer to that.

Lynne McMinn (Disclosure Scotland): To answer Ms Gallacher’s question, the five-year period is already in statute. When we did our pre-engagement and early engagement with stakeholders, and during the consultation, there was no consensus about changing from the periods of five years and 10 years that are prescribed in regulations, so we felt that there was no need to change those periods. We feel that five years and 10 years provide the right balance between proportionality and safeguarding.

We picked the age of 25 for a number of reasons. In the consultation, we provided a number of age points between 18 and 25. The majority of the respondents favoured increasing the age limit, and the majority who favoured an increase were in favour of the age of 25.

As Ms Haughey said, as a matter of policy, the threshold of the age of 25 is already in legislation for our corporate parenting approach. The 2014 act recognised that care-experienced people need access to services until they are 26 because of their life experiences, because they do not have the support systems that their peers have and because they are more likely than their peers are to interact with the justice system. That is also, as Ms Haughey said, in line with the rest of the UK.

Meghan Gallacher: Would the introduction of the regulations make it easier for people between the ages of 18 and 25 who are identified as having harmed children being allowed to work with vulnerable groups sooner? Is there a risk in making the process more accessible?

Clare Haughey: We all have a responsibility to ensure that children, young people and vulnerable adults are safeguarded. As I said in my opening remarks, the process of barring someone is robust and the process that someone would have to go through to have that barring lifted will be just as robust.

We want to ensure that we protect children, young people and vulnerable people. The changes in the regulations for people who were placed on the barred list when they were under the age of 25 is about recognising that young people move on from lifestyle choices and behaviours that have been harmful in the past. Denise McKay or Lynne McMinn might want to comment on the legalities around the process.

Lynne McMinn: I will just emphasise that the changes in the regulations will not make the

process easier. Under the current regulations, people over the age of 18 need to wait 10 years to make an application to be removed from the barred list. They can apply sooner than that if they can independently evidence that there has been a change to the circumstances that led to the barring in the first place.

As Ms Haughey said, the process of removing someone from the barring list is as robust as the process of adding someone to the list is. An application for removal does not mean that someone will be automatically removed. There is a robust process, and our caseworkers have the same information-gathering powers that they have under the current system of adding someone to the barred list. They go through an evidence-based process to make determinations case by case.

In the past 11 years, we have had 19 applications for removal, of which 13 have been successful. Of those successful applications, two have involved someone under the age of 26.

The Convener: I ask Michael Marra to come in at this point, as he has a supplementary question.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): The “robust” process has been mentioned a few times. Can you say a bit more about what that entails, so that we can have some confidence in the process? You mentioned evidence gathering.

Lynne McMinn: The protection unit carries out a casework process. It follows guidance from a casework manual, which was developed in 2014 and was co-produced with clinical psychologists. It was peer reviewed by other psychologists and it went to a committee of experts—academics, psychologists, care workers and unions.

It is not up to one individual to make a decision; each case is triaged and looked at by multiple people before a decision is taken. Information is gathered from the Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service and Police Scotland. Information can also be gathered from social workers and educators. The unit can get specific reports on risk assessment and clinical psychological reports. The unit has wide information-gathering powers, which allows people to gather whatever information they feel is necessary to make a decision.

Michael Marra: That is helpful. Thanks, convener.

Meghan Gallacher: How do you think the victims who have had such crimes committed against them would feel if someone could go through the system, be approved and be able to work with vulnerable groups sooner? There is a risk that the legislation could favour the perpetrator over the victim, in this instance.

09:45

Clare Haughey: We recognise the need for victims of crime to be respected and to feel that they have received appropriate support, regardless of how the person who perpetrated the crime is punished.

It is worth recognising that the change in regulation will affect young people and that there is a robust process to look at whether they should be removed from the barred list. Lynne McMinn has explained the process that people would go through. We can be assured that anyone who is removed from the barred list is suitable to work with groups that they had previously been barred from working with. None of us would want to remove from the lists anyone whom we felt was not suitable for work with children and young people or with vulnerable adults.

Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): I want to ask about the right to rehabilitation. Can you explain where that rationale comes from? Has it been supported by evidence from agencies such as Who Cares? Scotland?

Clare Haughey: It is important to acknowledge that there was wide consultation when the legislation was proposed and was going through Parliament. In my opening remarks, I mentioned the support that has been given by Who Cares? Scotland. There were other supporting voices, including Recruit With Conviction. We had a joint response from the Children and Young People’s Centre for Justice and the improving life chances implementation group, who also expressed their support for increasing the age threshold to the highest age that was offered. There is widespread support from stakeholders for the change in regulation.

James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP): Can you give us some information about automatic listing? What does it entail? What percentage of people on the barred list have been automatically listed? How many of those have ever been taken off the list?

Clare Haughey: Lynne McMinn can give some information about the process of automatic listing.

Lynne McMinn: The serious offences that we refer to as automatic listing offences are set out in statute. They include offences such as the murder of a child or rape. A person who is convicted of one of those offences is automatically listed.

It will take me a moment to find the statistics, but I can tell you that we have never removed an automatically listed person from the barred list. I think that automatically listed people make up about 26 per cent of the more than 8,000 people who are barred in Scotland.

Clare Haughey: Anyone who is mentally ill or who lacks capacity at the time of their conviction would also automatically be added to that list.

The Convener: We are putting on record the circumstances in which people's names appear on the barred list. Other than in cases of the automatic listing that we have just heard about, what are the other circumstances that lead to people being on the list?

Lynne McMinn: Other offending behaviour can lead to a person being considered for listing and, after investigation, being put on the list. There is the issue of the proximity of behaviour to the regulated work that a person might be doing, for example.

There are also referrals from employers. Someone might be working in regulated work and have behaved in a manner that was deemed to be not appropriate. The employer can make a referral to Disclosure Scotland. An investigation would take place and the person could be listed.

A person does not necessarily need to be convicted of a crime to be listed. Police Scotland can also push in other relevant information, which might be information about a person's conduct that could result in their being considered for listing and, possibly, after investigation, being put on the barred list.

It is not just criminal convictions that could result in a person being barred.

The Convener: We are talking about a situation in which an individual, in the course of doing regulated work, has

"harmed a child ... placed a child at risk of harm ... engaged in inappropriate conduct involving pornography ... engaged in inappropriate conduct of a sexual nature involving a child"

or a protected adult or has

"given inappropriate medical treatment to a child"

or a protected adult. That is how people end up on the list.

Lynne McMinn: Yes.

The Convener: When you speak about a change in circumstances, what does that mean? How do you define a change in circumstances? We are talking about a serious misdemeanour whether somebody is 16, 24 or 34.

Lynne McMinn: Not everybody who is on the list will have committed those offences. It could be that they have committed a series of offences over a period, such as theft. If such a person wants to go and work in a care home, the proximity of that offending to their wanting to do that work could be factored in. Not every listing relates to the serious offences that you mentioned.

A change in circumstances could be that an individual was convicted of an offence and then appealed it and it was quashed. It could be that the behaviour that led to them being barred was the direct result of addiction to alcohol or drugs and they can evidence some time down the line that they have sought treatment, the behaviour has desisted and it is no longer of concern. However, if someone makes an application because they claim that their circumstances have changed, it will still go through a thorough investigation before consideration is given to whether they should be removed from the list.

The Convener: If someone was convicted of an offence that put them on to the barred list and that conviction was overturned, would they still have to wait 10 years?

Lynne McMinn: No, they could apply—

The Convener: Could they do that now?

Lynne McMinn: Yes.

The Convener: So, in the circumstances that you have just described, there is no need to change the threshold to five years. An overturned conviction would take someone off the list anyway.

Lynne McMinn: No. As I said earlier—

The Convener: It is a separate issue.

Lynne McMinn: Yes. As I said earlier, there are two tests—

The Convener: It is separate from the regulations that we are considering.

Lynne McMinn: Yes.

The Convener: That is fair enough. You answered Michael Marra's question on process. Who handles the process? Is it Disclosure Scotland? I apologise—I should direct that question to the minister, because she is the lead person.

Lynne McMinn: There is a protection unit in Disclosure Scotland, which was set up in 2011. It does the work on behalf of ministers to determine whether somebody should be added to the list and whether somebody should be removed from it.

The Convener: Does it then make a recommendation to ministers?

Lynne McMinn: It makes decisions. Occasionally, depending on the circumstances, it might go to the minister.

The Convener: So, it is done in the name of the ministers.

Lynne McMinn: It is done on behalf of the Scottish ministers.

The Convener: You act on behalf of the ministers. I am with you.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): I will ask the minister and her officials two simple questions for clarification.

Is it right that, before any individual is removed from the barred list, there is, must be and will continue to be a full and robust consideration of whether that person remains unsuitable and, moreover, that these regulations will not change that? At the moment, there is a robust test of detailed, careful consideration, and that will remain the case if the regulations are not annulled. Is that correct?

Clare Haughey: Yes, I can confirm that.

Fergus Ewing: Secondly, is it the case that what we are doing here will, in effect, bring Scotland into line with England, which will mean that the same hurdles and time provisions apply?

Clare Haughey: Yes, I can also confirm that.

Fergus Ewing: Thank you, minister.

The Convener: It is not essential that we are in line with England.

Clare Haughey: No, convener, but I think that it gives some context.

The Convener: It seems to be a rather strange conversation in the political context.

Clare Haughey: It just gives us some context for the changes and shows that we are not just doing something—

The Convener: Because it is being done in other parts of the United Kingdom.

Clare Haughey: Yes.

The Convener: That is not a good reason to change anything in Scots law.

Lynne McMinn: Consistency across borders is helpful because, if someone is barred in Scotland, they are also barred in the rest of the UK, and if they are removed from the barred list in Scotland, they could well be removed from the barred list in the rest of the UK. If the barring service in England and Wales deems someone to be unsuitable when they have applied there, they will be barred in Scotland and the rest of the UK.

The Convener: I do not think that we have any other questions. We have given the regulations a fair airing. I appreciate the candour and willingness to answer our questions that the minister and her colleagues have shown.

At this point, and unless anyone objects, we will move to our next item, which is consideration of motion S6M-02353. I ask Meghan Gallacher to move the motion.

