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Education, Children and Young People Committee

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The Scottish Parliament
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EDUCATION, CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE COMMITTEE
9th Meeting 2022, 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:

Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP) (Committee Substitute)
Professor Graham Donaldson (University of Glasgow)
Professor Kenneth Muir (University of the West of Scotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Stephen Herbert

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Education, Children and Young People Committee

Wednesday 23 March 2022

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:30]

Subordinate Legislation

Police Act 1997 and the Protection of Vulnerable Groups (Scotland) Act 2007 (Fees) (Coronavirus) Amendment Regulations 2022

The Convener (Stephen Kerr): Good morning, and welcome to the ninth meeting in 2022 of the Education, Children and Young People Committee.

Our first agenda item is consideration of the Police Act 1997 and the Protection of Vulnerable Groups (Scotland) Act 2007 (Fees) (Coronavirus) Amendment Regulations 2022. The committee considered the instrument at its meeting on 9 March and agreed to write to Clare Haughey, the Minister for Children and Young People, on several points. The committee considered the minister's response by correspondence and agreed to note that and to make no recommendations in respect of the instrument. It is on the agenda today to allow the committee to formally record that decision.

Education Reform

09:30

The Convener: The second item is evidence on education reform, specifically on the report "Putting Learners at the Centre: Towards a Future Vision for Scottish Education".

I warmly welcome our witnesses: Professor Kenneth Muir, honorary professor at the University of the West of Scotland and former chief executive and registrar of the General Teaching Council for Scotland, and Professor Graham Donaldson, honorary professor in the school of education at the University of Glasgow. We are delighted to have you both with us so soon after the publication of that very important report.

I invite Professor Muir to make a short opening statement of up to five minutes, before we move to questions.

Professor Kenneth Muir (University of the West of Scotland): It is a pleasure to be here with the committee, both virtually and in real life. I am accompanied by Graham Donaldson, who was a member of the small panel of experts that I brought together to advise me. It is worth saying at the outset that the report is actually mine, although Graham and other members of the expert panel accompanied me on some of the visits that I undertook and gave feedback on some of the emerging recommendations in the report.

The committee will be aware that, when I took up the remit at the beginning of August, three decisions had already been made. One was to replace the Scottish Qualifications Authority, one was to remove the inspectorate from Education Scotland, and the third was that Education Scotland would be subject to reform as a result of that and that I was to advise on what that reform might look like. I was also asked to consider the possibility of establishing a curriculum and assessment body. I took that into account as part of my work.

Although my remit was quite tight and ring fenced, it was clear that, given the substantial remit and role of Education Scotland and the SQA in Scottish education, it was necessary to take a wide-ranging review and to engage with folk not only within but outwith the school sector. I was keen to engage extensively, particularly with learners and practitioners. The committee will be aware that I engaged with the Scottish Children's Parliament, the Scottish Youth Parliament and the charity Together to survey the views of primary and secondary school learners.

When I took on the remit, it was apparent that the work that I was being asked to do did not exist

in a vacuum. There was a lot going on in the education system at that time. For example, the national care service review and the fallout from that was having an impact on early years education and, at the other end of the school spectrum, the Scottish Funding Council was undertaking a review of tertiary education. My work fitted into that.

The 21 recommendations that I make should be seen as part of a package that is designed to address the remit that I faced and what came through in the report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development on curriculum for excellence. They are also an attempt to address some of the long-standing tensions and issues in Scottish education.

My report is designed to be a catalyst for further reform and change. The replacement of SQA and the restructuring or reform of Education Scotland is a starter, but I hope that you get the sense from my report that it is very much a starter and that more is needed to ensure that the education system in Scotland is fit for purpose for current and future learners in a changing world.

Many things are changing in our society, as well as more widely and globally, so the education system needs to reflect that. It is 20 years since we had a national debate on education, which spawned curriculum for excellence. Immediately after that, we had a period of consensus around the direction of travel, and that very much influenced my thinking with regard to the first recommendation: that now is an opportune time to have a really deep think about the purpose of education in Scotland and what we want the education system to do for current and future learners.

The Convener: Thank you very much, Professor Muir. We move now to questions. I will start with some background questions, and I hope that we will benefit from hearing your answers. Why is the SQA broken beyond repair?

Professor Muir: Those are not my words, but, particularly over recent years, issues have emerged around the national qualifications. However, I think that the issues go back beyond that. On many of the engagements that I had, it was fed back to me that concern had been expressed that the national qualifications, which were designed to support curriculum for excellence, were not meeting the needs of practitioners or young people.

To come back to the feedback that I received from various engagements, concerns were expressed about the extent to which the SQA in its current format was a listening organisation and the extent to which it took advice from practitioners and teachers. Generally, a fair degree of discontent was expressed about how the SQA operates and the extent to which its governance, which I reference in the report, is representative of the expertise that exists in schools and classrooms in Scotland. That was the feeling that I got and, in a lot of discussions that I had, various expressions were used about it being an unlistening and distant organisation.

I included a number of quotes in the report to emphasise some of those things. It struck a particular chord with me when a very senior, long-standing headteacher told me that, for a number of years, he had felt that SQA had become tone deaf not only in response to what was required in the system but in how it responded to and engaged with the system. It was particularly telling when I began to talk to folk who were working in the further education sector, in particular, who felt that a number of the vocational qualifications were very much out of date. That was also reflected to some extent in the discussions that I had with folk in higher education.

A combination of issues led to the notion that SQA needed to be replaced. One of the recommendations that I made is the separation of the awarding from the accrediting and regulation. From some of the discussions, a strong sense came through that SQA marked “its own homework”. From an accountability point of view, it had lost degree of trust and confidence not only from the profession but from wider society. I undertook a fair degree of engagement with parents, who said that their confidence in the organisation had waned over the years. A number of factors led to the decision that the SQA needed to be replaced, and that decision accorded with the views of many people whom I engaged with.

The Convener: The SQA had a function to carry out, so there is still a need for such a body, hence your recommendation that a new body be created. It sounds to me that we are really talking about culture. The organisation’s culture had gone wrong—it had gone adrift. Culture is ultimately the responsibility of the SQA’s leadership. Has the leadership of the SQA sailed the boat on to the rocks?

Professor Muir: As I said earlier, some of the issues have been more long-standing than the current leadership, in particular with regard to NQs, where my expertise lies. As I said, there was disquiet about the extent to which the national qualifications, when they came in a number of years ago, were fit for purpose, if I can put it like that.

I know that the current leadership has tried to make some changes to the culture, but in my report I talk about three factors that I think have, in combination, affected the SQA. The culture is certainly one factor. As I said, there is a strong

sense that the SQA is an organisation that needs to listen more, and that its governance needs to better reflect the views of the expert practitioners that are undertaking the very challenging task of learning and teaching.

I suppose that, given that there have been criticisms of the culture in the organisation, that automatically filters through to the organisation's leadership. Those three things came through very strongly with regard to how the SQA is perceived and, in some cases, how it currently operates.

One of the factors of which I had to take account—as, I am sure, you will appreciate—was the need to recognise that there will not be a quick fix for the SQA. It is undertaking at least another two, and possibly three, diets of examinations. I was very mindful—students themselves often reminded me—that it is important that the currency of the qualifications that students have gained under the past two diets is comparable to the perceived currency of the qualifications that were undertaken in previous years. There was also a recognition that the SQA needs to continue to deliver as well as change.

The Convener: You rightly point out that one of the concerns that has been expressed—you address it in your report—is that a new body should not be simply a rebranded SQA, given the issues that you have raised.

Professor Muir: If it is a rebrand and nothing else, I will be very disappointed, and I think that the profession will be, too. Given what I have said, I think that this is an opportune moment to really look at the role of not just the SQA, but organisations in general that support a very fast-changing education system.

I see, and the feedback that I got from many of the engagements that I had suggested, that there is a window of opportunity here to have the kind of discussion that is set out in my first recommendation. We need to have a deep think about what we want the education system to do and how we want it to change, and—this is as important as anything—about how the organisations that are part of the infrastructure need to change as well. In many cases, the culture in those organisations needs to change to match what we want our education system to look like.

The Convener: However, you would suggest that it would be a bad move to simply rehire the SQA's existing senior leadership team for the new body, as that would undermine the confidence that people might have in the new body. Is that a fair comment?

Professor Muir: I think that the current leadership needs to look at the things that I have identified in my report and the quotes that it contains, look at the "Education Reform: Consulting with children and young people" report that the Children's Parliament and others pulled together, and look at the analysis of the consultation returns. It should use those as a mirror to reflect on its current practice.

At the end of the day, it is being asked to deliver for at least the next two or three diets. There is undoubtedly huge expertise and experience within the SQA, and some of that certainly needs to be retained. However, as a first step, I think that the chief executive and the executive management team, as I said, need to look at those reports and think deeply about how they engage and operate for the duration of their continued existence as the SQA.

09:45

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I appreciate that the report is about far more than the personalities involved—it is about organisation, culture and broader leadership. I understand that. Nonetheless, how difficult will it be for the new qualifications Scotland body to win over the profession if the old leadership remains in place?

Professor Muir: I do not doubt that it will be a challenge. I suppose the issue is whether they are able to implement, and are up for, the types of radical changes to culture and governance that are needed.

Some of the issues can be fixed fairly quickly. As I said, one of my concerns is that, although the board of management is appointed by ministers as an advisory council that comprises around 17 individuals, none of its members have current practitioner experience. That has been part of the problem. As I said, it has been reported to me that practitioners and headteachers see the organisation as being very unlistening. Finding a way in which it can get more of an input from practitioners themselves to influence what it does has to be part of how it reflects on my report and on the other reports that sit alongside that.

