OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Education, Children and Young People Committee

Wednesday 20 September 2023

Session 6

The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Wednesday 20 September 2023

CONTENTS

EDUCATION, CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE COMMITTEE
23rd Meeting 2023, Session 6

CONVENER

*Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
*Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab)
*Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green)
*Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con)
*Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
*Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)
*Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD)
*Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Peter Bain (Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment)
Kirsty Flanagan (Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy)
Professor Louise Hayward (Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment)
Dr Douglas Hutchison (Glasgow City Council)
Carrie Lindsay (Association of Directors of Education in Scotland)
Professor Kenneth Muir (Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Pauline McIntyre

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Education, Children and Young People Committee

Wednesday 20 September 2023

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:00]

Pre-Budget Scrutiny

The Convener (Sue Webber): Good morning, and welcome to the 23rd meeting in 2023 of the Education, Children and Young People Committee. Our first item of business is an evidence session on local government spending on education and children's services, to help inform the committee's pre-budget scrutiny. I welcome Dr Douglas Hutchison, president of the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland and executive director of education, Glasgow City Council; Carrie Lindsay, executive officer, ADES; and Kirsty Flanagan, director of finance, Argyll and Bute Council, representing the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy local government directors of finance in Scotland. Thank you for joining us this morning. We have a lot of ground to cover, so I will move straight to questions from members.

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): Good morning, and thank you for joining us. I have a question for the whole panel. Arguably, it is a framing question. I am a member of the Finance and Public Administration Committee, so I am interested in the specifics of how the process for the Verity house agreement will work. To frame that, Scottish Government financing is deeply affected by the late decision making of the United Kingdom Government. You may have seen the recent letter from the Welsh Government complaining about the late UK autumn statement. That has also had an effect on the Scottish Government—the statement has been pushed back to 22 November, which makes the original planned budget date of 14 December unrealistic.

What is your understanding thus far of how the financial elements will work in the context of the flow-through and late decision making and processes of the UK Government? Anyone can go first. Perhaps Dr Hutchison might like to do so, but I know that Carrie Lindsay and Kirsty Flanagan will have an interest.

Dr Douglas Hutchison (Glasgow City Council): I have to be honest and say that I am not particularly familiar with the question. I have a broad understanding of the Verity house agreement and its principles, but my understanding is that we are still working through those. I suspect that it is more likely to be a question to direct to the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, which would be involved in discussions on behalf of local authorities. I have a broad understanding of Verity house and its implications, but my understanding is that we are still working through it. I am not in a position to comment on any late decisions from the UK Government, and I am not sure whether Kirsty Flanagan is.

Kirsty Flanagan (Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy): At the moment, as part of the Verity house agreement, we are looking at the in-year transfers and the transfers from all the portfolios, so we are interested to see how that progresses. There is also the presumption of no ring fencing or direction, so I am not quite sure how the UK Government position affects that. I suppose that the overall quantum of funding affects that. We just need to see the working out of the Verity house agreement and how having no ring fencing or direction will work for the total quantum of finances that will come to Scotland.

I agree that the late announcement of funding puts on extreme pressure to pull together a budget at a late stage. One-year budgets are not helpful either. For some time, we have been pushing for multiyear budgets that would allow us to plan ahead for financial sustainability. The one-year budgets are not helpful at all.

Michelle Thomson: I think that that is commonly understood. It came up in yesterday's Finance and Public Administration Committee meeting that, largely, the UK Government has been working to a one-year budget process, which flows through to the Scottish Government. I do not want to put words in your mouth, but it sounds to me as though, in the strategic review group's understanding of the detail of both of those things, it is still fairly early doors. It is not just about the initial budget settlement; it is about in-year changes, of which we have seen quite a few, that affect and could have an impact on ring fencing, because there is a lack of visibility and transparency in relation to money coming through. Am I putting words in your mouth?

Kirsty Flanagan: No, I agree with that.

Michelle Thomson: Okay. Carrie, you can have the final comment on that.

Carrie Lindsay (Association of Directors of Education in Scotland): Most things have probably been said, but I will reiterate that, where discussions need to happen at local authority level, if anything is late, that is challenging. If you do not know what your quantum is, you are not quite sure yet what your outcomes are in the outcomes framework for the Verity house

agreement, and you are not quite sure what the funding conditions will be, the lateness of that always has an impact. Things are perhaps not as clear as they could be if you had a longer lead-in time.