Meghan Gallacher: I will move the motion on behalf of Oliver Mundell.

Currently, those aged 18 to 25 who wish to apply to be removed from the children's or adults' list, as set out in the Protection of Vulnerable Groups (Scotland) Act 2007, can apply to do so after 10 years. Individuals who are on the lists are on there because it has been decided by ministers that it would be inappropriate for them to work with children or vulnerable adults. Reasons for referral can include engaging in child sex offences, among other things.

The regulations would lower the threshold by five years for 18 to 25-year-olds, meaning that they could apply to be removed from the children's or adults' list five years after being placed on it. That is concerning, because it might allow people who have been identified as harmful to children to work with children sooner as they could reoffend and then reapply to be removed from the list within five years instead of 10. That might also reduce competence in the disclosure system if the individual who was on the children's or adults' list has been removed.

There are also concerns about victims who might feel that the Scottish Government is favouring the perpetrator. What happens if they are living in the same community? There could also be wider issues there.

As has been discussed this morning, the sorts of offences and cases involved are too wide. That would need to be looked into further for the regulations to be approved. There are also concerns about the five-year limit and the overall justification for amending the regulations today. Moving the limit is a serious cause of concern and it should not be done, for the reasons that I have listed today and for the other reasons that members have raised.

I move,

That the Education, Children and Young People Committee recommends that the Protection of Vulnerable Groups (Scotland) Act 2007 (Applications for Removal from List and Late Representations) Amendment Regulations 2021 be annulled.—[*Meghan Gallacher*]

The Convener: Thank you. Do members have any comments to make on the motion?

10:00

James Dornan: Can we confirm that this is not about letting someone leave the barred list but is only about allowing them to make an application? There seems to be some confusion here. It is as if we are saying that people would be automatically free from the bar after five years.

The Convener: The minister might address that in the remarks that I will ask her to make shortly.

Clare Haughey: Yes, I can.

The Convener: The issues that Meghan Gallacher has raised are worthy of the airing that we have given them. It is hard to understand why it is felt necessary at this point to reduce the 10 years to five, given that there are already the flexibilities that were highlighted by Lynne McMinn in her response to the question that I asked about overturned convictions. Although it is true that a variety of convictions or behaviours can result in someone being on the barred list, those who are on the list have usually committed fairly serious indiscretions in relation to children or to vulnerable or protected adults.

I am commenting as an individual member of the committee, not as its convener. I think that I am allowed to make my opinions known without prejudicing my role as chair.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): I have a brief point about the seriousness of the offences that might result in an individual ending up on the list. It is very unlikely that an individual who had committed some of the very serious offences that we have been talking about would be in a position whereby their application for removal from the list would be granted. However, we have heard the example of an individual who might have committed theft and who wishes to work in a care home. That is the sort of circumstance that we talk about when Parliament debates the rehabilitation of offenders, acknowledging the adverse childhood experiences that affect some young people and the connection that that can have to care-experienced young people.

We are not talking about a mechanism for allowing those who are guilty of the most serious offences to get themselves removed from the list. The likelihood is that those who would be able to make a successful application would not be those who are guilty of the serious offences that you have mentioned; it would be those who have done something of far less gravity. They may have been placed on the list for something that is not a criminal offence. It is important to put that on the record.

Understandably, a lot of our debate has focused on the minority of people who are on the list because they have committed very serious offences. The mechanism that the regulations would allow will not commonly be applied to those cases. It will be far more common for it to be applied to cases that are far less serious and that absolutely fit into the category of the rehabilitation of offenders. We have discussed that many times in Parliament and we passed legislation on that—I believe, unanimously—during the previous session.

The Convener: Fergus Ewing wants to come in, to be followed by Stephanie Gallacher. I am sorry—I mean Stephanie Callaghan. I am mixing up my Gallachers and my Callaghans.

Fergus Ewing: I endorse what Ross Greer has just said and have a couple of points to add. My understanding of the officials' response is that, if the regulations are passed, there will be no change to the test that is applied, which protects the public from those who have committed more serious offences. There will be no change at all.

The only alteration is that people will be allowed to make an application at an earlier age. An application that would be refused would also be refused when they are younger. Any suggestion that there is an increased risk is nothing short of scaremongering. I am sure that no one would wish to do that. It is particularly disappointing to hear those arguments when we have already heard that one of the benefits will be a consistency of approach throughout the UK. That means that children who succeed in an application that is made in Scotland would be able to move south to take up advantages there, and vice versa. There may be practical benefits. For those reasons, I will vote against the motion to annul.

The Convener: Yes, I hear what you say, Fergus.

Stephanie, I invite you to speak. I apologise for getting your surname wrong earlier.

Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): I agree with Ross Greer and Fergus Ewing.

I challenge the assertion that it is all about serious offences. It is certainly not. For example, often, young men who are unable to find a toilet after being out at a nightclub can end up with indecent exposure offences. I have experienced that in my work with young people.

It is important to bear in mind that we have all supported keeping the promise and that care-experienced young people are more likely to be involved with the law. The five-year period is a key time for them when they are considering employment or further training, for instance. We must give people the opportunity to move on and have success in life. Right now, care-experienced young people are statistically not nearly as likely to be successful and we must do all that we can to support their success without putting people at risk. Proper safeguards are in place.

The Convener: I will ask the minister to confirm for the record that there is no risk at all attached to the change.

Michael Marra: I came into the discussion wanting to listen to the minister and her officials with a fairly open mind about the matter. I have

heard that there are strong safeguards and a robust process across agencies to ensure that the public are protected. The practical effect of the change seems to be that we go through the same process but in a timeous manner that enables people to have a chance in their lives if the process comes to a positive conclusion for them.

I am also satisfied that the numbers of people on the barred list who are making applications for removal are almost vanishingly small. Therefore, there should be sufficient capacity to ensure that the processes are robust.

I have listened to the arguments and am convinced that the regulations take a reasonable step with a robust process to protect the public.

The Convener: I say to Fergus Ewing that it is not fair to accuse a colleague of fearmongering if they have genuine concerns about the increased risk that a change in legislation might create, even for one person who might then reoffend with disastrous results for the lives of others. It is rather unfair to accuse colleagues of that on the basis of legislative scrutiny.

I call the minister, who is only too ready to respond to the points that have been made.

Clare Haughey: I have listened carefully to the debate and am grateful to have had the opportunity to explain the Scottish Government's position on the SSI.

On James Dornan's point, I am absolutely clear that the regulations do not automatically lead to individuals being removed from the barred list. They simply amend the circumstances in which an application for removal is competent in that they change the timescales.

As I said in my opening statement, I invite Ms Gallagher not to press Mr Mundell's motion. However, if it is pressed to a vote, I will ask members to vote in favour of the regulations.

Meghan Gallacher: I do not have much to add to the debate, but I will touch on one or two points that colleagues made.

I reiterate the point that I am absolutely not scaremongering. The concerns are legitimate. We need to weigh up risks and I am not convinced that the regulations would eliminate the risks that we have spoken about.

Stephanie Callaghan mentioned an assertion that it was all about serious offences. That is not what I said and I think that she has picked me up wrongly. I said that there was a wide-ranging list of offences. That is where another concern comes in. It could be something minimal or it could be something more serious. It is a matter of weighing up what would be approved and what would not be approved. We need to have more discussions

about that instead of approving the legislation as is.

I want to touch on the barred list. I understand James Dornan's point. However, as we heard earlier, 13 out of the 19 applications were successful. That shows that there is a sway in respect of applications being approved. That is okay if they have gone through robust processes, but it adds a further element of risk.

The Convener: The question is, that motion S6M-02353, in the name of Oliver Mundell, be agreed to. Are we agreed?

Members: No.

The Convener: As we are in a hybrid meeting, I invite members who are attending virtually to vote via the chat function. Members who are in the committee room can vote by raising their hand. Please keep your hand raised while the clerks record your vote.

For

Gallacher, Meghan (Central Scotland) (Con)
Kerr, Stephen (Central Scotland) (Con)

Against

Callaghan, Stephanie (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
Doris, Bob (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
Dornan, James (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
Ewing, Fergus (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
Greer, Ross (West Scotland) (Green)
Marra, Michael (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Stewart, Kaukab (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)

The Convener: The result of the division is: For 2, Against 7, Abstentions 0.

Motion disagreed to.

The Convener: The committee must now produce a report on the draft instrument. Is the committee content to delegate responsibility to the deputy convener and me to agree that report on behalf of the committee? It will be a brief factual report with a link to the *Official Report* of today's meeting.

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: I thank the minister and officials for their time. We will have a two-minute suspension to allow the witnesses to leave.

10:12

Meeting suspended.

10:14

On resuming—

**Disclosure (Scotland) Act 2020
(Commencement No 1 and Transitory
Provision) Regulations 2021 (SSI 2021/380)**

The Convener: Welcome back. Our next agenda item is consideration of SSI 2021/380, the Disclosure (Scotland) Act 2020 (Commencement No 1 and Transitory Provision) Regulations 2021.

Since no members have indicated that they wish to comment, are we agreed that the committee does not wish to make any recommendations in relation to the instrument?

Members *indicated agreement.*

**Skills: Alignment with Business
Needs**

10:15

The Convener: Our next item of business is evidence on skills: alignment with business needs. I welcome Leon Thompson, the executive director for Scotland at UK Hospitality, and Paul Mitchell, the head of employment affairs at the Scottish Building Federation.

Fergus Ewing: Good morning to the witnesses, and thank you for joining us today. The written submissions that we have received indicate that, following the effects of the pandemic, in order to help us to achieve a common economic recovery, business wishes, rightly, to focus on areas where there has been especial damage. Tourism and retail have been mentioned, although there are others. I agree with and welcome the wish for that focus. In particular, Leon Thompson will be aware of the work that the tourism task force has completed, which looked at specific measures that involve particular universities, colleges and establishments with a distinguished track record—for example, in tourism. In the evidence from our retail colleagues, I was slightly concerned to see that the number of apprentices in retail has reduced over recent years.

To supplement their written submissions, I would like the witnesses to provide us with a prognosis and a set of measures that they wish to see in place, and I would like them to be as specific as possible instead of generally saying that we should do more. What, in particular, should that “more” be? Who should provide it?