The Convener: It has been reported to me that staff at the SQA feel similarly about the senior leadership and their tin-eared approach to staff concerns.

Professor Muir: I had a look at the staff surveys. To be fair to the SQA, it was very open and it made available on its SharePoint site a very wide range of documents, all of which I read. At times, I thought that it was trying to confuddle me, but it was actually very helpful in that regard. Some of that came through. I also looked at things such as the local government leaders survey of 2021. Reading between the lines, although there was not a lot of qualitative detail in that survey, I got the sense that there was something amiss in

the SQA, given the views of chief executives of councils, council leaders and directors of education and their level of confidence in the organisation.

All of that points very much to an organisation that really needs to take a long, hard look at itself—or, more likely, a short, hard look at itself.

The Convener: And then take the appropriate action, yes?

Professor Muir: Yes. As I said, there are a number of key things that point towards culture, leadership and governance that the current executive management team needs to consider.

The Convener: How far back do you think the issue has existed?

Professor Muir: It is difficult to say. It probably goes back slightly longer than the Covid period, to be honest. As I said, there was some disquiet. In recent years, for example, there has been an issue with unit assessments within national qualifications, and whether they are part of that or not. All of that, and how things were handled in general, contributed to a very strong view that the organisation needed to be at least reformed, if not replaced.

To be truthful, I think that the situation has been exacerbated by Covid. In a previous existence, I sat on the Covid education recovery group, and I know about some of the challenges that the SQA went through in looking at the options and scenarios if a diet did not exist, and so on. The issue has been exacerbated in the past few years by Covid.

In addition, the SQA has had a change of chief executive. It is never easy to come into an organisation as a new chief executive and try to make your mark. Some of what the chief executive has done has begun to work. For example, I think that the communications are improving to a degree, although not entirely, as we have seen from some of the recent press and media coverage. Nevertheless, the organisation still has some way to go.

Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP) (Committee Substitute): As has already been touched on, some of the respondents to the consultation expressed concerns that the reforms were simply a rebranding of the current system. As we all know, that cynicism will always be there in such a process.

I would like to explore with you, and get your view on, this issue. Do you believe that Scottish Government's response to the OECD report, and thereafter to your report, offers a genuine reassurance that there is, certainly at Scottish Government level, a recognition of the need to reform fully, and a commitment to the process?

Professor Muir: There is nothing in any of the engagement that I have had with the Scottish Government to suggest that it is not up for reform. I think that it recognises that the world has changed significantly and continues to change, and that the education system needs to respond to that. In that sense, there is an acceptance that the system needs to change.

On the Government's response to my report, as I said in my opening statement, a number of things are happening outwith the school education sector that I have had to take into account, and some of the recommendations and some of the Government's response are perhaps a bit more tentative than I might have wanted them to be. For example, I point to the decision not to include the Scottish credit and qualifications framework in the proposed national agency. That is a disappointment to me, but the Government's response said that it recognised the value of the SCQF and the partnership body that runs it, and that there is a need to heighten the profile significantly of the SCQF.

On the inspectorate, I am clear, as a former Her Majesty's chief inspector of education, and I know having worked with Graham Donaldson when he was a senior chief inspector, that it needs to be a very independent body that is able to inform you. There is an expression about "talking truth to power", and that absolutely comes through in the need to have an independent inspectorate. I suggest in my report that it should be either a non-ministerial office or a national body akin to the likes of Audit Scotland that reports to Parliament rather than to ministers. Having an independent body that is a step removed in that way would help to build trust and confidence in the education system.

I can understand why some of the Government's response has been a bit tentative. Some of it will be dependent on the fallout from the tertiary review that is under way. Some of will be determined, as I said in my opening statement, by how the national care service review plays out and what falls out from that. Government's response has needed to be a bit tentative—for example, in relation to primary legislation being required for some of the changes. I know and you all know that that will take time.

As I suggested earlier, if it is nothing more than a rebranding of two major organisations, I will have wasted six months and, more than anything, the expectation that is out there that change and reform will come will land sorely with teachers, practitioners and headteachers.

The Convener: I have one more question before we go back to Willie Rennie. [*Interruption*.] I beg your pardon. We have a question from Michael Marra.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): I thank you both—in particular, Professor Muir, for your report. Your care for young people in Scotland and their future prospects and the long-term aspiration that you have for the country shine through on every page. Thank you for all that work.

I will focus on the short term, if that is okay. My colleagues have asked some questions about leadership. Your report and the commission to do the work were precipitated by a crisis of confidence in the SQA because of the disastrous handling of exams through the pandemic. That is why you are sitting here today, and it is why we have the report in front of us. We are now looking at that organisation staying in place for another three exam diets—the current one and another two. Should we have confidence in its leadership and their decisions if there is another crisis?

Professor Muir: I hope that the SQA has learned from the past two years. As long as we have Covid hanging there, we have an organisation that, because of the public profile of qualifications and examinations, will have to consider a number of options, as it has over the past two years, some of which have had to be implemented at very short notice.

I have a degree of sympathy for the SQA in that regard. However, as I said, given that the SQA will continue to exist, it is really important that it has the expertise and specialism required to undertake a national diet of examinations.

In the very short term, it is important that SQA leaders ask themselves whether they have the capacity, the culture and the organisational will to make the changes that are necessary. I think my report makes those changes clear. There is a lot more detail in the supporting documents. I could have included comments, which were made to me, that were significantly more damning, but I have tried to be balanced in what I have said and in the feedback that I have given in my report.

Something that is not well understood, particularly in schools, is the breadth of qualifications that the SQA offers. I got feedback from training providers and from those who operate in the vocational sphere rather than in the national qualifications sphere., and they were very positive about the SQA's work.

I chose to separate out accreditation and regulation in order to give a clear indication that trust and confidence in the SQA must be improved. Someone should look at that from afar, as opposed to the regulatory and accreditation functions being built into the system.

That will be a challenge. It is not necessarily for me to say what should happen to the board, but questions should be asked of the executive management team, the chief executive and the board. There is a management board. All those people were criticised in the engagements and discussions that I had. It is for them to decide or determine whether they have the capacity—or even the will—to lead the organisation forward in what will undoubtedly be a period of significant challenge and change. The SQA not only will deliver the next three exam diets but will have to pay close attention to the reforms that are coming down the track.

The Convener: I would like to say that this will be a quick question, but it probably will not be. We will try to deal with it quickly.

You have—deliberately, I think—made it your first recommendation that there should be a national discussion about the future of curriculum for excellence in the light of the OECD's commentary on curriculum for excellence. You say:

"There was generally agreement with the OECD that CfE is still part of the direction of travel and confirmation that its underpinning philosophy was still sound."

You go on to say that

"there was also a clear message"

about the requirement for change. You quote your consultation finding that 58 per cent agreed

"that the vision for CfE reflects what matters for the education of children and young people in Scotland."

Will you comment on the second-top finding in your consultation? When asked to agree whether curriculum for excellence gives the best possible educational experience for our young people and enables them to realise their ambitions, only 22 per cent—one in five—felt able to agree with that statement.

When you talk about change, Professor Muir, surely we should be looking at a major overhaul of curriculum for excellence if it is failing to deliver the best possible educational experience and to help young people to realise their ambitions.

Professor Muir: I will ask Graham Donaldson to speak about this, too, because he was party to the creation of curriculum for excellence after the national debate that spawned that curriculum. We need to bear in mind the fact that there are some schools where children get an excellent deal. There is no doubt about that. Some teachers and schools have gone to the ends of the earth to make curriculum for excellence work.

10:00

The thinking and philosophy behind curriculum for excellence are 20 years old. There are some teachers on the committee—Ms Stewart and others—who know how hard it has been to

introduce curriculum for excellence. It is a very different philosophy. It is the first time ever in Scottish education that we have tried to change the entire system at once. In the past, we have tended to do it in bits and pieces.

We need to remember that there are children and young people in Scottish schools who get a good deal through curriculum for excellence. However, the world has moved on in 20 years. The expectations of an education system in Scottish society—what we want from it—have changed hugely and are changing even more quickly as we move on. That is one of the reasons why the report, and whatever comes out of Professor Hayward's report on the review of national qualifications, gives us a window of time in which to make a decision about and get a consensus on what we want the education system to look like.

It is important to point out how hard schools are working to implement curriculum for excellence. I have seen it as an inspector, and a lot of the feedback that I had confirmed it. However, it is true that it does not meet the needs of all children and young people. That is one of the reasons why the central message in my report is that, in the education system, all the telescopes need to focus on meeting learners' needs first and foremost. That must be the prime objective of what we do in education.

To do that, we need to put in place an infrastructure that supports learning and teaching and that supports teachers and practitioners. I hope that that comes through strongly in the report. To do that and to make any further change to the infrastructure, we need to take the time to ask the kind of questions that we asked 20 years ago: what do we want the education system to do for the next generation?

That needs a consensual vision that is agreed by all parties—political and otherwise. For four or five years after the introduction of curriculum for excellence, we had absolute consensus on the direction of travel. I think that it began to come off the rails because we did not do enough to explain to teachers the philosophy of CFE and what it meant in practice. We did not do enough to communicate with parents about what curriculum for excellence was trying to do and why the national qualifications needed to be different from what we had before.

The first and second recommendations are saying that this is a good time to have that discussion. However, it needs to be an all-embracing discussion. Critically, it needs to take account of the views of teachers, who are experts in the profession, and—just as important—learners themselves.