Michelle Thomson: Thank you.

The Convener: Ben Macpherson has questions on that theme.

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): Good morning, all. I will build on what my colleague Michelle Thomson asked about. Thinking back to before the Verity house agreement, in recent years, one of the main reasons for ring fencing and direction was because of political pressure being applied on the Scottish Government by Opposition parties and others to meet certain policy obligations that required local government to be a significant part—the main part—of that delivery. As we move on after the Verity house agreement, open up the flexibility and remove the ring fencing and direction—for clarity, I support that approach—what should be the Scottish Government's role if a local authority is failing to improve outcomes in an area of national priority such as education?

Dr Hutchison: In some ways, there has been reference to that question in one of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development reports. I think that it was the 2015 OECD report that said that the role of the Scottish Government in education is to set the overall strategic direction and policy direction, but delivery is done at local authority level, and where that national approach comes up short is in getting through the classroom door. That phrase might even be mentioned in the document.

Where there is a failure, there are various mechanisms in the system to address that. There is legislation under which the inspectorate can inspect a local authority if, for example, it is failing in its duties in relation to education. That has rarely been used, but it is available. Equally, Audit Scotland has carried out its best value reviews, which, again, highlight where there are weaknesses. There are various safety mechanisms in the system that are available to Scottish ministers to direct, for example.

Overall, given that the Government is elected on the basis of a manifesto, it is right that it delivers on that manifesto. We live and operate in a parliamentary democracy, so it is right that that happens. The Government delivers its manifesto commitments and sets the policy direction, and that delivery is local. Where that delivery is failing or where a local education authority is failing, it would be appropriate for the Scottish Government to intervene, and that can be done in the various ways that I have outlined.

Ben Macpherson: I am familiar with the best value report process and the considerations thereafter around how the Government and, in this instance, the education inspectorate should engage with the specific local authority, both at a political level and an official level. It seems that you have outlined that that is the right course for Scottish ministers and for parliamentary pressure to be directed.

The Convener: Carrie, do you want to come in?

Carrie Lindsay: Yes, thanks. The word "failing" is quite a pejorative term, and there are probably different challenges for different local authorities at different points for a range of reasons. Every local authority will have improvement processes already in place and, if there are areas that are not reaching the targets, the Verity house agreement and the outcomes framework will be a way of giving support, where that is required, if people are finding that challenge in particular areas. In ADES, we support local authorities in that way. If people in a local authority ask for support, we would provide that very much on a collaborative basis. Education Scotland—either itself or through the regional improvement collaboratives—has a role in that. We have quite good systems in place to allow that to happen. The Scottish Government needs to look at the outcomes, and there are things that it can use, as Douglas Hutchison outlined, if it feels that something further is required.

Ben Macpherson: Thank you, both, for your reflections. That is helpful.

The Convener: Pam Duncan-Glancy has a brief supplementary.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): I thank the panel. Given the Verity house agreement, do you have any concerns about the overall quantum available to you for education locally? Are you aware already of stretched budgets and the use of other budgets, such as pupil equity funding, to plug holes that exist in core budgets across the piece?

The Convener: Carrie, do you want to come in, or is that more for Kirsty Flanagan?

Carrie Lindsay: Kirsty Flanagan may want to go first.

Kirsty Flanagan: We are concerned that budgets are stretched right across local government. There just is not enough budget to do everything that we want to do. The Verity house agreement is a positive step because of the relaxing of ring fencing and direction. One example of ring fencing in education is absolute teacher numbers. You could get into a situation where that is not providing value for money or efficiency and local authorities are trying to maintain an absolute number for a declining

school roll. The overall quantum of funding, not just education funding, needs to be looked at. The relaxing of ring fencing might help, but we still need to keep a focus on outcomes. Councils were doing that prior to the introduction of ring fencing for the absolute teacher numbers.

The Convener: Members will ask questions on that specific topic later, Kirsty, so we can get into more detail then.