Having been in a driving seat of sorts, as a minister for 14 years, I am acutely aware that those are complex matters and that it is difficult to deliver objectives into reality. Nevertheless, some very positive, specific, prescriptive suggestions about how we can help younger people, in particular, and how money should be focused on areas such as tourism and retail would be very welcome. My questions go to both witnesses.

The Convener: Would Leon Thompson like to go first?

Leon Thompson (UK Hospitality): I am happy to do that. Thank you for inviting me along today. In response to the question from Mr Ewing, I will start by saying that hospitality works very closely with education providers and with the Scottish and UK Governments. We take a partnership approach to developing the workforce for hospitality. There are some great examples of where things are working well at the moment. We have some terrific colleges delivering outstanding courses and

bringing young workers through into the sector. We have businesses working with those colleges and education providers to provide pathways and routes into work. We are working very closely with the UK Government around the kickstart scheme, and a number of our members are making very good use of that. We are also working with the Scottish Government around the young persons guarantee, so there are already a lot of initiatives that are working well and delivering for hospitality, although the disruption that is caused by the pandemic is still very much in the foreground.

We have good partnership working and strong connections there. As a sector, we offer great jobs and terrific careers for our young people to take up, but we still face a significant hurdle in challenging some of the perceptions that exist around jobs and careers in hospitality. We should look to address that collectively by talking up the roles that are available in hospitality and, more widely, in tourism and by getting schools and parents on side with talking to their young people about careers in hospitality.

We worked closely with the Scottish Government immediately after the reopening of hospitality earlier this year, and the Scottish Government put £100,000 into a promotion campaign to encourage young people to consider jobs and careers in the sector. We would like to see more of that in the future, because it demonstrates good partnership working between the sector and Government.

Fergus Ewing: I am aware that a lot of good work is done by VisitScotland, by the kickstart scheme and by colleges and universities throughout the country; I will not name them, as it would take too long. Much good work is also done by the industry itself, which has partnered with the public sector in many ways to help young people into tourism and to give specific practical work experience to youngsters while they pursue primarily academic, classroom-based training courses, certificates or degrees. The industry is to be congratulated on that.

I would be grateful if UK Hospitality and bodies such as the Scottish Tourism Alliance could continue the good relationship that they have with the public sector and the Scottish Government to build on that work, because I think that more needs to be done. I agree with Leon Thompson's point that there is still a perception risk, even though tourism and hospitality, along with food and drink and events, offer terrific career opportunities and will continue to do so in the future, just as much as they have done in the past.

I invite Paul Mitchell to respond.

Paul Mitchell (Scottish Building Federation): Good morning. We appreciate the opportunity to give evidence to the committee.

In answering Fergus Ewing's question about what specific measures should be taken, I will look first at the Covid recovery situation. In the construction industry, we currently have a cohort of around 500 apprentices who should have completed their time-served construction crafts apprenticeships in the trades of joinery, bricklaying and painting in August and September of this year. For a number of reasons, some of which are related to the coronavirus pandemic and some of which are related to the arrangements for the apprenticeship qualifications, those candidates have not yet managed to finish their apprenticeships, which means that their futures are uncertain. That is also causing a level of delay for employers. We need to look at measures to get that group of 500 apprentices through their qualifications as soon as possible.

With that in mind, serious consideration should be given to allowing candidates to undertake simulation, with a view to their completing their portfolio evidence. During the pandemic, it has not always been possible to collect evidence from site. Giving candidates the opportunity to undertake simulation would really help them, because they have been delayed for a number of months and the uncertainty continues.

I want to mention two other issues. The first is reform of the flexible workforce development fund, which is derived from the apprenticeship levy contributions. Earlier this year, we saw evidence that, if financial incentives are provided to employers to recruit apprentices, apprenticeship recruitment increases. We had the new apprenticeship employer grant, which provided £5,000 to employers to take on an apprentice, and the number of construction apprenticeships went through the roof at that time.

We need to create a hybrid model in which we retain the existing provision for college training, upskilling and retraining, but that is aligned with an element of incentivising apprenticeship recruitment through the flexible workforce development fund. That fund could perhaps be targeted in areas where there are known skill shortages or areas where there are underrepresented groups. That would be a real step forward.

More broadly, measures should be taken to re-engage with industry. We feel very disenfranchised in relation to the skills planning landscape and the development of and arrangements for our apprenticeships. It would be a real step forward to re-establish those connections with industry, perhaps through the reinstatement of the apprenticeship registration bodies, which consisted of 50 per cent employer

representatives and 50 per cent employee representatives.

Fergus Ewing: Both witnesses have provided positive suggestions, which we should pursue afterwards, convener. There is no doubt that we can discuss that. We have some pretty concrete pointers in the right direction.

I have a small supplementary question for Paul Mitchell. Is there a concern in the construction sector that, generally, there is a shortage of skilled labour in many of the trades that are essential to pursue construction projects? Do you agree with me, as someone who represents a largely rural constituency, that the shortage of available contractors means that it is difficult to get competitive prices for projects, which has led to price inflation in many projects in the public and private sectors? Do you consider that, as part of the solution to those issues, we need to take up the suggestions that you have made to ensure that there is a larger stream of young people in rural and urban Scotland going into the construction sector to carry out the work that we all believe is necessary for schools, roads, hospitals, railways and private sector projects?

The Convener: And houses.

Paul Mitchell: We have skills shortages and issues, particularly in rural parts of Scotland. Our members often report difficulties with bricklaying and labouring. That of course has an impact, not only on project costs but on timescales. There are other issues related to costings. As I am sure members will be aware, earlier this year, there were serial supply-side issues as we recovered from Covid, which pushed up the cost of materials. We have to deal with that inflation on an on-going basis.

The latest study that was conducted in construction recommended that, between 2020 and 2025, the construction industry in Scotland will require more than 26,000 new entrants. There are fantastic opportunities in construction to build a career, and we need new entrants. However, it is worth pausing for a second to recognise that, even during 2020-21, the construction sector recruited 5,000 apprentices, which was still very much top of the class compared to the volume in other sectors. We are immensely proud of not just the number of opportunities that have been created but the depth and scale of those apprenticeship offerings.

10:30

The Convener: I have a question for Leon Thompson. People have a perception that hospitality largely involves casual work that students do. That is a popular idea about employment in the sector that you represent, but

that works against the sector. What has the hospitality sector done to try to change such perceptions and to pitch itself particularly to younger people who perhaps do not see it as a route to a skilled career?

Leon Thompson: The sector is very much on the front foot in that regard. Businesses are doing a lot of work by going into schools and talking to young people when they are considering their employment options after school education. They are talking up the roles and opportunities that exist in hospitality—

The Convener: Do you get into all schools? I speak to employers who find that, although there are some really positive experiences of engagement with schools, it is very hard to get through the front door of some schools.

Leon Thompson: That is absolutely correct. Engagement is patchy. It is working very well in some areas, but it is not working so well in others. A locally driven approach is taken, and we could do with getting some consistency in businesses' engagement with schools, so that they can set out the employment opportunities that exist.

The Convener: Do headteachers have discretion about which employers, if any, get through the front door? Are such decisions entirely for local headteachers?

Leon Thompson: When I say "local", I mean local authorities, but schools also have a say in how they engage with local businesses. The lack of consistency hinders businesses in taking a more proactive approach. However, there are some excellent examples, so the template model for engaging well already exists.

The Convener: I also asked about the broader pitching of the sector. In relation to career structure, what has been done to sell the hospitality sector to younger people in order to attract them into the sector?

Leon Thompson: I mentioned the social media campaign that was run back in June in conjunction with the Scottish Government. That involved talking up all the different roles that exist in hospitality. A key issue for the sector is being able to unpack the variety of roles that exist in hospitality. People automatically think about front-of-house staff and chefs, but a range of roles and jobs are available that can lead to fulfilling and rewarding careers in businesses and across the sector.

A number of our members run their own promotional campaigns and encourage people to apply for the roles that they have available. Some members have set up their own hospitality academies, which allows them to recruit and, crucially, retain staff, particularly young people, in

businesses. There are opportunities to expand and learn more on the job, which highlights the real career opportunities that exist in the sector.

The Convener: Where is the sector on the journey with regard to the perception of hospitality changing from it involving low skills and low pay to it involving higher skills and much better pay?

Leon Thompson: I think that we are doing well—we are certainly moving forward. We have obviously had a setback with the pandemic, with which businesses are still grappling. The biggest challenge that businesses face probably relates to job security in hospitality, given that the sector was the first to close and the last to reopen during the pandemic. That is a big hindrance at the moment. However, students who are studying hospitality-related courses say that they certainly intend to enter the sector once they have completed their courses, and that is incredibly encouraging—there is that pipeline and young people are coming through it into the sector.

There is more to be done, and, as I mentioned, we are working closely with the Government on this. The sector is also looking at running a national campaign at some point in the next year that will highlight the diversity of the roles that are available to people entering hospitality. That initiative will be very important for breaking down some of the perceptions that probably still exist out there.

The Convener: Do not let me put words in your mouth, Leon, but you seem to be saying that the sector understands that the ball is at its feet as much as at the feet of anyone else when it comes to changing perceptions and selling the reality that someone can have a very positive career in hospitality.

Leon Thompson: That is absolutely correct. As I said at the start of this session, partnership is absolutely key to what we do here in Scotland. UK Hospitality Scotland works very closely with Skills Development Scotland, our partners in the Scottish Tourism Alliance and education providers. It is very much a team effort to make the changes and attract people into our important sector.

Michael Marra: My first questions, for Leon Thompson, are about the skills gaps and the impact of the pandemic. Plenty of us have seen signs in the windows of pubs and cafes saying that they are looking for staff, and signs on some pubs and shops saying that they cannot open because they do not have enough staff.

Do you feel that this is a short-term shock to our labour supply that is particularly acute? You have talked about work being done for the long term, but let us leave that to the side for the moment. It is good to hear about the good partnership working across the different areas, but I am

particularly keen to see what we can do in the short term to try to help industry address these issues.

Leon Thompson: The big challenge at the moment is that we just do not have enough people in Scotland of working age to fill the vacancies. With the economy having restarted, there is a huge imbalance between the demand for labour—the number of jobs that are available—and the labour supply.