Some of the most interesting engagements that I had were with children and young people—Graham Donaldson was party to some of them. Children and young people know what they want from an education system, and it is not just about being driven by examinations. When we get below the skin of what they say about what they want from their experience in schools, we find that it is far more than just attainment, important though that is. How do we embrace all of that in a national discussion? That is important to the way forward.

Graham Donaldson was party to the creation of curriculum for excellence, so he might want to say something.

Professor Graham Donaldson (University of Glasgow): I was the head of the inspectorate when the great debate and the reforms that followed it took place, so I engaged extensively with ministers and the Parliament, including your predecessor committees, during that period.

As Ken Muir pointed out, that debate took place 20 years ago. As the OECD mentioned, curriculum for excellence departed dramatically from conventional wisdom about what a curriculum should look like. Over the past 20 years, country after country has moved in that direction. Prior to 2004, a curriculum, in essence, defined what young people should learn. That sounds pretty obvious, but curriculum for excellence says that, while that is, of course, important, it is actually about how young people use that learning and what they become as a result.

Schools not only have a responsibility to give young people the learning they require and test whether they have it; they also have to see if they have the capacity—that is what the four capacities are about—to learn, then contribute and engage as 21st century citizens and think through complex issues. Curriculum for excellence was, at the time, a very radical departure.

The OECD is currently running its future of education and skills 2030 project to consider what the curriculum should look like in 2030, and it looks an awful lot like curriculum for excellence. It is not the same, but it has the same thrust, because it focuses on building capacity and competence in young people and on helping them to grow and acquire pre-specified learning.

A curriculum does not deliver anything; it is inert and totally dependent on what happens as a result of it. As Ken said, during the 20-year period since curriculum for excellence was created, we have, in part, lost the narrative. If you ask people—even those in schools—what curriculum for excellence is, you will get about 20 different answers, because it has become too diffuse and has been influenced by events that have shaped things during that time.

That applies during the senior phase, in particular, which takes us back to the questions that members raised about the SQA and examinations. Examination boards are on a hiding to nothing, because it is very difficult to maintain standards reliably over time.

In 2000, there was a meltdown in relation to examinations in Scotland, and that has created a very risk-averse SQA that thinks, "Whatever we do, we must not go back to where we were in 2000." That thinking was quite influential in the development of the examination and qualification process. The qualification process was developed in relation to previous thinking on the curriculum, which meant that we got a very conservative, fairly narrow interpretation of what the curriculum philosophy is.

It also meant that there was a mismatch between what schools thought they were supposed to be doing in relation to the bit that went before and—particularly in secondary schools—the serious stuff, which did not look awfully different from how the serious stuff looked before. That caused a disjuncture between the curriculum philosophy and the practicalities of examinations. That came through in Ken's report.

Also, partly because of the 2000 situation, the SQA was given a governance structure—I did not realise this when I was working with Ken—in which the board of management is very narrowly conceived. It is not surprising that the board of management is not really in touch with issues of the classroom and of learning and teaching, because it was set up to avoid risk and manage the organisation tightly. It was not designed to think about the nature of the learning that takes place or about how the SQA can best provide qualifications that reflect the learning. To do that, it would need to look two ways—first, at businesses, universities and further education colleges, to find qualifications that serve them; and, secondly, looking back to reflect the learning that has built up.

When we talk about curriculum for excellence, therefore, we need to remember that it is only a curriculum and that it is only as good as the context in which it takes place. The disjuncture between examinations and the curriculum philosophy in secondary schools has been a serious issue. In primary schools, we lost the narrative a bit. The four capacities became something to which everyone could subscribe, but they are worthwhile only if you really drill down and there is real rigour and depth to them. You have to think, "What does that really mean?"

You can call anything creating "a confident individual" or whatever—it is not hard to do that—but you really have to stick at it and drill down so that young people are being challenged. The whole business of developing those capacities should be a very rigorous and challenging, but enjoyable, process for young people. To some extent, we lost the flow that was originally intended with curriculum for excellence.

We need a debate now, 20 years on, as Ken Muir has recommended. I have been involved in a number of OECD reviews and I did a review—with the same team, more or less—of Japanese education. Japan has a formal 10-year review of the curriculum; it is automatic, which kind of depoliticises it. The curriculum is reviewed not because there is a problem, but simply because it needs to change—of course it does. It needs to be updated, so it has to be under a process of constant review.

Curriculum for excellence is used as a label, but we need to think about what lies behind that and how we achieve the aspirations that were in the original curriculum. We need to ask ourselves the hard question that is highlighted in Ken Muir's report. We need to think about where we are now, given all the disruptors that are around—you heard me talk about that earlier, so I will not go on about it. Technology will change the nature of learning and teaching dramatically over the next decade, through artificial intelligence and the so-called metaverse, and all of that will impact on schools dramatically. We need to think very hard about the nature of the curriculum that we need and how that is going to work with the grain of the changes, in a learning context, that young people need, let alone how it will interact with issues such as sustainability and all the geopolitical implications of what is currently happening in Ukraine.

The time is absolutely ripe for that debate, which is why the recommendation in Ken's report is so important. I hope that we can have a genuine debate rather than a process whereby the great and the good think up something and say, "Do you like it?" We need a debate that engages people, which was pretty well done back in the first flush of the Parliament, in the early part of the century.

The Convener: We need a genuine national discussion. That was a pretty strong endorsement of the first recommendation in the report, and I appreciate it.

Willie Rennie: I will come to child protection in a moment, but I first want to ask about Education Scotland and the new national agency, because that is the next meaty part of the report. The report talks about a "cluttered landscape", "patchy" delivery in schools and teachers feeling "bombarded" with the material that is provided. You have also talked about a teacher-responsive approach. To be honest, I am not sure what that means. I get the idea, but what difference would a

teacher notice with the new national agency in comparison with what they currently receive?

Professor Muir: In proposing the creation of a national agency in my report, I am suggesting that teachers currently have a variable experience of the support that is available to them. At present, Education Scotland has a national offer, a lot of which is focused on leadership and professional learning. However, what teachers were saying to me included very mixed messages. Some of them felt that the offer suited their needs, but others did not. What they would notice in a new agency is a much more responsive and reactive approach to what teachers themselves are saying they need in order to undertake the very difficult task of teaching and learning.

In the report, I have tried to highlight that one of the current issues with Education Scotland—as the organisation itself recognises—is that it is facing different ways. It is facing Government and trying to face the profession, and it is trying to work with local authorities through the regional improvement collaboratives. In fairness, some of that is working well, but it is not working well enough consistently.

10:15

Creating an agency that is aligned with the philosophy of putting the child at the centre is the prime focus of the education system. The next level is to ask how we ensure that the teachers and practitioners who support that learning get the support and professional learning that they require. That is not determined by a national agency or a national organisation; it is determined by those who are engaged in that critical learning and teaching process, which goes back to what Graham Donaldson said.

That is one of the reasons why I rejected the notion of an agency that was purely about curriculum and assessment. There are different interpretations of the curriculum, but most folk see it in a very traditional sense as being about the content and the delivery of that content. A curriculum and assessment agency ran the risk of missing out that important element of learning and teaching, so a lot of what is in my report is orientated towards improving learning and teaching, which will allow outcomes for learners to be better met. I saw the agency as being one where the resource was much more localised and responsive to the bespoke requests of schools and individual teachers in relation to the support that they require to make learning and teaching effective.

We can create the kind of agency that brings not just opportunities for professional learning at a local level, but the opportunity for teachers, practitioners and headteachers and so on to have a role to play in creating the education system. A lot of the feedback that I get is that we still have a very hierarchical and top-down system in Scotland, so the key message that I tried to embed in the report is that we need to turn that around and start with the learners, teachers and practitioners, making sure that they are supported. One of the ways of doing that is by looking again at the role of what are currently called regional improvement collaboratives. My report talks more about regional and local collaboration because a lot of teachers have fallen back on that.

A lot of those who were critical of the support that they received during Covid found salvation through their informal networks and the organisations that produce resources for teachers at the national level—for example, the Royal Scottish Geographical Society, the Scottish Association of Geography Teachers, the Modern Studies Association, the Scottish Association of the Teachers of History, and so on. There are lots of national organisations populated by expert volunteers who are very committed to their subject and to learning and teaching. A lot of teachers have fallen back on those organisations, and recreating the kind of model whereby teachers' needs are responded to just as much as learners' needs is the central philosophy that I see in the national agency.

Willie Rennie: You talk about the hierarchy and the top-down approach. Are you saying that the national agency will have a filtering or gatekeeping role to make sure that the teachers and education providers are put first, and that it will have a role in filtering any interference that contradicts that? You talk in the report about co-ordination and coherence; is that what you mean?

Professor Muir: Yes, that was part of the thinking behind the agency. I recommended bringing together the SCQF, the insight team and part of the curriculum and qualifications division of the Scottish Government, with an eye to policy, so that all the key decisions that are taken about the direction of travel and so on would sit in a single agency. That, in itself, would provide greater coherence in thinking about and provision of the support and resources that go into schools and classrooms. There are, in the system, variations around interpretation of policy and so on. It is about trying to ensure that there is less chance of fragmented interpretation by filtering—to use Willie Rennie's words—through a central agency in which all the bits of the jigsaw fit together.

What is recommended in the report will do a number of things. For example, it will help to reduce some of the pressures and bureaucracy in the system. As you know, I mention in the report that I asked headteachers in primary and

secondary schools to give me an indication of the number of extant policies that they deal with every day. For secondary headteachers, the number was around 40, and for primary headteachers, it was around 34. There were also complaints that not all those policies are necessarily coherent in themselves.