Pam, are you okay with that response? I am just checking.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I would be keen to hear from Dr Hutchison or—

The Convener: I will move on to Bill Kidd now. Thank you.

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): On education spend and its protection, other than free school meals, does the panel have any examples of ring-fenced or earmarked funds where the Government has not uprated its contribution in line with inflation?

Kirsty Flanagan: Did you say "other than free school meals"? Free school meals is probably the best example of where we get an allocation to implement a policy but it is never sustainable in the long term. Free school meals is a perfect example, because all of us around the table know about the cost of living now and how it is increasing.

The Convener: We are looking for another example.

Bill Kidd: Any other example.

The Convener: Carrie Lindsay has something, I think.

Carrie Lindsay: I am thinking of the 1,140 hours of funded early learning and childcare, and the private, voluntary and independent sector payments for that. Due to inflation, the uplift for PVI payments has seemed to be necessary to keep that whole project going and deliver the 1,140 hours, but the budget does not match that. That is another example.

Bill Kidd: We know about the situation with free school meals, which Kirsty Flanagan mentioned, and whether the ring fencing has kept up with that. I just wanted to find out whether there are other areas such as the one that has been mentioned.

The Convener: We are powering through. Sticking to the subject of early learning and the ring fencing terminology, do you get a sense that the ring-fenced grants support the ELC cover that we need and the cost of delivering the expanded ELC offer?

Carrie Lindsay: There have been changes to the funding over the past three years in particular. As the models were put in place incrementally, it has taken some time for local authorities to have their absolute models in place. There is also a biannual survey of parents about what is required. There are then some changes, and some models are more expensive than others. For a quantum, therefore, it is quite difficult to continue to deliver an almost parent-led system where they are looking for particular things. There have been real challenges in delivering on that policy agenda. If we are to include two-year-olds and one-year-olds—we are not really clear about whether the Government will implement that policy—there would be big implications, as there would not be enough in that budget.

09:15

The Convener: Sticking with two-year-olds and one-year-olds, others might want to come in on this, but I have a question on the data sharing agreement between HM Revenue and Customs and the Department for Work and Pensions to identify the two-year-olds who are eligible for the ELC. What progress has been made in reaching those families? What are the anticipated costs and locations? How will all of that be funded within the envelope that we have?

Carrie Lindsay: Over the past three years, we have seen a significant increase in the two-year-old uptake. Of course, some parents of two-year-olds and one-year-olds do not want to take up their places. It would be helpful to see that information from the DWP. We have been asking for it for some time, because the information is available in England but we are not able to access it. There will definitely be an impact where there are families who, perhaps, were not aware that they were able to access the provision. All the budgets were aligned to the information that we were given on birth rates and the expected percentage uptake. We will now have a much firmer idea of the numbers, and that might have a significant implication.

The Convener: Is that data not yet available at local authority level?

Carrie Lindsay: It is just starting now.

The Convener: It is just starting to come through to you now.

Carrie Lindsay: Yes.

The Convener: Okay. That is fine.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I am interested in how you view the state of the PVI sector in early learning and childcare. What are the pressures? Perhaps Carrie could talk us through that first.

Carrie Lindsay: We cannot deliver the 1,140 hours policy without the PVI sector. We value those organisations because they are often much more flexible and can do different things because they are small, rather than large, organisations. There is absolutely no doubt that we want to work in partnership with them, but there are real challenges for them from costs including inflation, staffing costs and the minimum wage. They have been expected to be able to deliver a range of things that have made it challenging for them to produce business cases that stack up.

Another thing about the PVI sector is that some of the organisations are very small and do not have sustainable management committees because parents change often, which becomes a real problem because people come in who do not have the experience that is needed. We are now seeing childminding being brought in, as well.

From the local authority perspective, a lot is required to support people in the PVI sector to make sure that the quality of provision is acceptable. One of the recommendations now is that they have to be rated as "good" or better to stay in partnership with a local authority, so a lot is required from local authorities in supporting them. Sometimes, those costs are hidden: the PVI sector does not see the support because it is not monetary and does not come through to it as an amount per pupil or per child. The hidden costs are sometimes not recognised as much as they could be. That gives you a flavour of the situation.