We are experiencing severe disruption in the labour supply for hospitality. Before the pandemic, our sector was the third-largest employer in Scotland, employing 285,000 people all around and in every corner of the country. Our members say that they are experiencing shortages of anywhere between 10 per cent and 16 per cent in the number of workers that they need. Businesses are looking at how they can manage with fewer workers, and they are also bringing in people who might not have any experience in hospitality. That provides a good opportunity for people to come in, learn new skills and get involved in a sector that they might not be familiar with, but the fundamental challenge remains that, right now, there are more vacancies than people who appear to be available to work. That is what businesses are grappling with.

We mentioned students coming through from colleges, but that pipeline of talent has been disrupted as well, with many students repeating years because of problems in the live-in courses due to lockdown and so on.

Those are a number of reasons why we are experiencing these problems, and, obviously, changes in the immigration system have compounded the challenges for some businesses as well. However, businesses are doing what we do best: being adaptable, being resilient and looking at how we can increase productivity with the number of workers that we have. As you pointed out, though, some businesses are having to reduce their service and the hours that they can operate, and that is holding the sector back from recovery.

Michael Marra: I find that really useful. The trends that you are laying out for the sector may have emerged due to the rapid rebounding of the economy, which I think has taken most people by surprise, globally. The scale of the Government investment to try and ensure that that has happened has been welcome, although there are skills shortages, as you have illustrated, in many countries around the world. That is fairly common, although I do not doubt that some of that has been exacerbated by the shape of our labour market with regard to immigration.

Do you believe that, as a result of that, and given the longer-term changes in people's behaviour, both in their working patterns and as consumers, we need to have a more profound reset in how we address these issues? You have spoken about the positive atmosphere in working with agencies, and that is great. Do we need to examine some of the issues in a more concerted way and to think about what is emerging as a new normal?

Leon Thompson: Yes, absolutely. We see that the sector will need to keep adapting. It will need to continue to present itself as an attractive place to work, where people can come in and work and build their careers. Businesses have made a number of changes in order to make their offer more attractive and appealing to young people who are coming in. That means more flexibility around hours. Pay is obviously a key issue, too, and we are in a very competitive market for labour, which is obviously driving up wages. The majority of businesses will now probably be paying the real living wage, if not above, in order to attract and retain their workers. We are already seeing that kind of rebalancing going on, as market forces dictate that businesses need to do that in order to recruit and retain their workforce.

Michael Marra: I have been speaking to representatives of colleges over the past couple of weeks, and they are telling me that they are struggling to retain students, due to the opportunities that emerge for well-paid jobs in your industry. When it comes to completing courses and ensuring that students have the qualifications to hand that allow them to work through a longer-term career, there is a drive on your side of the fence to get people into work—and that is a great thing—but are you working with your members to ensure that new recruits can complete those courses, get the credits and get the credentials that can provide a longer career?

Leon Thompson: Yes. Our members are clear that they want to have skilled workers coming in—people who have completed courses and who have their qualifications and so on. It does not end there, however. On-the-job training is absolutely critical, particularly in sectors such as hospitality. Businesses are in this for the long term, and they are seeking to build talent within Scotland, ensuring that we have a constant flow of skills, with young people coming into the sector. That is very much where the future lies for our sector.

Michael Marra: Turning to our colleague from the Scottish Building Federation, I am interested in issues pertaining to net zero and the training not just of young people—on whom we have focused in this discussion—but of older, more experienced tradespeople and other people bringing skills to the labour market. Do you think that enough is

being done, both by the industry and by the associated agencies, to support you to upskill and refresh the workforce, so that we can meet the challenges of higher building standards, different approaches and new technologies? Are we building capacity and reacting enough, as institutions, to help you to do that work?

Paul Mitchell: We are beginning to take steps in the right direction. Like many other sectors, we are caught at an impasse on that. We recognise that we have a problem with continuous professional development in our sector. Often, when craftspeople have completed their apprenticeship, the only training that they have thereafter is on health and safety. There has to be a culture and mindset change. We have looked at initiatives such as supporting tradespeople to be accredited to the passive house standard. We will have to consider that.

10:45

There is an opportunity to look at and review the apprenticeship qualifications through the new SAAB—Scottish Apprenticeship Advisory Board—apprenticeship approval process. That is an opportunity to look at not only bedding in the apprenticeship issues relating to net zero but at modern methods of construction and building information technology. The aim would be to ensure that apprenticeships are modernised and contemporary and reflect what actually happens on site as well as the requirements of employers in the sector.

Ross Greer: My first question is on Paul Mitchell's point about apprenticeships. Do we need to rebrand foundation apprenticeships? That might sound like a slightly daft question, but hear me out. I have had a concern for a while that, for people who are my age or older, in education and skills terms, the word "foundation" is generally associated with the lowest of the three standard grade levels. However, a foundation apprenticeship is actually a really attractive opportunity—it is a substantial course and employment opportunity. My concern, which is based on feedback that I have had from young people, is that the brand that we have chosen puts them off—it sounds like something that they should not consider, and there are other opportunities that, superficially, sound more attractive. Do we have the branding right with foundation apprenticeships?

Paul Mitchell: No, I do not think that we have the branding correct at all. I agree with those comments. When I was at school, the foundation level was the lowest of the three standard grade levels. The name does not send out the right message to candidates and employers, and it would benefit from being changed. Perhaps it

could be called a pathways apprenticeship or something of that nature. The branding certainly has to be looked at.

Specifically in construction, there is an issue with foundation apprenticeships in that we do not want to half train candidates in bricklaying or joinery so that they can go out into the market and start operating with no licence or meeting only the minimum requirements to operate as a craftsperson in Scotland. We need to be careful that we do not give people a little bit of knowledge. We must ensure that there is a coherent pathway from a foundation apprenticeship into a modern apprenticeship and then on into a graduate apprenticeship.

Ross Greer: I will move on to another area. About five years ago, our predecessor committee did a wide-ranging inquiry into personal and social education in schools. That touched on some of the soft employability skills and questions about whether schools were preparing young people with skills such as CV drafting and preparation for interview. We found huge inconsistency across the country. Some schools were excellent at that— young people were leaving at the end of their fourth, fifth or sixth years knowing how to draft their CV and how to prepare for and perform in an interview. However, in other schools, that simply was not part of the PSE curriculum.

I am interested in your reflections on whether the situation has improved over the past five years. Do you get the impression that young people are leaving school with those soft employability skills, or is there still inconsistency there?

Leon Thompson: There is still a lack of consistency. From speaking to members about the applications that they get, I know that it is a mixed picture. Some applications are very good, and some are not so good. Clearly, skills have improved in the area. A lot more resources are available to young people, and there is more support at school with putting together CVs and preparing for interviews. However, the picture is still very mixed and patchy.

Right now, applications are coming through from people who are looking for work who are perhaps not particularly strong on paper. However, because businesses are looking for workers, young people are getting opportunities to go for interviews, which is probably incredibly helpful for them, as they get real-life experience of sitting down and talking to an employer. Even if they are unsuccessful in securing a place, that will help them in their endeavours in the future.

Paul Mitchell: I agree with Leon Thompson that there is still inconsistency. A lot of our members, as employers, want core or basic skills—they

might be referred to as meta skills—when they are looking to recruit an apprentice. They want somebody who can turn up regularly, is punctual and has the right attitude so that they can mould them into a craftsperson for the future.

I want to go back to the earlier conversation about careers development in schools. That work is always really important. As a federation, we have our local associations, and we try to engage with schools through each of our local associations across Scotland.

To be candid, the problem for construction is not a lack of demand from candidates for construction apprenticeships. Despite the high levels of apprenticeship offerings in construction, we do not have sufficient levels of opportunity. We need to create the right conditions and environment to encourage employers to recruit apprentices. I have real concern about that. The lack of engagement with the industry and the neutering and marginalisation of the industry voice in the skills planning landscape have led to the introduction of changes that are really detrimental to employers and which turn employers off the prospect of offering apprenticeship opportunities.

I can give the committee one example from just this week, although I am happy to write with several more examples. We have been told by the Scottish Government and Skills Development Scotland that a candidate will not be considered to be an apprentice unless they are registered on SDS's funding information and processing system, or FIPS. That is not reflective of recruitment practices in the Scottish construction industry, and it will disadvantage some employers and candidates.

I will illustrate that with an example. If an employer recruited an apprentice at the start of the summertime and they did not get registered on FIPS until now, those months would not count towards the time-served element of the apprenticeship, which would have the effect of extending the apprenticeship time-served period. That is not what employers or trade unions want, and it does not suit the needs of employers and apprentices.

There are several such issues tied up across the apprenticeship offerings in construction, because the employer voice is not in the room. The industry voice and that of our trade union colleagues have not been in the room when critical decisions have been made.

Ross Greer: That is all from me, convener. We should probably write to the Government about Paul Mitchell's point about the SDS apprenticeship registration system, to ask for an explanation of the rationale behind that.

The Convener: Yes. Paul Mitchell has given an important piece of evidence. I thank Ross Greer for getting us to that.

Michael Marra: The point about the appropriate representation of business and employers in those groups should be included in that, as well. I am sure that we will touch on that later in our discussion of the evidence. That was particularly powerful evidence.

The Convener: I want to talk a bit more about apprenticeships, because I have a bit of a thing about them. Like Ross Greer, I think that they are fantastic things that we should all be very committed to. I presume that most of Leon Thompson's members pay an annual salary bill in excess of £3 million. Do they? Many of them will.

Leon Thompson: Yes, it will be something of that order.

The Convener: So, they pay the apprenticeship levy.

Leon Thompson: That is right.

The Convener: Do they see that as good value for money?

Leon Thompson: I get a lot of questions from members about whether they are getting what they need from the payments that they make for the apprenticeship levy. We would welcome a discussion with Government on how we can get the apprenticeship levy to work better for our businesses.

The Convener: That was a brilliant political answer. Based on that answer, you have another career ahead of you. Was that a no? Do they think that they do not get value for money?

Leon Thompson: Certainly, some members that I have spoken to question whether they are getting that.