There is, therefore, a question about where reform should happen. For me, it should happen at all levels; we cannot have a system in which various policies contradict each other, work against each other, or are not clear enough to be implemented because they go through a filter at local authority level. Local authorities will apply their interpretation of a policy on the system.

Headteachers and teachers say to me, "The Government is asking me to do this—it seems to be Government policy, but the local authority is asking me to do something else." I hope that, through the creation of a national agency for Scottish education of the kind that I recommend, some of the inconsistencies and fragmentation will disappear. However, as I also highlight in the report, that has to involve much more than simply replacing the SQA and reforming Education Scotland.

Willie Rennie: In your previous role with the General Teaching Council for Scotland, child protection will have been close to you. The GTCS made a submission in which it talked about—to put words in its mouth—the vacuum around regulation of employers when it comes to child protection and safeguarding. As you know, the GTCS has a role in regulating the profession, but because local authorities—the employers—are regarded as the front line in child protection, referrals are passed on to them to be dealt with. The GTCS does not necessarily know what happens to those referrals. It says that there is a gap in the system, because no one is regulating that aspect.

We know that local authorities sometimes manage people out, instead of dealing with issues head on. They are not necessarily doing anything that is inappropriate, but there is a tendency to manage issues out. Why did you not include in your report a recommendation on regulation of employers in that regard, given that the GTCS had suggested that there is a gap in the arrangements?

Professor Muir: That is a valid question. In the system, a lot of trust is required that local authorities will be up front with the professional regulatory body—the General Teaching Council for Scotland—in reporting to it issues to do with child protection. The GTCS is a relatively small organisation, although its profile is big. Certainly, during the eight years in which I was there, we simply did not have the resources to monitor what was happening within individual local authorities. There is a need for trust in the system.

You are right that local authorities sometimes manage issues out, particularly in cases in which the issues are about fitness to teach—cases that are not about child protection, but are about teachers perhaps not performing to the expected professional standards. In the report, I emphasised the important role that the inspectorate might play in overseeing the child protection procedures within schools and local authorities.

I got a hard copy of the report only this morning but, from memory, I specifically made reference to child protection because, in my latter years as the chief executive of the GTCS, I was very conscious of the child abuse inquiry and the extent to which independent schools were not part of the GTCS's registration functions at the time when many of the abuses took place. I was conscious that the profile of child protection was very much on the rise—rightly so. Therefore, I have included that more within the inspectorate role.

More work needs to be done between the GTC and local authorities in order to impress on them the significance of their not referring issues directly to the regulatory body. However, as I said, my approach was to look at the issue more from an inspectorate point of view. Again, one of the arguments for my suggestion that there be an independent inspectorate—either a national body or a non-ministerial office—was the importance of the child protection agenda.

Willie Rennie: The Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland was quite forceful this week about the particular issue of restraint. We still have problems with members of the profession using inappropriate restraint methods. How important is it that the inspector makes that a significant area of work and that we look at how employers are dealing with such issues? How do we address issues to do with restraint?

Professor Muir: The subject is important. Where there are child protection issues, we cannot have a system that is as dependent on trust as it is at the moment. In fairness, in my experience as chief executive of the GTCS, most local authorities were good at coming forward, but I recognise that there was variation

At the time, a bigger issue for us, which has only just been resolved by the inner house of the Court of Session, was that we had a number of child protection issues relating to teachers in which there was criminal activity. We had difficulty in getting the intelligence that we required from Police Scotland, which was unwilling to share information and cited general data protection

regulation. In my time as chief executive, we took the matter to the Court of Session; in, I think, October last year, the General Teaching Council for Scotland rightly won that case. I have not kept up to speed with the situation; Mr Rennie will know better than I do whether Police Scotland is now more forthcoming with the kind of information that we needed.

However, the matter is not just about local authorities not informing the regulator about child protection issues. There are other players in the system; for Police Scotland to be asking us to take out a court order—at £40,000 a time—every time we wanted information relating to a teacher, regarding whom there was an issue of child protection, was, frankly, absurd. If Police Scotland is not more forthcoming, as the inner house's decision has asked it to be, that is, quite frankly, appalling.

Willie Rennie: Thank you very much.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): Good morning to both professors. I will pick up on something that Professor Donaldson—I think—said about the fact that there are 40 extant unimplemented policies for secondary schools and 34 for primary schools. Have those been looked at as part of the report? Have you identified which, if any, of those policies should be implemented and which should be consigned to the dustbin of educational history?

Professor Muir: I referred to the number of policies, but it was more about the volume of policies that schools deal with, than to do with whether some are working well and some are working less well.

The point that I was trying to make was highlighted by a comment that I did not include in the report. It was from a headteacher who said that, rather than being a leader of learning, they are now a leader of administration. That is a matter for great sadness, because our expectation should be that headteachers are model leaders of learning in their establishments—particularly in primary schools, but also in secondary schools. In secondary schools that is an issue, but it is perhaps less so because they have larger senior management teams, in general. In primary schools, and particularly for teaching headteachers who have perhaps half a day of relief a week, having to juggle 34 policies—the average figure from primary headteachers' responses to me—is a major challenge.

10:30

To go back to the main thrust of my report, I note that, if we want to change the education system for the better, we need to focus much more significantly on learning and teaching. Where there are variations in learning and teaching, the first port of responsibility and accountability is the headteacher. The headteacher is responsible for the overall quality of what goes on in her or his school, but if they are overtaken by having to implement policy, whom do they respond to? They might find that some policy is difficult to interpret. Individuals have said that, at times, policies can contradict Government policy as a whole or the local authority's interpretation of Government policy. However, the issue is more the volume of policy.

Change needs to start at Scottish Government level, with civil servants and the creation of policy. It is not just the learning directorate to which teachers need to be responsive; there are lots of directorates that would, to be frank, benefit from engaging with one another to ensure that policies articulate together and that the volume of policy is not such that schools, local authorities and teachers drown under it. That cannot be the purpose of policy.

Fergus Ewing: Thank you for that answer. It strikes a chord with what I have heard in my constituency over the years from teachers and, in particular, headteachers, who complain that they spend too much time doing administration and that that detracts from their primary function of teaching.

However, Professor Muir, I do not see anyone coming up with a specific plan to debureaucratise the system. I note that, in your report, one of the opportunities that you identify for the new agency is to

"declutter and streamline the 'middle ground' in Scotland's educational landscape".

I also read something on, I think, page 47 or page 109 of the report. That sounds impressive but, if I am candid, I do not think that I quite made it through to the end. This is the point that interested me, so I stopped at page 47—I am sorry about that. The report quotes a primary teacher who said:

"We need less agencies, more support in classrooms, smaller class sizes and more prescriptive planning, not more agencies trying to justify how busy they are."

I am impressed with the report and the obvious care for your task and for pupils, as Mr Marra said earlier, but where is the beef? Who is going to get to grips with the enormous bureaucracy that you have indemnified? Is not it incumbent on you, as the author of the report, to say how we will "declutter and streamline" and which policies should be suspended or removed?

We need somebody to lead the task of getting teachers back to teaching and away from administration, but is that too much to ask? Is it an unfair ask, Professor Muir? I am afraid that just

expressing it as an aspiration does not cut the mustard. I say that with 13 years of ministerial experience in which frustration was an emotion that I suffered daily when coming up against a very large bureaucracy that, sometimes, appeared to impede the purposes that we are here to advance.

Professor Muir: First, Mr Ewing, I hope that the reason why you did not get to the end of the report was not simply because it was a boring read. I assure you that it is a riveting read right to page 109.

It is not for one person to make the change; the system needs to agree to there being less bureaucracy. As I have tried to suggest in my report, when you scratch to get below the surface of why we have so much bureaucracy, you find that it partly—not wholly—stems from the fragmented nature of how policy is created and the volume of policy that is considered to be appropriate for the system to deal with. I talked about that earlier.

You are quite right: we need fewer agencies. In creating the national agency for Scottish education, I have tried to bring various bits of the environment together. There are probably other steps to be taken further down the road, but the extent of change that would be required to bring the host of agencies together would probably not be appropriate. In my report, I have tried to balance what I think is feasible change, at this point.

Part of the thinking on the very first recommendation is for everyone who has an interest—from members of the committee to the teaching profession itself—to try to get consensus on what we want to focus on. Only by doing that will we begin to strip away some of the policy and bureaucracy that exists in the system.

As I said, you are right: there are far too many agencies. There are organisations and agencies about whose role and purpose in life some teachers are unclear. It has been interesting to talk to some of the expert witnesses—Graham Donaldson might want to come in on this—who thought that they knew the Scottish education system well but found that it is an awful lot more complex than they had imagined.

Part of my balancing act in writing the report has been to suggest what is feasible in the short term and to set the direction of travel for the longer term. It is not the job of an individual to say which policies are appropriate and which are not; that has to come through discussion of where we want the education system to be over the next 20 years. The policies should reflect that; the process should automatically produce rationalisation of policies. If we focus on learners, teachers and—as the leaders of learning—headteachers, we will get a clear response from them about what needs to go and what needs to stay.

Professor Donaldson: To pick up Mr Ewing's point, I think that that is one of the key roles for the inspectorate. As head of the inspectorate, I was conscious that part of my job, which did not make me all that popular, sometimes, was to act as a kind of filter for ministers or the profession. If the inspectorate is doing its job properly, it has an absolutely up-to-date knowledge of what is happening throughout Scottish schools because of the evidence that comes through the inspection programme. It can then help to deploy that knowledge, in part to address issues of policy incontinence, which can certainly develop if you have a very responsive policy environment. In that situation, the answer to a problem is a new policy, which it has to fit in somewhere.