Willie Rennie: Do you recognise that there is a significant difference between the fees that are paid for council nurseries and those that are paid in the PVI sector?

Carrie Lindsay: That is a hard question to answer, because of what I have just said. A whole range of things come from the local authority to the PVI sector—

Willie Rennie: Do they really amount to that difference?

Carrie Lindsay: The sectors have completely different set-ups and structures. Councils do not work on the same type of business case as the PVI sector does, so that is a challenging question to answer.

Willie Rennie: The outcome seems to be that the PVI sector is losing significant numbers of experienced staff. It is not able to retain them because the sector cannot pay rates that are competitive with other the rates of other organisations inside or outside the sector. They are really worried about the sector's future. Do you not recognise that?

Carrie Lindsay: That has always been said in all the time that I have been involved in early years provision, which is many years—

Willie Rennie: Does that make it any better?

Carrie Lindsay: I was going to go on to say that I do not see that happening in reality, as such. Providers often retain their staff through modern apprenticeships, for example, which we run through the PVI sector as well as in local authorities. Many local authorities have agreements with the colleges that enable them to support staffing so that providers can access enough staff.

In the system as it is currently set up, there are differences in payment structures—absolutely. That happens in lots of things.

Willie Rennie: To be honest, I am really disappointed by that response. Last year, Matthew Sweeney from COSLA acknowledged that there was a significant difference, and it was agreed, right at the beginning, between Government and local authorities that that would happen.

We see real threats to the sector now. The PVI bodies are getting staff, but they need to keep experienced staff. I worry about the integrity of bodies and that we will, perhaps, in the future get Care Inspectorate reports that indicate that we have not managed to keep up with the standards that you mentioned earlier. I am disappointed that you do not recognise that.

Carrie Lindsay: It is not that I do not recognise that there is a differential; I think that I said that I do. We are trying to make sure that we support the sector in a way that means that it can survive. As I said earlier, it is a partnership, so we need to work jointly to deliver. That is why a number of groups have looked at what we need to provide. It has been difficult to get a figure or an amount for what is required, or to determine whether it is just about staffing or about all the other things that are offered in order to retain organisations' ability to deliver their services.

The Convener: Dr Hutchison wants to come in to respond to some of those points, and I have a small supplementary.

Dr Hutchison: I just want to say, convener, in response to Mr Rennie's disappointment, that this is a discussion and argument that comes up annually when local authorities are required to set the sustainable rate. I absolutely acknowledge that there are significant differences between PVI and local authority rates.

Part of the reason for that is, in a sense, historical. If we were starting with a blank sheet for early years provision, there would be much more equity, but we did not start with a blank sheet. There were already partner providers and third

sector organisations: a range of organisations were providing early learning and childcare, and those organisations did not have the commitments that local authorities have in relation to pension funds and various other things, including the commitment to pay the real living wage. A differential that existed at the very beginning has almost become baked in. That makes the situation very challenging. These discussions and arguments come up every year. That is partly why there is a discussion about whether we should set a national sustainable rate.

Willie Rennie: You are absolutely right that the situation is "historical" and "baked in", but people's expectations of the PVI sector are almost exactly the same as they are of council nurseries. People expect the same service from both, when it comes to care and education. So, although you are right, that does not make the situation right. We need to work on a plan to bring them closer together, do we not? Do we need to bring them closer together?

Dr Hutchison: That is the issue that comes up annually in terms of agreeing a sustainable rate. Part of the discussion is about whether the rate should be set nationally, because that would be more likely to bring the sectors closer together, but that would be a significant task.

The Convener: I will ask specifically about the rates that local authorities pass down to the PVI sector. There is variation across local authorities in what they pay for over-twos and under-twos. You mentioned, and we know, that the cost for under-twos is higher in terms of ratios of staff.

There is a local authority—in fact, it is the one that we are sitting within the boundaries of: the City of Edinburgh Council—that pays the same, irrespective of the age of the child. I wonder how it can be perceived to be fair to put that pressure on the PVI sector when it is not getting the additional resource that is required to fund and support the under-twos sector.

Carrie Lindsay: It is difficult to comment on a particular local authority—

The Convener: It is not just about Edinburgh; we are seeing variation.