The Convener: I will ask the same questions to Paul Mitchell. I think I have the flavour of what you might say to those questions. Most of your members certainly pay more than £3 million a year in salaries and therefore also pay the apprenticeship levy.

Paul Mitchell: About 100 employers in the Scottish construction industry pay the apprenticeship levy. The problem that we have in construction is that we also have our own industry training levy.

The Convener: You pay money to the Construction Industry Training Board.

Paul Mitchell: That is correct. Many of our members pay twice: once for the industry training levy and again for the apprenticeship levy. I

touched on the issues that we have with the apprenticeship levy.

The Convener: My second question was whether your members think that they are getting value for money. Based on the fact that they pay a double levy, what is the answer? I had better not lead the witness. Do they get value for money?

Paul Mitchell: The candid answer would be no.

The Convener: Leon, what would have to change in the way that the money is spent in Scotland for your members to begin to believe that they might be getting value for money? Give us the changes that you would like to see happen.

Leon, are you there?

Leon Thompson: I was waiting for my microphone to be switched on.

The Convener: I was starting to think that my comment about your having another career in politics had put you off so much that you had left the meeting.

Leon Thompson: Not at all.

I am not sure that I have enough detail to give you the answer that you are looking for. I am happy to send further information in writing. Our members would like more flexibility built into the scheme. That is a key issue for them. At the moment, businesses are focusing on the immediate need to fill vacancies, rather than looking at changes to the apprenticeship levy. I am happy to come back with more detail.

The Convener: Based on our earlier conversation, those things come together. I think that the idea of offering people the career prospects that come from an apprenticeship would be a powerful incentive to get people to look at hospitality as a career and would attract them into the industry. Those things are closely linked.

We would be interested in knowing what specific policy changes members of UK Hospitality would like in Scotland, to feel that they were getting value for money from the apprenticeship levy. I set this before you as an enticing question: would they like more transparency in how their specific contributions are returned to them as an investment in their apprenticeses?

Leon Thompson: I think that they would. That would enable them to understand what they get in return for paying the levy.

The Convener: That is a basic point. They would like to see what they get for the money that they pay in. Is it correct to say that they cannot currently discern exactly where that money goes?

Leon Thompson: That is correct. It is hard for them to determine how that is returned to them.

The Convener: Paul Mitchell began to give us an answer to that in responding to Ross Greer's questions. Everyone knows that businesses have to invest in people—there is no contention there—but what policy changes would SBF members like, specifically around value for money for the apprenticeship levy?

11:00

Paul Mitchell: At present, apprenticeship levy payers can claim £15,000 from the flexible workforce development fund, which can be used for training through their local college. Recently, there have been changes to allow private training providers to get involved in that process, if colleges do not offer certain types of training. For example, many local colleges will not offer specific training in the operation of plant machinery, so private providers may be needed for that.

We are looking again at the rules to allow private providers to get involved in the flexible workforce development fund. However, as I said, the core of the issue is that we have an apprenticeship levy that does not go on to fund apprenticeship opportunities in Scotland. We looked at the apprenticeship employer grant earlier this year—it has had a massively positive effect in Scotland, especially in the construction industry. I realise that the fund is not a bottomless pit, but we could allocate some of the money to incentivise employers to recruit apprentices. That would be hugely beneficial, in addition to retaining some elements of the upskilling and retraining agenda and allowing private involvement in the process.

The Convener: We would welcome any further evidence from you or Leon Thompson regarding specifics from your members in relation to the question that I asked. I am thinking in particular of policy changes that would generate value around the apprenticeship levy that your members pay.

Colleges have been mentioned quite a few times. I am very much aware, as I am sure my colleagues are, of the excellent work that is done in the college sector in support of apprenticeships. However, there is one area that I am always concerned about. How committed are our universities to supporting apprenticeships? I have a question in my head about that, to be honest.

Do you have any reflections on that, Leon? What is your engagement with the university sector like? Do you get much comeback from the universities? What are you talking to them about, and what are they doing for you?

Leon Thompson: There is probably less engagement with universities than with colleges. Universities provide excellent courses in tourism, events and hospitality, so there will be quite a lot

of direct engagement with member businesses in those specific areas. They may be able to partner up and look at specific work opportunities for students who are on, or just leaving, those courses. However, I do not have a lot of experience of engaging with the university sector.

The Convener: Some of the evidence that we have received, including written evidence from the next panel that we are about to meet, talks about the importance of graduate apprenticeships in different sectors. It is clear that university could play a very important part in that regard.

Is there a demand for graduate apprentices in your sector, Leon?

Leon Thompson: There is certainly a demand for graduates to come in and take roles in hospitality. A lot of graduates will leave university and move into hospitality to start their careers, and businesses will be working to offer the best opportunities.

The Convener: What about undergraduates who are going to become graduate apprentices? Someone can do an apprenticeship with no direct connection with a higher education partner. Is there a demand in hospitality for the kind of relationship that, as I envisage it, ought to exist between business and universities?

Leon Thompson: Yes, absolutely. As I said, some businesses will have already established those relationships with universities.

The Convener: I put the same questions to Paul Mitchell. Do you have any comments?

Paul Mitchell: I would just echo Leon Thompson's comments. We probably have closer relationships with the college sector than with the university sector. We of course have graduate apprenticeship opportunities in the construction industry in areas such as construction management, surveying, and estimating. They have been a welcome addition, and the numbers are growing steadily. As you will be aware, they were introduced only in recent years. There is an opportunity for improvement but, as things stand, our relationship with the college sector is closer.

The Convener: Stephanie Callaghan would like to come in.

Stephanie Callaghan: My question is for Paul Mitchell. I am lucky because, after this meeting, I am heading over to Bellshill to meet Darren McGhee, the managing director at DMG roofing. The company is opening up an academy of roofing, which is really interesting. It has an older workforce and is looking to invest in younger people. Darren actually won the Britain's top tradesperson award, and I know that he has been doing excellent work to promote the value of apprenticeships, and of having the qualifications

and skills as a tradesperson. He is also connected with SDS and careers advisers for more than 60 schools. He offers pupils work experience tasters, which can capture the interest of young people. That is the real McCoy, with a bag of nails and materials, to attract young people and bring them on.

What can the Scottish Government do to support stronger links with schools and education that inspire our young people to consider skilled trades and a career that will be full of opportunities?

Paul Mitchell: DMG roofing is a member of ours, so please pass on my congratulations to Darren and everybody concerned in the development of its apprenticeship academy.

Stephanie Callaghan: I will.

Paul Mitchell: A lot of work is being done in schools at the moment. Some of that is co-ordinated through the Developing the Young Workforce programme. There is, for example, the build your future campaign, which is an online collection of videos and interactive activities that school pupils can undertake. We also work closely with the Construction Industry Training Board to train employers to go into schools to deliver career sessions, activities, guidance events and so on.

As I said, I do not want to focus on this too much, but I feel that, on balance, the issues that we have in construction are not about a lack of demand from young people. Many youngsters still value a construction apprenticeship. We undoubtedly have problems with diversity and there are sometimes issues with the standard of candidates. Also, it is not a blanket picture across the country, as there are issues in rural areas. However, for us, it is about ensuring that the apprenticeship conditions are right to encourage employers to take on young people.

Lots of young people get involved in prevocational qualifications, particularly the progression awards in Scotland. There are more candidates doing prevoc qualifications in construction crafts than there are opportunities each year for them to become an apprentice, which does not seem right, to me or the industry. We need to look at those issues and try to unpick them.

I will take this opportunity to return to the theme of industry engagement. We need greater involvement with industry, employers, federations, trade unions and apprentices to try to address the problem collectively. The same issues that are faced at the prevoc level are faced at the apprenticeship level, and it all stems from the lack of engagement with the industry. In our sector, we used to have apprenticeship registration bodies, which provided a platform for formal industry

engagement, and very little could be done in relation to apprenticeships in Scotland without the express consent of the industry. When we had that model in place, we certainly did not face the issues that we are facing now. If the convener will allow it, I could write to the committee with a bit more detail on that issue.

The Convener: That would be fabulous. Thank you.

Leon Thompson: We have talked a lot about schools, colleges and so on. We will continue to work closely on that with our members in order to keep the channels of communication open and look at ways of developing new ones.

The Convener: Stephanie, are you content to leave it there?

Stephanie Callaghan: Yes. I thank Paul Mitchell and Leon Thompson for their answers.

The Convener: I echo that. Thank you, both. That concludes our time with you today. It has been valuable. We welcome the offers that you have made to submit additional information, and we look forward to receiving it. I wish you a pleasant day.

We will suspend the meeting to allow for a change of witnesses.

11:11

Meeting suspended.

11:12

On resuming—

The Convener: Welcome back. We have a rich selection of people on our second panel. I welcome Professor Mark Logan, who is a professor in practice at the school of computing science at the University of Glasgow; Dr Natalie Coull, who is the head of cybersecurity at the school of design and informatics at Abertay University; Karen Meechan, who is the chief executive officer of ScotlandIS; and Nicola Taylor, who is the head of operations and skills at ScotlandIS. Thank you all for your time today. It is very much appreciated.

We will go straight into questioning, which will be led by the deputy convener, Kaukab Stewart.

Kaukab Stewart: Good morning. I note that the submission from ScotlandIS says that

“80% of future jobs will require STEM skills”

and it goes on to talk about the gender imbalance in that regard. It also talks about staffing and the issue of getting digital skills teachers.

As a practitioner in the field, I know that schools do a lot of good work on that already, so clearly that is something that is not transferring through. Could you shed any light on that to enable us to make recommendations about what could be done better? I put that question to Karen Meechan, first of all. If anyone else wants to chip in, that would be grand.

11:15

Karen Meechan (ScotlandIS): Education Scotland has done some research on the issue and has contacted all 356 local authority high schools. Of the 301 that responded, 36 do not have a computing science teacher or function, which means that pupils in those schools do not have access—or have insufficient access—to the subject. Of those 36 schools, 18 are in remote or very remote areas. We know that there is a lack of computing science teachers and that we need to get more of them into schools so that our young people can access those skills and that knowledge.