Part of the role of an inspectorate is to provide evaluation, but, because the inspectorate was inside the development body, that bit of the inspectorate's role became difficult to do. The chief inspector was also the head of the development organisation; that conflict of roles perhaps diluted the role of the inspectorate in terms of helping to address the issue that Mr Ewing raised.

Fergus Ewing: I have a final reflection, although I note that I am an outsider to the education world and you are insider experts—so who am I to opine when, arguably, I do not have the factual knowledge?

You have said that we want to

"declutter and streamline the 'middle ground'".

I do not quite know whether there is a plan for how that could be done, other than by the inspectorate identifying things to be culled and made more efficient, as Professor Donaldson just said. Would it not be an idea to ask a group of headteachers to say what should be dispensed with? Has that been tried? We could ask, say, five headteachers from primary and secondary schools around the country what they would do to simplify and declutter the middle ground.

In my experience, the people who do the work know what is wrong. With all respect, professors and MSPs, who are not in the classrooms and schools, often do not know what is going on. Whatever the walk of life, the people who do the work know what does not work, yet they are often the last people to be asked for their opinions. I put that to you. Maybe it is a daft-laddie suggestion, but could you add that to your recommendations, Professor Muir?

Professor Muir: Mr Ewing, lots of volunteers would come forward from the primary, secondary

and early years sectors to cull some of those policies. Although I am not sure that I could make that suggestion an addendum to the report, it is certainly something that I accord with.

Fergus Ewing: Thank you.

The Convener: Michael Marra has one more line of questioning to follow, then we will go to Bob Doris.

Michael Marra: My questioning follows in a slightly similar vein. If the new national education agency was put in place according to the vision that you have outlined, Professor Muir, could we get rid of the regional improvement collaboratives? Are they one thing that could be scrapped, along the lines of Fergus Ewing's suggestion?

Professor Muir: The regional improvement collaboratives are modelled on what has been happening in Wales. They have been an attempt to create a more local support structure. As you know, the report on the regional improvement collaboratives that came out last year said that some of them seem to be working reasonably well but that others are not.

You will notice that, in the report, as I said earlier, I tend to talk about regional collaboration. An issue in the education system in Scotland is that regional improvement collaboratives are seen as entities—as bodies—whereas I am trying to direct things towards the concept of regional collaboration, with the mechanism for support being much more regional and localised.

Michael Marra: The regional improvement collaboratives have budgets and seconded staff, so they create their own bureaucracy. Mr Ewing's questioning along that line was about that middle ground. They are intermediate organisations. Essentially, they are the rusting hulks of the failed reform agenda of the previous cabinet secretary. They are the left-over result of an attempt to remove the control of education policy from local councils.

Having spoken to teachers, I tend to agree that some of those collaboratives have had some value. Indeed, what you have described—being led by teachers, sharing, empowering teachers and giving them the information that they need—sounds a little like what has been got out of the regional improvement collaboratives that have worked. Are we not looking at another duplication?

Professor Muir: No, I hope not. In my report, I am clear. At the moment, there is an agreement between the Scottish Government, local authorities and Education Scotland on regional improvement collaboratives and how they operate. However, I was struck by the co-sponsorship model for operating Public Health Scotland. I make specific reference to that.

You are right: what is needed for that regional collaboration—not RICs, but regional collaboration—to work is for it to have more control of finances and longer-term funding and for the resources that currently comprise Education Scotland and the regional improvement collaboratives to be directed much more towards supporting teachers on the ground, so that that resource is being used. The model is more one of co-sponsorship, which is why I was attracted to the Public Health Scotland model, which is slightly different from what exists just now in the infrastructure of RICs.

Michael Marra: That policy landscape is a very busy place. I asked the Scottish Parliament information centre to give me the total number of working groups that the Scottish Government had set up for education, and it was unable to do so. The answer was "loads". There were so many, it was unable to count them or track them down. We can see that in the announcements in the chamber on the commission of your own work. In each statement that the cabinet secretary makes, another three or four crop up. All those bodies then produce the kind of policies that we end up talking about.

10:45

I have an issue with what you identify at section 13 in the report: the transition period between where we are now and where we have to get to. I worry about the pace of that transition. I understand what you identify in terms of the twin-track approach and the need to ensure that there is an agency that sits alongside the other one, but we have urgent problems in Scottish education. We have the biggest attainment gap that we have ever had and the lowest attainment among primary school pupils, and no assessment has been made of the impact of the pandemic on the rest of our education system. There has, so far, been a complete refusal by the Government to do that work, but international evidence suggests that it is a very difficult situation, and that is what we hear from teachers. Are we changing quickly enough to address the problems in the system?

Professor Muir: From a school point of view—particularly a secondary school point view—one of the big challenges is around the national qualifications. As you know, Professor Hayward from the University of Glasgow will do some work on the review of national qualifications. That work is essential. In relation to the further education sector, the review of higher national provision has been delayed, which is one the reasons why there is a view out there that some of the vocational qualifications that the SQA offers are out of date, and it is one of the reasons why colleges are looking to other providers of qualifications.

There are a lot of policies out there; I do not doubt that. That goes back to something that Graham Donaldson hinted at in one of his responses, which is that Scottish education could be characterised just now as being a very reactive system. We do not have the kind of thing that Graham referred to in the context of his Japanese experience, which is a programme of monitoring and review in the sense of the committee and the Government generally getting feedback on how well things are working or not working.

All of that has to be in the mix of what we want the education system to look like and how we support it. What infrastructure should we create around it to produce a much more forward-looking and reflective education system that does not wait for crises to come along or wait for a policy to address a crisis? There will always be crises, and it is inevitable that Governments and local authorities will need to respond to them. However, a clear view that I have had for some time—which came from and was confirmed by those I spoke to—is that we are in that reactive mode far too much. That adds to the stress and the bureaucracy. There is a crisis, so this is the response, and, all of a sudden, schools and local authorities are having to respond to another policy or suite of policies to address the issue.

I would hope that part of the outcome of a national conversation would be a recognition that, because of the pace of change in education, which has been significant and will be more significant over the next 20 years, as Graham hinted, we need to have a mechanism or infrastructure that is much more on the front foot, ahead of the curve, and that does not simply respond, with all the fallout that a responsive system produces.

Michael Marra: It will be three years before we get into a new settled pattern, and the young people who are going through the system at the moment will not get the benefit of those changes. If we reflect on what has happened in the past couple of weeks—the study guides that were produced by the SQA were memorably described to me by a geography teacher in Glasgow as the "Mariana Trench of uselessness"—we can see that the organisation is failing now. I absolutely agree with the need for strategic intent and with where you are pitching the long term strategy, but is there not also a need for short-term leadership?

Professor Muir: Yes, there is. I hope that the Government will look at the 21 recommendations that I made and identify those that can go forward quickly, because you are right that there are issues in the system at the moment. For some of the areas that we need to respond to, the four-year timescale—to after the 2024 diet—probably is too long. I think that you are right that there are things that need to be addressed in the system now. I am as keen as anyone to see a clear plan that sets out how, in the short term, some of those recommendations can be taken forward to deal with the very real issues and challenges that have emerged, in particular, in the past two years.

Michael Marra: That is really useful. Thank you.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): Good morning to both witnesses. Your evidence so far has been really helpful.

An area in which there is probably broad consensus is the recommendations around the reform of inspections. I know that colleagues will have some general questions on that, but I will look specifically at reform of the inspections process in early learning and childcare. It is widely agreed that that sector is disproportionately assessed and that the inspection work could be far more efficient. Professor Muir recommended that there should be a shared inspections framework between the new inspectorate body and the Care Inspectorate. Given the fact that there are more than 200,000 young people in more than 8,000 registered early learning and childcare services in Scotland, it is obvious how the bureaucracy of assessment and inspection could be burdensome.

I have a very specific question on that. Education Scotland says on its website that it already has examples of stand-alone childcare facilities that have a Care Inspectorate representative on their inspection team from time to time. I am keen to know what a shared inspection framework would look like and whether the practice would be to inspect once and comprehensively rather than return again and again to early years settings.

Professor Muir: Mr Doris, you touch on an issue that came through strongly from the early learning and childcare sector, which is the extent to which the sector is "disproportionately subject" to inspection by both bodies, as I said in the report. I will respond by giving an example of how policy does not always align.

Last year, the Care Inspectorate produced a new inspection framework although, prior to Covid, it was working on a shared inspection framework. The notion of a shared inspection framework was that there would be a single inspection activity. I find it quite bamboozling that the Care Inspectorate was allowed to create a new inspection framework at a time when it was meant to be working with Education Scotland on a shared inspection framework, particularly when the early learning and childcare sector is working hard across the board—in independent and other settings—to embed the 1,140 hours of funded childcare.

It is one of the recommendations that I was quite tentative about because, as I said earlier, I was conscious that I had to be mindful of what was happening in the wider firmament, which includes the national care service outcomes, and how that might impact on the work of the Care Inspectorate. I did not go as far as saying that the work should be undertaken by the education inspectorate, but that is my personal view. The Care Inspectorate undertakes a statutory function, which is one of the reasons that there are sometimes delays, as Mr Marra well knows, and some of the statute requires to be amended. However, if the work that is done in early learning and childcare continues to be subject to as much inspection as has been the case, it is not sustainable, for the very reasons that Mr Doris cites.