Carrie Lindsay: As I said in answer to Mr Rennie's question, other things are offered, as well as the sustainable rate. Some local authorities will offer teacher support while others will say that the teacher is part of the PVI sector and so is that sector's responsibility. There is a wide range of different ways in which people make up those costs and how they—

The Convener: They do so to justify the fact that they are not passing adequate funding on to the PVI sector.

Okay. I now have some—

Dr Hutchison: I am sorry, convener—I have a point to make about variations in funding. I moved from a local authority with a large rural hinterland to Glasgow City Council, which does not. The funding pressures are different. For example, if childcare is being provided in Ballantrae, there might be only three children, but two members of staff are still needed, so provision is proportionally more expensive in rural areas. I found that the PVI sector tended not to make provision up a glen or down in Ballantrae but to do so in centres of population.

The variations across the country are understandable, and are why there is a challenge in setting a national rate. There is a huge difference between a fairly efficient system such as that in Glasgow, where the early years centres are largely full and the staff ratios are efficient, and rural local authorities, where there is almost built-in inefficiency, because of there being smaller numbers of children for which numbers of staff are still required. That makes it more expensive.

The Convener: Thank you for those comments.

I am going to switch to primary and secondary schools now. We have had a look at some of the figures. What factors mean that, in real terms, the net spend on schools is planned to be higher this year than it was in 2019-20? As an adjunct to that, why is there what appears to be a planned reduction in the real-terms spend between 2022-23 and the year that we are in now, 2023-24? Are you able to take that one first, Kirsty?

Kirsty Flanagan: Yes, but I will have to get you to ask the second question again.

The net spend on schools is higher. We are living in a time of high inflation, so a big proportion of the expenditure on education—about half of it—is employee-related expenditure. Not only have there been significant pay rises, but we have had high levels of inflation in utilities costs and other costs that schools have to meet. Those are the reasons for the increase in spending.

What was your question about the real-terms spend?

The Convener: Why is there a planned reduction in the real-terms spend between 2022-23 and 2023-24?

Kirsty Flanagan: I am not sure whether I know—

The Convener: —if you quite get that question.

Kirsty Flanagan: I do not have the figures for that real-terms reduction in front of me.

The Convener: We have some data that sits behind that, Kirsty, but we will follow up on the

question in writing. That might be the best thing to do—unless Carrie wants to come in on either question.

Carrie Lindsay: I will come in on the reduction in primary school spend in particular. There has been a significant reduction in births across Scotland—some local authorities have had 500 or 600 fewer births a year over the past few years. The bulge from primary education is now in secondary education, so spend is higher for secondary schools. You will see that secondary school spend is still going up but primary school spend is coming down, because not as many children are attending primary school. It is less efficient for schools to try to manage budgets in that situation.

The Convener: Okay. Thank you. We will move to questions from my colleague, Ruth Maguire.

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): Thank you and good morning.

I would like to talk about teaching and other staffing costs. Kirsty Flanagan mentioned protecting teacher numbers. We have spoken before in the committee about the situation in which pupil rolls are falling in some local authority areas, yet they are expected to maintain teacher numbers. My local authority has also lost attainment challenge funding, which adds additional pressure. Can you speak a little bit about the opportunity costs of having to maintain teacher numbers and what that looks like for children and young people in schools where that is the case?

09:30

Kirsty Flanagan: I am not sure whether what I said earlier answers the question about the opportunity cost. If we are trying to maintain absolute teacher numbers, that is to the detriment of other services right across the local government portfolio. We are seeing costs in education increasing, but you will see a budget reduction in most other portfolios because they have to take the burden of the cost savings, due to the real-terms decrease in the overall quantum of funding.

We have education colleagues here; obviously, we want to maintain good schooling. If I compare maintaining current teacher numbers with the pupil to teacher ratio that we used to have, I would say that although the latter was not a perfect formula, it recognised the school roll.

Ruth Maguire: Maybe we can move on to reflections from ADES. Does Carrie Lindsay or Douglas Hutchison want to come in?