Industry and our digital skills advisory board are doing a couple of things around how we can create a pipeline of computing science teachers to go into our schools. However, we face a two-pronged issue, in that we have to balance that with the fact that we have a huge skills gap in the industry. When we are thinking about the graduates who are coming out of university and what some of the apprenticeship models can do, we also need to think about how we backfill some of the skills gap.

Kaukab Stewart: The Scottish Government has committed substantial sums of money to teacher recruitment. Is it just a question of money, or is there something else? Is the problem to do with people not wanting to go into digital skills teaching? Why do we not have enough of those teachers?

Karen Meechan: There are probably two parts to that. Obviously, a person must want to be a teacher in order to teach. People in some medical degree courses can take a year out to get another degree; they are being encouraged to make it a teaching degree. However, some of our digital skills graduates have not considered teaching as a potential career, so they have not sought such an experience. The sector is looking at what the medical professionals are doing and asking what we can do to give our digital skills graduates access to teaching as a potential pathway.

We have computing science teachers who have an undergraduate computing degree and have gone into teaching because they want to teach the subject. However, not everyone wants to do that, and not everyone knows whether they want to,

because they have not experienced it. We need to find a way to open up the opportunity for our computing science graduates to think about whether teaching is a potential career path for them.

As I said, our digital skills advisory board is doing some research on what that opportunity would look like. We appreciate that it would add a year to the four-year degree. If the message from universities and industry were to be that that would be a good way forward, there would be a requirement for some funding from the Scottish Government in order to enable people to have that extra year of higher education.

Kaukab Stewart: Professor Logan, could you add something to that?

Professor Mark Logan (University of Glasgow): I think—*[Inaudible.]*

Kaukab Stewart: I am sorry, but we cannot quite hear you. We will move on to Dr Coull while we try to sort out your sound. Thank you for your patience.

Dr Natalie Coull (Abertay University): I would echo what Karen Meechan said. A couple of weeks ago, I was chatting to some of our fourth year computing students who have been helping us in the lab doing some teaching with first year students. They are great at breaking down problems and explaining them to the first year students. However, they had absolutely no idea that their course made them eligible to do a year of teacher training. I wonder whether there is more that the universities that offer that training could do to signpost it to universities across Scotland so that, for example, careers departments can push the message that the courses exist and that all students on computing courses are eligible to apply. That would be useful.

Kaukab Stewart: That is a helpful point. We are still not ready to go back to Mark Logan, so I will carry on.

I am trying to delve into the issue. There is underrepresentation of women and ethnic minorities in every workforce. What more could be done to reach out to communities that to an even greater extent than others do not consider computer science or digital technology as careers? Does that need to be addressed by the educational professions, by schools or through a Government campaign?

Any ideas on that would be welcome. I will bring in Nicola Taylor on that, as she has not had a chance to say anything.

Nicola Taylor (ScotlandIS): To be honest, an element of everything that you mentioned is required. We need to start at the very beginning in our schools and to give girls, in particular, more

opportunities to see what is available in our sector. We are running a “critical friends” programme, the mantra behind which is “You can’t be what you can’t see.” It is about exposing people to the positive role models in the industry and allowing them to see the types of jobs that are out there for them.

There is definitely a need for a wider awareness campaign. There are opportunities such as the digital start fund that Skills Development Scotland runs, which provides access in areas of deprivation, for example. That is a great way for us to access demographics that we would not normally target. By running such initiatives, we have established that there is an untapped wealth of talent. For example, we have had success with a homeless chap who was able to undertake training at a very junior entry level through the digital start fund. As a result of that, we have been able to secure him employment in the sector on the Isle of Skye.

Kaukab Stewart: That is a fascinating example. That is super.

Is Mark Logan back with us yet? If he is, could somebody let me know?

Nicola Taylor gave quite a comprehensive answer, but would anyone else on the panel like to comment?

The Convener: Can we have an update on Mark Logan’s comms? [*Interruption.*] He is coming back in. In fact, he has just rejoined us.

Mark, would you like to test your sound?

Professor Logan: Hi. Can you hear me?

The Convener: We can; that is much clearer. Kaukab, would you like to resume your questioning?

Kaukab Stewart: We had moved on in an attempt to get underneath the skin of the issue. My original question was about the shortage of teachers in computer science and digital skills. The Scottish Government has committed substantial funds to addressing that, and I am interested to learn what impact that has had. Is the issue just about money, or are there other factors? Why are people not coming forward to be computing teachers?

Professor Logan: I think that the issue is about more than money; it starts with our historical failure to recognise the importance of computing science to the economy. Our tech sector is one of the fastest-growing parts of our economy. It has about 13,000 unfilled vacancies a year—which is probably an underestimate. The main supply line into the sector is children who go on to become software engineers. All the other jobs, such as product managers and marketeers, are a function

of how many software engineers are in tech companies, so it is very important that we have a sufficient flow of young folks who want to go into the profession.

When we look at how computing science is regarded in the school education system in Scotland, we see that it is very far from being a peer of the other science, technology, engineering and mathematics subjects—in fact, it is very far from being a peer of geography, history and so on. It is essentially a third-tier subject. In the early years of secondary school, it vies for syllabus time with home economics and physical education.

Because of that neglect, a career as a computing science teacher is not a particularly attractive career prospect; it does not have a great brand. In fact, teachers have been leaving the profession; we had about 20 per cent more teachers in computing science 15 years ago than we do now.

There has also been a reduction in the number of children studying the subject. At higher level alone, for example, we used to have about 8,000 annually, but we now have about 5,000 annually. The subject is not just static; it is declining.

We are not addressing computing teacher recruitment because we have put up reasons why we cannot hire computing graduates so we should not bother trying. That reason is usually that they can earn a lot of money in industry, so there is no point in going after them. We need to increase teacher recruitment, but we do not have a strategy for tailoring our efforts to attract people who want to become computing science teachers.

That is one of the many issues that we have. The root issue is that, historically, we have not agreed that the subject matters. We do not believe that it is in crisis because, if it does not matter, how could it be in crisis? Therefore, we have not marshalled action to address the issues until recently. We can perhaps talk later about what we are starting to do.

I will comment on gender. I apologise for missing some of the earlier comments. The reason why we, along with many other societies, have a gender problem in computing is that we have considered extreme gender imbalance to be normal and acceptable. That pervades our society.

The way that we should look at the matter is to say that half of our best people are, in essence, excluded from an industry that we depend on economically. It is not enough to find ways to get girls engaged when they are in primary school. We need to do that—it is necessary but not sufficient, because we must also recognise that, when those girls look upwards, there are few exemplars. Therefore, we must do more as a country to denormalise gender ghettoisation in the tech

industry—which is the term that I prefer—in the same way as we denormalised drunk driving some time back. We must use the same techniques.

We can discuss that further, but my point is simply that it will not be enough to have initiatives to get girls engaged if the industry as a whole has normalised appalling gender divides.

The Convener: You produced the Logan review and you are an authority on the matter. The review suggested that computing science is a boring subject and that the syllabus is not exciting. You said that the teachers tend to be generalists and that there is therefore, in effect—I will use a term that might be objectionable to some people; I am willing to be corrected—a dumbing down in computing science, so that it is less about the more exciting aspects of the subject that require specialist knowledge, and is much more about the general. How do we fix that? What can we do differently?

Professor Logan: There are a number of things that we can do. The problem is fixable, and I am happy to update the committee on what is now starting to happen on that.

To cover the issue that you mentioned from the “Scottish Technology Ecosystem Review”, we can think of it in terms of there being two vicious circles operating. That is what we have to arrest. The first of those vicious circles is that, as pupil numbers fall, classes are not run and schools cannot hire teachers. In turn, that creates the impression that not so many teachers are needed, which in turn results in fewer pupils being involved. That is one of the mechanisms that is running. The only way to address that is by significantly fixing recruitment in terms of attraction and retention, because both those issues are significant.

The other issue, to which you referred, is quality. I think that Karen Meechan mentioned in her opening comments—as others might have done after I dropped out—not only that no computing science is being taught in many schools but that, in many, and no one really knows how many, it is being taught by non-specialists. I give all credit to them, but the subject is being taught by well-intentioned and hard-working business studies teachers and psychology teachers, for example.

11:30

As an aside, I note that we would not tolerate that in mathematics or physics, but we tolerate it in computing science because it is a third-tier subject. That requires a dumbing down of the syllabus, which is the term that I use in my report. I hope that that does not offend people, but I hope that it leads to the issue getting the attention that it needs. Non-specialists cannot teach object-

oriented programming, for example, so the syllabus includes things such as the general data protection regulation, which is interesting to software engineers at the professional level but is not what we should be teaching our children. We should be teaching them about the magic of getting computers to do stuff. That requires our teaching profession to have basic competence in teaching of programming. That competence is patchy, let us say, so the syllabus has to reflect that.

What can we do about that? I propose a number of things. First, we need to launch an active recruitment campaign that does not accept that we cannot recruit expensive computing science graduates. I teach computing science to fourth year undergraduates, and I can tell you that a fair percentage of them do not want to become software engineers. They want to do something else with their degrees, so there is a fertile field in which to hunt, if only we would approach those people. Most science and engineering undergraduates are taught programming, so we could approach them and try to recruit them. We could look into the matter further, but those are a couple of examples.

Secondly, we need to embark on a nationwide intensive and on-going upskilling campaign for our computing science teachers. Computing science, in particular, needs such a campaign because the subject changes more rapidly than do physics and mathematics, for example. A teacher who graduated 12 years ago has never experienced that development, and kids want to do projects that involve those developments because that is what they think of as computing. Such a programme needs to be put in place, and I believe that one could be put in place pretty quickly.

Thirdly, there is a morale problem among computing science teachers because they know that their profession is dying. Teachers do not feel that they are listened to. I have spoken to a lot of teachers, and that is what I hear. We need to set up a teacher-led body—which we are doing—and to recruit a couple of teachers to it full time in order to procure, curate and promote best practice in computing science teaching across Scotland.

Fourthly, we should extend computing science teaching far more intensively into primary schools, so that we engage pupils earlier. Many schools teach computing science only from third year, if at all. That is too late. We also need to educate the country—parents, pupils and so on—about the fact that the subject is very interesting and leads to great career options.

We should be doing other things beyond those, but they are what I would call the basic beginnings.