In addition, I think that early learning and childcare has to be seen as a key player in the system, as part of a re-envisaging of the education system. At times, it worries me—as it did when I was the senior chief inspector of schools—that primary and secondary teachers seem to value what is happening from years zero to five less and that they think that children really start learning only when they go to primary school. I think that we all know, and research shows, that the six most important years in a young person's life are those up to the age of five. That is the start of the learner journey. I would like to see the profile of early learning and childcare enhanced significantly in any re-envisaging of education in the future.

You are right that the reform of inspection should look closely at what can be done to lessen the burden and reduce—dare I say it—unnecessary inspection. There are models—risk-based models and so on—that can be applied so that early learning and childcare centres can get on with the job that they are expected to do instead of having to respond, sometimes twice a year, to inspections coming down the road. Inspections are all taken very seriously, and they create a lot of disruption to the flow of learning; that is the reality.

Bob Doris: That is helpful. I have a relatively brief—I hope—follow-up question. What came through strongly in the report was your surprise that the Care Inspectorate produced its own revised framework when it was working collaboratively with Education Scotland. I will leave the question of why that would be the case sitting there.

You seem to be quite clear about the need for a shared, supportive inspection framework that would be combined and integrated. It would involve a seamless, inspect-once process, so the skills mix would have to be appropriate. You said that you would probably favour a new inspectorate body on the education side of things leading on that. You also acknowledged the need for legislative change because there are statutory duties in relation to inspections of early learning and childcare settings. That is helpful. My understanding is that the Government will bring forward its proposals in that respect before the summer.

Would it be possible to leave that open? As long as a lead agency—be it the new education inspectorate or the Care Inspectorate—does a combined inspection, with a multidisciplinary team with the appropriate skills mix going into an establishment, could there be a joint statutory duty in that regard? I think that practitioners will not care whether it is the new education inspectorate or the Care Inspectorate, but they will want it to be proportionate, supportive and not bureaucratic. Do you have any additional thoughts on that or on the Scottish Government's timescale, details of which are likely to emerge before the summer?

Professor Muir: The kind of model that you suggest is very much what I have in mind. One of the reasons why I suggested that the function should reside within the education inspectorate is that it has a long history of having multidisciplinary teams inspecting all manner of educational establishments. You are right—the critical point is that the expertise and credibility of those who are undertaking the inspection is recognised by those who are on the receiving end. The model that you suggest should be at the heart of the process.

With regard to what that model and the joint inspection framework might look like, it is clear from my engagements with folk in early learning and childcare that they have a good understanding of what they are trying to do. It goes back to the basic point in my report: we need to start to recognise better the expertise that resides within the various sectors of education and use that to support the inspection framework, and to support policy and changes to it, much more than we currently do.

Bob Doris: Would a summer timescale be reasonable?

Professor Muir: Looking at all my recommendations, there could be an early move on the creation of the independent inspectorate body. Graham Donaldson is much more experienced in inspection activities than I am, but I certainly saw that. In some of the discussions that we had with the expert panel, it was felt strongly that the creation of the inspectorate could be moved on quickly. Going back to Mr Marra's point about the pace of some of the changes, there are things that can be done very quickly, and that is one of them.

11:00

Professor Donaldson: I echo that. I was slightly surprised at the Government's response. I thought that it would move quickly on taking inspection out of Education Scotland because it could be done quickly and, to pick up Mr Marra's point, that independent, external entity could then be part of the engine that drives change and could ask hard questions of the process as it goes through. There is a case for that.

I will say a wee word of caution on early years inspection. I was the head of the inspectorate when we introduced early years inspection, which had not been done previously, and there is a distinction between regulation and inspection. The Care Inspectorate is a regulator that deals with important issues such as infection control. A regulator has to do all sorts of stuff that requires a frequency of visit that you do not need when you are examining young people's broader educational experience. The issue is soluble but it is complex. A possibility would be to do something with multidisciplinary teams with, perhaps, visits to top up the regulation side rather than big set-piece inspections. The distinction between a regulator and an inspector is important.

Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): I have been listening with great interest all morning. A lot of what you said resonates with my experience and that of the teachers I speak to. I welcome the fact that mainstreaming of the learner voice throughout the educational landscape is at the heart of the report. Teachers and parents have wanted that for a long time and we do not always see it.

I will carry on asking about inspections and open that topic up a wee bit. Having been through inspections, I declare an interest. The process can be, and often is, stressful. It can cause enormous anxiety and extra burdens on schools and pupils. How can the school inspection system be more supportive of continuing quality improvement ? How do we make it so that it is not just an event that happens, which people put everything into and then recover from? How does inspection become more integral to quality improvement?

Professor Muir: Over a number of years, the inspectorate has brought in associate assessors. Graham Donaldson introduced that practice when he was a senior chief. Those assessors are practitioners from the system who are trained by HMI and, after a period of probation, accompany inspectors on inspection not within their own local authority areas but more widely. I know from speaking to many associate assessors that extending that opportunity for them to see inspectors in operation provides one of the best professional learning exercises they can undertake.

There is something about having an inspection process that actively encourages the involvement of practitioners in the system, whether headteachers or—dare I say it?—local authority officials as well as practising teachers. In my time in the inspectorate—I am sure that it is the same for Graham Donaldson—we found that to be a positive way of sharing standards and reassuring the rest of the system that inspectors were empathetic, that they understood and that they always set the inspection in the context of the school. Things like that can be done.

We can also share good practice. Over the years, we had a series of reports every three years—the improving Scottish education reports—which set out examples of good practice that teachers and headteachers could consider. Those reports were two-fold in what they did. As well as sharing good practice, they helped to identify what Graham Donaldson touched on earlier: the issues that needed to be resolved in education. They became an important driver for policy change.

As I said earlier, an independent body that is trusted and has the confidence of teachers and wider society is a good source through which policy can be informed by what is happening on the ground. As inspectors, we were up to speed with what was happening on the research front, although, again, more could probably be done to research what is happening out there. That goes back to Michael Marra's earlier point about how we know whether things are working well and the timescale over which that happens.

Part of my thinking about the creation of a national agency for Scottish education is the notion that it would have a responsibility for bringing together the think-tank thinking that is out there in the system with the research—possibly even commissioning that—in areas that are being identified as not working as well as they might, or in looking at what is coming over the horizon and how we prepare for that. A number of things in the system just now could be replicated or enhanced in order to remove some of the fear factor about inspections.

Of course, the bottom line is that folk would rather not be inspected. What that then comes down to is who the inspectors are and how they operate. Even in my time there—Graham Donaldson may have more to say—we worked hard to appoint the right folk to the role of inspector. I used the word "empathy". We were both involved in a lot of interviewing of inspectors, and that was one of the qualities that I looked for—somebody who could go into what was sometimes quite a challenging context, empathise and put themselves in the shoes of the headteacher or the teachers, as Kaukab Stewart and Bob Doris were.

I do not know whether Graham Donaldson has any other suggestion.

Professor Donaldson: Broadly, I agree. The challenge, even in good inspection, is that there is always going to be a degree of stress. For any of us, somebody coming in from outside creates a degree of stress. That is going to happen, but it should not be oppressive. When inspection becomes oppressive, everyone freezes and it becomes about, "How do we get these folk off our backs?" The more we create a context in which inspection moves towards being done with teachers rather than to them, the more likely we are to improve things for children. The more oppressive it is, the more people will try to hide their problems and what is not working.

The context that we create must be more about somebody coming in from outside who has a lot of expertise from having seen lots of stuff elsewhere, or who is a fellow professional who is teaching at the time, and who can give the school a view, which can combine with its own internal evaluation and assessment of what is needed. Good inspection does not tell us that there is a problem, although, obviously it will do that; it heads problems off. If an inspection is working well, it identifies things that are emerging, rather than telling the blindingly obvious afterwards and saying that something is not working.

As Professor Muir quoted in the report, I was asked to undertake a review of the inspectorate in Wales, Estyn. Like those of the Office for Standards in Education, its inspections were very external and very heavily driven. The report that I put in, which was called "A Learning Inspectorate", was designed to turn that on its head and say that inspection is about learning, inspectors need to learn and we should see the inspection process as a learning process. Estyn has completely changed its approach to inspection and has adopted that, which is much more in tune with the kind of reform that is taking place in Wales just now.

When that new independent inspectorate is set up, therefore, one of the big questions is about getting the culture right from the start. Whoever heads it up will have to have a good, strategic understanding of the role that inspection can and should play in helping kids to get the best possible deal in Scottish schools, because that is what inspection is for.

Kaukab Stewart: I agree with a lot of what you said, especially on the make-up of the inspectors. We should be mindful of the need to have people who have not been out of the classroom for too long and who have credibility among the workforce. It is easy to forget what teaching is like, so we need to retain that connection.

On mainstreaming the learner's voice and wanting to put learners and teachers at the heart of everything, one student said:

"I think if students had an opportunity to be involved in the inspections it would look a lot different".

I want to explore that. How can we incorporate that in an inspection system? Is there scope for young people to co-design a future inspection system or its remit?

Professor Muir: Absolutely. To an extent, there is a degree of involvement of children and young people in inspections at the moment. Questionnaires go out, and inspectors have discussions with groups of children and young people. However, you are right, and you are really making a case for recommendation 1. All of that is part of the discussion that we need to have about the entirety of the education system. As Graham Donaldson says, if we want an inspectorate and recognise that there is value in having one, we need to think about how we want it to operate and who it is for. As you say, bringing in the voice of children and young people is critical to that.