Recently, as a result of my ecosystem review, Shirley-Anne Somerville, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, convened a senior steering group that includes me and the chief executive officers of stakeholders including Skills Development Scotland, the Scottish Funding Council, Education Scotland and so on. The group will consider the issues that I have mentioned and others, and it will co-ordinate stakeholders in order to start making progress. That is an encouraging development.

The Convener: When was that group convened? When is the first meeting, if it has not yet been held?

Professor Logan: The first meeting was in the past two to three weeks. Since then, we have identified the first area that we are going to work on, and we have identified a front-line team that will work collaboratively on the issues. The group is needed because nobody owns the problem—everybody owns a bit of responsibility for education and computing science, therefore nobody owns it.

When I tried to address such issues the first time round, over the past year, there was an attitude that said, “That is a problem. Good luck with that. Let us know when you’ve managed to get other people to agree that it is a problem.” I call it the “The Wizard of Oz” broomstick problem—fetch me the broomstick and then we can talk. The senior group’s job is to overcome that mentality and to work collaboratively in directing our various agencies to effect change. It is very encouraging that the group has been formed in the past month.

The Convener: That is good. We will work our way round the table, because everyone wants in on this issue—it is a hot topic.

Michael Marra: I will ask a supplementary question on this, if that is okay, convener—

The Convener: Yes. That is what I am looking for.

Michael Marra: —and I will come back to my substantive question. That is great.

I am heartened by Professor Logan’s comments. He gave a practical shopping list of things that could happen now, and there were lots of nodding heads, although he might not have been able to see them. That is the kind of thing that we want to hear. When Shirley-Anne Somerville was with us on 6 October, she told us that some meetings were happening, but it did not feel as if there was a practical list of things that were taking place.

We are two years on, I think, from the publication of the report that you authored, and I am detecting a certain frustration about the pace

of change in bringing the organisations together. Is there more that we could usefully do on the issue to push the pace?

Professor Logan: [*Inaudible.*—in August last year, but you are right. My first foray into this space was frustrating because the issue was not considered important in most of the agencies, or certainly not in the ones that have most influence on it. It was therefore not considered worthy of action, and it was considered to be a difficult thing to address because of the multiple ownership.

I am genuinely very encouraged that, under Shirley-Anne Somerville’s sponsorship, the group has been set up and we have positive and energetic commitment from the leaders of the various agencies and groups to address the issue. We have started to consider whether it is important, which it is, and whether there is an urgent need to take action, which there is, because we are declining while our competitors in Europe are strengthening in the area. Countries with economies of an equivalent size, such as Estonia, Finland and Israel, are miles ahead and are getting further ahead of Scotland on the issue. I am encouraged that that is now well recognised and that it is understood that action is required.

You asked what else we could do. It is important that we keep our attention on the issue, because a multiyear fix is going to be needed. Committees such as yours can be helpful in reminding the various actors on the stage that the issue is important and urgent. I fear that, with the cut and thrust of life, and given that education is a complicated area in general, we will start to fall back. In summary, as a country, we need to elevate computing science to be a peer of the other sciences. For as long as we have not done that, there will be work to be done. We would welcome your support in keeping that goal front and centre.

Stephanie Callaghan: I thank the panel for coming along today. I have a question for Professor Logan. I asked Shirley-Anne Somerville a question on the subject in Parliament, noting that Skills Development Scotland and the General Teaching Council for Scotland have noted the value of bringing computer experts into the classroom to upskill teachers and pupils together on issues such as cybersecurity. A number of partners are already working with schools to introduce industry skills, and Skills Development Scotland, which is quite heavily involved in supporting that work, has established a framework that brings agencies together to help them to tackle the challenge. Is this an area that the senior steering group will be, or should be, focusing on?

Professor Logan: I agree that it is important to get industry engaged in the classroom, for a number of reasons. First, it gives pupils a concrete

reason to learn the subject. It gives them a sense of what the future holds if they get interested in the subject. Secondly, it brings support and another type of upskilling to our teachers, which is very much appreciated.

The reason why I did not include that in the list that I mentioned earlier is that there are already some really good things happening. For example, ScotlandIS, which is represented on the panel this morning, is running an excellent programme called digital critical friends, which brings industry folks into schools and pairs them. SDS is also—*[Inaudible.]*—which is doing very well and I understand that the two organisations are discussing how to work together rather than compete on those themes, which is great.

My concern is that, historically, we have had a sort of displacement mentality on the issue. People think that the difficult things are hiring more teachers, keeping teachers and making the subject more interesting by introducing more project and extracurricular work. No one bothered to fix those things. They did the relatively easy thing, which was engaging industry. That is an important element that is necessary and useful, but it is not sufficient. If we do only the industry work, which is fantastic and which I support, we will make very little progress, but if we do that in conjunction with those other things, we will get somewhere. That is the context.

The Convener: I will bring in Karen Meechan at the mention of the digital critical friends programme. Would you like to make some comments in that area?

Karen Meechan: Absolutely—*[Inaudible.]*—what Mark Logan said. It is about bringing industry into our schools and bringing computing science opportunities to the forefront for our young people. It is also about upskilling and supporting our teachers, because we appreciate that, as I said, they do their degree and go into teaching without having access to industry, so the programme brings them that industry-based practice. Young people cannot be what they cannot see, as Nicola Taylor said, so we want to get those e-figures and practitioners—not the business leaders but the actual computing scientists, software engineers and data scientists—into our schools to highlight the subject.

We have had some success with that already. We started rolling out the programme in Glasgow in August, and as Mark Logan said, that was in a school that did not have a computing science function, so the subject was being taught through a business module. The school used the digital critical friends programme for that class, and now a number of the pupils want to take computing science in their third year of school.

As Mark Logan said, one initiative will not fix everything; lots of initiatives need to marry up for the bigger fix. The digital critical friends programme is using industry to stimulate the curriculum, because we cannot change it. It is a way of making the curriculum exciting for teachers to teach and for young people to learn.

As Mark said, there were more than 13,000 unfilled jobs in the sector before the pandemic. Given the digital transformation that has happened during the pandemic, that number is only set to rise, and SDS is doing some research on that. Our sector is coming to us as the industry trade body to say, “We need better coding skills and we need fundamental computing science and software engineering skills so that we can invest in, harness and nurture young people once they are in the industry.” We need to make sure that we are providing that talent pipeline, and that has to start in schools and work all the way through to industry.

There is another piece regarding upskilling the current workforce. We are seeing that there is a huge skills gap in graduates who have not been employed in our industry. Some of our small and medium-sized enterprises have mid-level practitioners or software engineers whom they need to upskill to senior developer level. Some of that issue is just down to time spent in the sector. We need to find a way to fast track that upskilling, because the issue is causing a bottleneck for junior practitioners who are coming into the sector.

There are three things that we need to fix. In relation to education, we need to promote to young people, their families and the people who are influencers in their life what the sector is like to work in and where the opportunities are. What does an ethical hacker do? What does a tester do? We are not getting those messages across to first and second year pupils, so we cannot expect them to take computing science as a core subject in third, fourth and fifth year and on to further and higher education. We need to get that part right and get the teaching right, but we will not fix it all today. There needs to be a bigger fundamental shift and fix.

The Convener: Do you have any concerns about the supply of the kind of teachers whom Mark Logan has been describing—those who are not generalists or fill-ins but are specialists who can teach coding and all the other things that are exciting about computing science that are currently not being covered? Are you confident that there would be a supply of people in your sector who would be willing to commit themselves to a career in teaching if all the other conditions that Mark Logan and you have been describing were met?

11:45

Karen Meechan: As I said earlier, teaching is a passion until you have tried it. There is a huge piece of work around promoting that opportunity.

There are a number of graduates—Natalie Coull and Mark Logan have already spoken about the undergraduates whom they teach—who do not necessarily want to come into the IT sector. If they do not want to work as a software developer or a computer scientist, we must signpost them to the other opportunities that are open to them with their computing science degree. That is a piece of work that, collectively, we must do. The digital critical friends programme brings those specialisms to teachers who are currently in the education sector.

I agree with Mark that the critical friends programme is wonderful and we are seeing progress with it. We are in around 160 schools around Scotland, or will be by the turn of the year. We have had great case studies from schools and teachers—and from industry, because what it is looking to do, ultimately, is develop a talent pipeline.

As part of the Scottish technology ecosystem review—STER—we have the tech scaler programme, which is great. Support for the small and medium enterprise community is great, but when we help such enterprises to grow and scale their business, where are we finding the talent to backfill? As a collective, we need to look at closing off that circle.

The Convener: There was a lot in your evidence about the gender imbalance in the sector—or the gender ghettoisation, as Mark Logan referred to it. How many digital critical friends are there and how many of them are women?

Karen Meechan: We will be in 160 schools and we are recruiting for another two areas at the moment. We probably have in the region of just over 100 digital critical friends from industry, and probably 20 or 30 of them are female. It is a good chunk, but the problem has not been sorted and there is more for us to do as a sector. I will have a look at the figures and send on to the committee the exact number of female critical friends.

The Convener: That would be helpful, because we want to do everything that we can to help and encourage in this area. Girls need to have role models, so you are right to focus on it.

Ross Greer: I will stick with the issue of gender imbalance in STEM. From a couple of studies that have been presented to the Parliament in evidence before, I am aware that negative gender stereotypes, particularly in STEM and computing, are generally pretty embedded by the age of seven or eight. An area that is tricky but which we

need to focus on is engagement with the early years and primary schools. I would be interested in witnesses' thoughts on the extent to which engagement is happening with business and how embedded it is in the education system. Is engagement happening with the early years and, in particular, the primary 1 to 3 early primary school age group? Perhaps we can start with Karen Meechan.

Karen Meechan: There are various programmes in place. There is SmartSTEMs, which focuses on the primary to early secondary age group. It promotes the sector and its skills requirements, and ScotlandIS has been a STEM ambassador with it for a number of years.

There is the Digital Xtra Fund, which is a charity that ScotlandIS and SDS set up four years ago. Again, it is supported by industry financially to roll out funds to organisations, schools and community groups to ensure that all our children, regardless of their location or economic background, have access to coding activity. Industry is supporting that by putting money in the pot to be distributed to schools and community groups. Things are going on, but it is not enough.

A couple of years ago, we did some research. We were allowed to speak to young people and primary kids when we were in the SmartSTEMs programme. We asked them why they are not looking at digital careers and whether something was putting them off that potential career path. The results showed that they want to learn but there are issues in doing so, including there being only one computer in the classroom or the teacher not doing such classes every week, month or quarter. The pupils want to sit and make apps in their class so that they can help themselves and their classmates with their maths.

The enthusiasm is there, but we need to harness it at that young age. When young people get to the first and second year of school, we teach them Microsoft Office and portray that as computing science. However, by the point at which we are asking them to take the subject in higher education and then go into industry, we have lost them. The subject absolutely needs to be taught through all school years. I agree with Mark Logan that it needs to be highlighted as a core subject.

Every young person who leaves school from this day onwards will require digital skills for any role that they do. We are educating our young people and children for jobs of the future. We do not know what those jobs are. Back in 2009, when we first highlighted the skills gap, we did not have data scientists. That was not an opportunity, as no one knew about such a position or knew that it would come. What will we be looking for in 10 years' time? We as a sector do not want to be sitting in a committee like this one in 10 years raising the

same issues. We do not want to come back to ask for the issue to be fixed. I agree with Mark Logan. The subject is fundamental. The situation needs to be fixed now—the industry needs it to be fixed now.

Ross Greer: Thank you very much. I am very conscious of time, and I have another question that I would like to put to Mark Logan specifically. Does anyone else want to come in on the issue of engaging children, particularly girls, at the early primary school age?

This is slightly tricky because we cannot see whether anyone is gesturing to come in. As no one is coming in, I will move on to Mark Logan.

You mentioned the challenges of trying to keep the computing curriculum up to date. It has been 15 years since I started high school, but I remember that, even at that point, it was quite clear that the curriculum was dramatically out of date compared with the average level of digital literacy of an 11 or 12-year-old.

Part of the challenge is the digital divide, which has always been there but which the pandemic has highlighted and exacerbated. If we are to keep the curriculum up to date so that young people are not bored in computing, how do you manage that? If you are a computing teacher with a class of 20 to 25 young people, 20 of them might have computers at school, have their own iPad and smartphone, and have a pretty high level of basic digital literacy. However, you could have a handful, or more, who do not have a computer at home and who have never owned their own smartphone or tablet. How do we manage to keep the curriculum up to date so that young people are not bored being taught to do something that they learned years ago while managing to keep everyone in the room engaged when there could be a wide spectrum of digital literacy and access to digital devices in their own homes?

Professor Logan: We need to ensure that there is not also a huge divide in the equipment that is available in our schools across Scotland. Right now, there is.

The first thing to say on the curriculum is that it is not homogeneous. An element of the curriculum is basic logical computing pedagogy, which does not change often. That should be at the core of what we teach. That is not the case today, because of the skills issues in relation to teaching that subject, which we have talked about. However, the projects and the environments that you build to demonstrate the basic fundamentals change.

We must be very careful when we talk about changing the curriculum. I have been looking at data that shows that, every time we change the curriculum, we lose teachers from the profession. I

think that that is because they are already apprehensive about their knowledge and if a new concept is brought in that they have to absorb and learn how to teach, they might say to themselves, “This is too hard—I’m off.” There is an element of that. Over the years, we have had a lot of curriculum change and, at the same time, have lost a lot of teachers; I do not know whether there is a causative link, but I suspect that there is an element of that.

I advocate instead that we take out of the curriculum the exam-filler stuff that is put in because we can ask questions on it—for example, on GDPR. Instead, we should create space for projects, and ensure that our children’s schools are equipped with kit that is sufficient for doing such projects and that they have extracurricular programming clubs, where children can, if they want to, continue to work on those projects. Those things are relatively easy to do; it does not cost a huge amount of money to address them, but it makes an enormous difference to the problem.

I have a comment in answer to your earlier question, which was about gender. Industry often waits for people to fix that problem, but that is the problem, because it is industry’s fault as much as anyone else’s.

For example, a female tech director in a company looks up at the board. How many women does she see at the level of vice-president of engineering? Not very many. That discourages women from applying for such a position—because, often, the environment is hostile in lots of subtle ways. Now, the mid-ranking engineer looks up and does not see many engineering directors who are women. Again, that sends a message. We then look at the young graduate who is thinking about becoming a programmer. She does not see many team leaders and senior folk in those positions who are women, so she does not consider it a career that is for her. Then we look at children in school who are considering doing a computing science degree. The same thing applies. It is worked back. That chain of a lack of exemplars means that, even if we engage young girls at primary level in computing science, society is telling them that it is a hostile career path and environment. That is the context that we have to fix.

I am fed up of hearing industry people complaining—as I used to do, before I understood the issue better—that, “We would hire more women if only we could get more girls interested at school level,” at the same time as they are creating an environment that is, in essence, more difficult for women to progress in. We have to address that as much as we have to address what is happening in schools.

Ross Greer: Thank you very much.

The Convener: Before I go to Michael Marra for our final set of questions, Mark Logan, do we have you only until about 12 o'clock?

Professor Logan: Until 5 past. I apologise. I can go on for about another 10 minutes.

The Convener: That is very kind of you.

Michael Marra: I will direct my questions to Dr Coull. We have been talking about female leaders in the sector, and we have one here, so I want to ask her some questions.

My understanding of your role is that you are perhaps at the interface of employers—through preparing graduates to go to work with companies—and consumers of the exam system and people coming through to you. What are your reflections on the previous discussion on what is coming out of our schools? Are people being prepared for what you need to do to get them into those employment opportunities?

Dr Coull: Is that question specifically about gender, or is it intended more broadly?

Michael Marra: It is more broadly about the system and the skills. We will park the gender issue just now, as we have covered it quite comprehensively so far.

Dr Coull: I echo what Mark Logan was saying about computing science being perceived as a boring subject area. That really is turning off so many kids.

I will describe one of the challenges that I have seen. I have done a fair amount of outreach work through my role with local schools. I have walked into a number of computing classrooms and found that the resources that are there are just not fit for purpose; in some, it has taken the kids 20 minutes just to log in. Ultimately, that impacts on their perception of the subject area. It is seen as boring, as something that does not work and as an environment in which they do not feel invigorated and stimulated.

Another thing that computing teachers, even specialist ones, struggle with is that they do not have admin rights. They do not have proper control over their own classrooms. I know from teaching at university how catastrophic it can be if a software update has been rolled out overnight and all of a sudden—[*Inaudible.*]

Often, IT staff support is available to teachers but it is shared across an authority, so if a teacher has a problem in a classroom, they cannot get that issue resolved during that class. That really puts a lot of teachers off teaching those more exciting aspects of computing, because they are so practical and they depend on the technology being up to date and working effectively. That is just not happening in our schools.

12:00

Michael Marra: That is a very useful comment about the broader practical issues. We have focused on a very useful conversation about the 23 per cent decline in the number of computing teachers and we recognise that something has to be done in that area. Your comments on the broader infrastructure, including the human infrastructure of support staff, are particularly useful.

I am conscious of the Scottish Qualifications Authority's role in the area. There is a lot of characterisation of computing as a boring subject. One headteacher said to me recently that higher computing had been positioned as being quite a technical, boring, inaccessible subject, rather than having been given a sense of inspiration and possibility. Would you recognise and agree with that characterisation?

Dr Coull: Yes, I would, and I agree with Mark Logan's take on that. Perhaps assessing the subject predominately through exams promotes and encourages teachers to teach through exam questions rather than giving them the flexibility to introduce exciting projects through which kids can develop skills and get the spark of innovation, which makes them think, "Wow—this could have implications for so many different things."

I think that Leon Thompson mentioned that young people really do not understand the breadth of career opportunities that exist in the hospitality industry. Their understanding of that subject area is very much limited to what they see around them in society. They go to restaurants, they understand front-of-house staff and chefs in the kitchen, but they do not appreciate the breadth of roles.

I really see that with computing. A few weeks ago, I had a conversation with a sixth-year boy I know—a friend of the family who is very passionate about studying computing at university. Even though he already has that passion, he had no idea of the breadth of careers that exist or computing's application in so many other subject areas.

Helping young people to better understand the breadth of roles is key to addressing the gender balance. We see all the stereotypes out there around computing. We see "The IT Crowd"—it is geeky and it is all about people with no social skills who just enjoy being stuck in an office, batting away at a keyboard.

A lot of girls would perhaps be more interested in the subject area if they could see that, after studying computing, they could go and get a job that helps. Perhaps they could get a job in health informatics, looking at cancer treatments, which would really make an impact. There are genuinely rewarding careers in computing and it is not just

about people with no social skills. People do not understand how rewarding job opportunities in computing can be. The curriculum does not help people to see all those rewarding careers.

Sorry, I am just talking now. Karen Meechan spoke about the critical friends programme, which is crucial in addressing the issue.

Michael Marra: My final question relates to your own institution. I recall speaking to a lecturer who expressed frustration that the lack of young people taking higher computing had meant that, in some of your core courses, it could no longer be used as a compulsory subject. Consequently, a lot of teaching in first year was in areas that could perhaps have enthused people in the way you spoke about. Do you see other institutions having that problem in common with you?

Dr Coull: Yes, absolutely. It was maybe eight years ago that all the institutions in the Scottish Informatics & Computer Science Alliance agreed that we would not have higher computing as an entry requirement, because that would be a barrier to all the children who do not have the opportunity to study the subject at school.

The Convener: That was a sobering comment on which to end our session, which has been excellent. All of the witnesses have brought a lot to it, and I wish that we could have had longer with you. I hope that we can have you all back again, especially to talk about entrepreneurship in this context, because that was highlighted by the Logan review and it deserves further scrutiny by us.

I thank Professor Mark Logan, Dr Natalie Coull, Karen Meechan and Nicola Taylor for joining us this morning. Your time has been very valuable from your point of view and it has been very well used from our point of view, so thank you for being with us.

The public part of the meeting is now at an end.

12:05

Meeting continued in private until 12:28.

This is the final edition of the *Official Report* of this meeting. It is part of the Scottish Parliament *Official Report* archive and has been sent for legal deposit.

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