Looming over the horizon, we have the incorporation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. I talk a lot in my report about a culture and mindset shift. There are already some strong moves in rights respecting schools in Scotland, but having the UNCRC embedded in schools will call into question how teachers operate, their values and how they engage with children and young people. Given that children and young people are the users of the education service, that will also raise the question of what they want from it.

As I said, some of the comments that have come through that do not appear in my report but appear in the report that was produced by Cathy McCulloch and her colleagues at the Scottish Children's Parliament are fascinating. Some of them are very reassuring, but some of them are deeply worrying as well. In a sense, that is part of the reason why I think that we need to take this window of opportunity to review what we want the system to look like for the next generation.

Kaukab Stewart: There is a big area to explore there.

I have one final question. School inspectors will assess schools, and you recommend that they should be completely independent, but who will inspect the inspectors?

Professor Muir: I will pass to Graham Donaldson on that, because he has much more experience than I have on the issue.

Professor Donaldson: The integrity of inspection has to do with its credibility. In a sense, inspectors are inspected by the extent to which

they have a positive impact on Scottish education. Of course, the Parliament and ministers will look at how well the inspectorate is fulfilling the functions that have been set for it. It is interesting that Ken Muir's report talks about whether the inspectorate should report to the Parliament and have that kind of role. There are pros and cons in relation to that, which obviously need to be talked through. However, fundamentally, inspection operates in the public arena and, at the end of the day, inspectors are responsible to the Parliament for the role that they play in Scottish education.

I suppose that I would say this, but my personal view is that over the past 10 years, there has been an absence of that kind of external commentary on how Scottish education has been performing. I have certainly not been aware of it. It is very important that we have that because, if we do not, we get evaluation by who shouts the loudest or by anecdote. We need something that is systematic and built in and which consistently provides reflection back to the system. If inspectors do not do that well, you will have to tell them.

Kaukab Stewart: I am sure that we will.

11:15

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): I have found the conversation about the inspectorate—particularly the question about who the inspector should be—to be very interesting. Given what has just been said and remarks in your report, Professor Muir, about the need to make greater use of peer review processes and for inspectors to have recent first-hand classroom experience, does that all point towards a system in which the ideal inspectorate is largely staffed by teachers who are on a three-year or five-year secondment? If we want there continuously to be people with very recent classroom experience, people cannot be in post as inspectors for a particularly long period of time, because they will get further away from the last time they were in the classroom. I think that that is an attractive proposal. Does that not lead us to say that the inspectorate should be seconded teachers on short-term contracts?

Professor Muir: I think that we have moved towards that to a degree with the introduction of associate assessors, which I talked about earlier. However, continuity of experience is an issue. I was in the inspectorate for 18 years, and I learned a lot in that time. Sharing longer-term experience through the permanence of my role as a full-time permanent inspector benefited the associate assessors.

There is already a bit of the mix that you have suggested. As I said earlier, I think that the balance needs to be much more towards bringing folk from the system into inspection activity. That does not necessarily mean that all inspectors need to be on a three-year or five-year term, because there are benefits in part of the cohort being longer term and seeing patterns of change, for example. As the improving Scottish education reports suggest, it is not just about change over a few years; it is about how change takes place over a longer period. A degree of continuity is therefore needed, but the principle and the balance that you suggest are not far off what an ideal inspectorate would look like.

Ross Greer: Does Professor Donaldson have any thoughts on the make-up of the inspectorate workforce?

Professor Donaldson: As Ken Muir has said, it is about balance. In my experience, some very good teachers make very poor inspectors. In a sense, inspection is a profession that grows out of the teaching profession, but it has its own set of skills. It is about evidence and not saying, "I'm watching you teach, and I wouldn't have taught that way. Therefore, you're not good." A good inspector understands the context that they are dealing with, looks for evidence, engages heavily with the young people and works in a genuinely collaborative way with whoever in the school they are dealing with. The balance has to be got right.

Teams with skilled evaluators—that is what we are talking about—who can help to work with leading professionals who are brought in and getting the balance right seem to me to be the model. That is very close to the model that Scotland was developing towards some time ago.

Ross Greer: Are there elements of the inspectorate's role and the inspection process that would be better moved to regional improvement collaboratives or even to local authorities and conducted entirely through a peer review process, rather than by seconded teachers who have become inspectors, or inspectors who have come in through some other way? Should elements be removed from the inspection process and taken into a purely peer review space? Are there any areas that that would be more appropriate for?

Professor Muir: I think that the notion of peer review—seeing each other's work in different schools and different contexts—as an integral and normal part of the way in which we do the job is very important. Part of the problem—I have seen this many times—is that the better people know each other, the more difficult it is for them to engage in evaluative discussions. Being a critical friend is quite a hard role to play, and the friend bit sometimes trumps the critical bit in respect of the need for honest conversations.

There is a definite skill in being able to win the confidence of the people whom you are dealing with, but you are there for the children. One of the

issues with peer review is that the process can—ironically, given that everyone involved is a teacher—be about the teachers rather than the children.

As I said, the issue is complex. It is about getting the balance right and creating a culture that is about evidence. It sounds a bit trite, but if I was asked who my reference points were and for whom I was inspecting, I would say that I am inspecting for the children. I am not inspecting for the ministers or the Parliament, or for teachers or the profession. If necessary, if the evidence points in that direction, hard messages may have to be given to any of those groups.

Peer review should simply be a part of how we do things, but in addition we need something that helps to provide an external perspective, with more distance from the day-to-day stuff. That can sometimes allow us to spot things that have not been spotted. Sometimes, I am really surprised. There are some schools—I will not name them—where I have been horrified at what was happening, yet the local authority either condoned the situation or did nothing about it. How could that happen? It took someone coming in from the outside to say, "This is not right—it can't go on."

It is a question of balance. In creating the new inspectorate, the types of issues that you raise, around the strategy and the role that inspectors play in the system, are exactly those that need to be discussed. My own view is that I would not have inspectors grading schools; that was my recommendation to the inspectorate in Wales, and it has dropped grading. With grading, the inspection becomes all about the grade and not about the children or the learning from the process.

Ross Greer: Thank you, Professor Muir. In that section of the report, you raise quite a challenging question: to whom is the inspectorate accountable? Is it Parliament or Government, or some mix of the two? From my reading of it—correct me if I have totally misinterpreted your meaning—your intention is much more to have direct parliamentary accountability, in the same way as we have for some of the commissioners who are appointed by Parliament.

Is there not a need, to some extent, for Government to set a strategic direction? For example, in recent years, we have gone through the process of embedding LGBT-inclusive education and practices in all schools. Is the inspectorate not exactly the type of body that we would want to ensure that something like that had indeed been implemented? Is there a need, therefore, for Government to set a strategic direction—to say to the inspectorate, "For the next five years, it's very important that this is part of your inspection programme, because we've set this as a priority for all schools, with no exceptions"?

Professor Muir: The inspectors inspect in that context, because that is what is expected of schools. One of the ways in which we did that—certainly in my time and in Graham Donaldson's time as inspector—was by undertaking not inspections of schools and establishments but thematic inspections.

We talked earlier about thematic inspections of child protection where there are particular areas of concern—that is, or was, part and parcel of the inspection process anyway—and thematic inspections of teacher education. Strategic policy areas that are set by ministers could very much be part of such an inspection. However, what ministers could ask of the inspectorate would depend on the arrangements for the governance of the new inspectorate body. At present, for example, the inspectorate does not inspect initial teacher education—that comes as a request from ministers to undertake a thematic review of that aspect. The same could be applied to any of the strategic policy areas.

Ross Greer: If the intention is for the Government still to set the strategic direction of the inspectorate in some respects, how different is the governance structure that you envisage? You have made points around direct accountability to Parliament. What are you looking for in accountability terms that is not in place as part of the current model?

Professor Muir: In suggesting that a non-ministerial office or a national body take on the role, I am trying to make the new inspectorate part of the process of building trust and confidence in the education system. As I said earlier, that has waned.

I was trying to make the point that the system as a whole, including the stakeholders in it, should have a body that they know will, as Graham Donaldson said, talk truth to power and will, without fear or favour, deliver hard messages when it needs to do so.

My feeling is that the public body options that I have looked at—a non-ministerial office or a national body—would give the inspectorate a degree of separation from the system; it would also give it a degree of credibility. I know that a new body would have to gain credibility, but that approach would give a degree of reassurance to stakeholders and users of the system that it would operate in a particular way and that folk could have more confidence in it, given that separation.

Ross Greer: Thank you both very much for that.

The Convener: I call Oliver Mundell, who is participating remotely. We will not have the

privilege of seeing Oliver, because he has broadband problems; we will only hear him.

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): I want to go back briefly to the SQA. Professor Muir has said that problems in the SQA were becoming visible before Covid. Does it undermine trust in Scottish education when the person with ministerial oversight continued to say, right up until June 2021, that they had full confidence in that organisation?

Professor Muir: As Graham Donaldson said in one of his responses, the work of an examination and qualifications body is particularly challenging. It is inevitable that, from time to time, such a body does not get things right or is perceived as having not got things right.

The SQA has been subject to a lot of scrutiny, and rightly so. A decision has emerged from that scrutiny that the body should be replaced simply because trust and confidence in it has, in part, been lost. As I said, it is a real challenge for any examination and qualifications body to maintain full confidence during a period of significant change. The SQA has had to be very responsive to the challenges that it has faced.

In part, my proposals are trying to go some way towards rebuilding some of the trust and confidence that have been lost not only in the SQA but more generally, across the board, in how we have grappled with the challenges that we have faced. Those challenges have been faced not just in the past couple of years, but—I said this in one of my earlier responses; I do not know whether you heard it—since the introduction of the national qualifications, a number of years ago, which was not seen to be delivering as intended on the philosophy of curriculum for excellence.

Although I am sure that the SQA would say that it has attempted to ensure that the national qualifications accord with that philosophy, the firm view in the system is that they do not—hence the cabinet secretary's call for a review of the NQs.

11:30

Oliver Mundell: I hear what you are saying and I respect your answer, but we have had problems for years. In the previous parliamentary session, our predecessor committee raised concerns about the independence of the inspectorate, we have had repeated concerns about the SQA, and lots of the problems that you identify are well known among the teaching profession. Therefore, it is about how we have confidence that the Government is actually going to take those things forward and build that trust, when it has spent years trying to say that everything is okay, that those are not real problems and that everything could be sorted if only people asked less difficult questions. Do you have confidence that—[*Inaudible*.]

Professor Muir: I did not hear the last point, Mr Mundell.

The Convener: Can you repeat the last question, Oliver?

Oliver Mundell: Do you have confidence that the Government has taken the message on board? Should it have taken an OECD review and your report for the Government to recognise the significant issues?

Professor Muir: No, I do not think that it should. As I said earlier, one of the intended values of my report—as well as of the documents that were issued to accompany my report—is that the SQA will use it as a mirror to reflect on how it plans to go forward, given its stay of execution until 2024. I have made it clear that, with some degree of urgency, the SQA needs to reflect on the three areas that I talk about in the report—the governance, leadership and culture of the organisation. I hope that it will do that in a prompt fashion, for the very reasons that we have discussed throughout this session—those children and young people have been most affected by the changes that are taking place in the education system and in society more generally. We need a qualifications and examination body that commands the confidence of everybody who uses it, particularly the learners.

Oliver Mundell: The point that I am trying to tease out is that there is also a cultural issue among Scottish Government ministers, who have exercised very poor oversight over those bodies. It is wrong just to try to shift all of the buck on to the SQA, as dreadful as its performance has been. Surely, if the education system was working well, the Scottish Government ministers should have identified sooner that something was going wrong. Are there not accountability and cultural issues there?

Professor Muir: Scottish ministers are accountable to committees such as this committee, so I did not feel that it was an area that I could refer to directly in my report. I have tried to identify where I think that there are issues. Clearly, if MSPs feel that the SQA needs to be held to account, there are mechanisms for doing that, including through this particular committee.

Oliver Mundell: That gets to the nub of the issue. We have brought in the OECD to work to a very restricted remit, and the Scottish Government brought you in, but neither you nor the OECD have really felt able to challenge the culture at the heart of the Scottish Government. The lack of ministerial oversight has allowed the issues that you identified to continue for five years, when Opposition parties across the Parliament have

been calling for an independent inspectorate and raising concerns about leadership at the SQA. We have seen continued reboots of curriculum for excellence, but nothing seems to have changed. What makes you confident that this time is going to be any different?

Professor Muir: In my report, I have set out a number of recommendations that I think will drive that change. It is for everybody, at all levels in the system—from ministers right the way through to teachers in schools—to consider those recommendations and find a way forward. That is why the next step has to be a conversation around what we want the education system to look like.

Oliver Mundell: Would that not take us back to before the OECD report and your report, which, in some respects, have already set us off in a direction? Would it not be a more genuine offer to teachers and front-line practitioners to say that we value their input from the start, rather than to put so many pieces in place and then say that we need to have a conversation?

Professor Muir: That is one of the reasons why I said in my opening statement that I engaged in an extensive round of engagements with all stakeholders in the education system. I hope that that will be replicated when the national conversation takes place, and I hope that that will take place promptly, with a degree of urgency.

Oliver Mundell: Okay. I will leave it there.

Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): I thank the witnesses for joining us today. I know that it has been quite a long session, but I have a few questions.

Council leaders and directors of education have been mentioned. Could you say a bit more about how you envisage the role of local authorities fitting with the proposed national agency in order to support and drive improvement at local and regional levels? How important are clusters, collaboration and a sense of shared identity, support and work in schools?

Professor Muir: I will refer back to what I said earlier about regional collaboration. In the current system, many teachers see regional improvement collaboratives as individual bodies and entities. I suggest in my report that the resourcing from local authorities and the central agency, Education Scotland, should be reconfigured so that there is more local and regional control over the agenda and the financing. One of the criticisms relating to regional improvement collaboratives that I heard from local authorities is that one-year funding is provided, which limits quite significantly the extent to which local authorities can offer longer-term support where they feel that that is necessary, because there is uncertainty about where future funding will come from.

The bottom line is that local authorities have a statutory responsibility to effect improvement and support change in the education system. I hope and expect there to be closer and more consistent collaboration across the country between local authorities and the national agency that I am proposing than has perhaps been the case so far. We cannot have a system in which, as was reported to me, support is provided on the basis of who you know in either the local authority or the support agency—in this case, Education Scotland. As I said earlier, the approach needs to be driven much more from the bottom up. Teachers should say, "In order to deliver high-quality learning and teaching, this is what I need," and then the mechanisms and infrastructure should be there for that to happen.

We should have a much more bespoke and responsive system than the one that we seem to have in some areas. I have to caveat that by saying that there are a number of schools and teachers who get very good support through collaboration between the local authority and Education Scotland, but the system needs to be more equitable than it appears to be at the moment.

Stephanie Callaghan: I should declare an interest in that I am a councillor on South Lanarkshire Council. You would say that there are good examples of collaboration that we could build on.

Professor Muir: Absolutely. That came through, to some extent, in the report on the regional improvement collaboratives and in other reports, including a recent report by the University of Glasgow on the West Partnership. There are isolated examples and, when you scratch below the surface to see why collaboration is working well—which is what I did—you tend to find that there is a commitment from all parties. That is important.

I know that the birth of regional improvement collaboratives in some local authority areas was not without its difficulties and that there were varying degrees of commitment from all parties to making that approach work. However, the concept of regional and local collaboration has to be the way forward, and it is the only way in which teachers can have confidence that their needs will be responded to in a bespoke way, as opposed to through some kind of national or regional improvement collaborative offer that does not necessarily meet the needs of a hard-pressed primary 5 teacher in a particular primary school.

Stephanie Callaghan: That brings me to my next question. You have spoken about the need for the national agency to be responsive and reactive. Looking again at the role of the regional improvement collaboratives, I am interested in

what you see as the priorities for creating that on-going collaborative environment. How can we ensure that the local authorities, the teachers, the parents and, most important, the young people—including our young people with additional support needs, who make up quite a big proportion of pupils—can be involved in that? How can we maximise their influence and ensure that wellbeing and rights are a central focus?

Professor Muir: You are talking about the kind of model that the system would want to have, and two factors need to be in place to make all of that work. One is about control and one is about resource—the two elements are related to each other. Part of my thinking about the national agency—which involves the co-sponsorship model that is applied to Public Health Scotland, which I spoke about earlier—is a sense that it should allow more control and more effective use of resource in order to provide support at the local level than might be the case at the moment. Having control of the agenda in a way that enables people to reflect local and regional needs—which does not necessarily involve creating voluminous regional improvement collaborative plans centrally—and having greater control of the resource, which is fundamentally about staffing and finance, would mean that the needs of young people and teachers could be more appropriately responded to in a proactive way, as opposed to the worst practice, which is reflected in some of the feedback around regional improvement collaboratives at the moment.

Having said that, there is some good practice on the part of regional improvement collaboratives, and we need to build on that. As I said, scratching below the surface of what is working well, we can see that that involves commitment, a feeling that there is a degree of empowerment over the agenda and the application of adequate resources to make that work.

Stephanie Callaghan: That is helpful. I have a short final question for both of you. What is your top ask of us if we are to facilitate the positive changes that our young people want and deserve?

Professor Muir: I will start, and Graham Donaldson can have time to think about that question.

There is a lot of good stuff happening in Scottish schools, but it is not reflected in what goes out into the public domain. For years, I have had a bee in my bonnet about the fact that most of what people hear about the system is more negative than positive, even though, as you will all know from your visits to schools, some wonderful stuff is being done. Therefore, anything that this committee can do to extol the virtues of the positive things that are happening in education in Scotland would go a long way towards helping to move the system forward in a positive way. It is not a system that is broken; it is a system that should have enough confidence to look forward and build on the good practice that exists, but that should be made more visible and translatable across the board, so that all young people can benefit from it.

Stephanie Callaghan: I could not agree more.

11:45

Professor Donaldson: With the benefit of my great age, I can say that, in the early years of the Parliament, it was interesting to see the extent to which parliamentarians had a common sense of purpose, which was reflected in the education debate as we spoke about earlier. I hope that, as we move forward, we can re-establish not a cosy consensus but that kind of constructive engagement around the issues that really matter for young people and that—a fond hope, I know—we can keep the politics confined. I feel strongly that, not only in Scotland but across the world, the nature of what happens in our schools and how our young people learn will change dramatically in the next five, 10 or 15 years, and that change will be driven by all sorts of forces that will disrupt our assumptions about what is the right thing to do and what the future will look like. It is important that the Parliament has a constructive engagement with people's longer-term strategic thinking about how Scotland and our young people can grow, develop and flourish in the quite febrile world that they are living in and will continue to live in. Those young people are our future.

My plea would be: do not micromanage; be as strategic as possible.

Stephanie Callaghan: Fantastic. I hope that our committee can get that positive message out there.

The Convener: Our session has gone on quite a bit longer than I promised, but our witnesses have given us a lot to think about. I thank you both for that and for your time this morning.

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

11:47

Meeting continued in private until 12:18.

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