Dr Hutchison: I agree with Kirsty that the focus on absolute teacher numbers is a challenge. It has been done this year, and it was done previously when Mr Russell was the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, when there was a year during which we had to focus on absolute teacher numbers. It is difficult to see the logic of that in a local authority that has a declining roll, compared with a local authority like West Lothian Council, where there is an increasing roll and new schools are being built. Councils almost have falsely to keep supernumerary teachers because they have to focus on absolute teacher numbers. I struggle to see the logic of that. I can understand there being a pupil to teacher ratio: if there is a falling roll but councils are forced to keep teachers, the opportunity costs become clear.

I have been either a head of education or a director of education for 10 years. In almost every one of those 10 years—with the exception of the Covid years, when there seemed to be lots of money—I have been involved in reducing the budget in education and in having to find savings, because the council's overall budget has been reduced. If we protect teachers, the burden of savings falls on others: support-for-learning workers, educational psychologists, home-school liaison workers, technician support services and administration staff in school offices. There are a range of people without whom education services cannot function. If we protect one group, albeit that it is a very important and valued group, the burden of savings falls more heavily on others in education.

That is true of education and it is true of council services more generally, because education depends on other council services to operate. The burden of savings falls significantly more heavily on other parts of the council if education is protected. Obviously, as a director of education, I am happy that education is protected, but I also recognise the impact that that has on other services.

For example, in Scotland, there will hardly be a school that is more than 15 or 20 years old that does not have some kind of maintenance backlog. If we reduce budgets for other council services, we reduce the money that is available for repairs and renewals of our school buildings.

Ruth Maguire: You spoke about Glasgow City Council reducing its education budget. I know that there are other local authorities that have protected the education budget, even throughout these really challenging times. It would be good to hear what, within education, the money could be invested in and what that would look like for children and young people in the education system. To go back to the Verity house agreement and the priorities for us in relation to that, it would be interesting to hear your reflections on where that money might be invested and how that would benefit children and young people.

Carrie Lindsay: I am happy to say something on that. If a local authority is in the luxurious position of being able to maintain the education budget without having to offer lots up and it does not have teacher numbers to keep, there are lots of things that it can do, as some have. They have kept their teaching numbers, but they have also invested. It is about having that flexibility. A number of local authorities have put early years officers into their primary 1 classes to look at how they support communication and socialisation after Covid, which has been challenging in the early years. Some authorities have put in staff to support attendance, because, again, pupil attendance has been a bit challenging since Covid. People have used that budget or extra budget, if they have had it, to keep their teacher numbers and to give themselves the flexibility to use other members of staff who are not teachers.

Teachers are absolutely essential to the business of teaching and learning, but there are lots of other things that families, children and young people need support with. Another example is that authorities have invested more in counselling services, play therapy, art therapy and other support for young people who are really struggling and having a difficult time in school. Maintaining the education budget would give that type of flexibility.

Ruth Maguire: Thank you. That is helpful.

Generally, the pay of teachers and local government employees is subject to negotiations between COSLA, local authorities and trade unions. However, in recent years, the Scottish Government has stepped in to fund uplifts in pay. What role is there for the Scottish Government in relation to the pay of local authority workers?

The Convener: Kirsty first.

Ruth Maguire: Kirsty is smiling.

Kirsty Flanagan: It is an interesting question. Obviously, we are very much in the negotiations for non-teaching staff at the moment. The Verity house agreement outlines that the negotiations for non-teachers take place with COSLA and the trade unions. However, we are seeing pressure—there has been pressure from the Scottish Government—to increase pay.

As for the role of the Scottish Government, if it wants pay to be increased, we need additional funding to support that, because we have only so much money that we can put into the pay award. I know that additional funding was put into the teachers' pay award last year, and we got additional funding into our staff governance committee negotiations as well, which was helpful, but there is the on-going cost of that. We might get a one-year injection, but there is the inflationary aspect that gives us a bigger hit in future years.

Your question was about what role the Scottish Government plays in that. I am not entirely sure what role it should play in such negotiations, but I know that it has intervened in the past.

Ruth Maguire: Okay. Thank you. I do not know whether any of the other panel members wish to come in.

The Convener: Not on that one.

Ruth Maguire: Thank you. That was helpful.

Ben Macpherson: I want to build on what Ruth Maguire asked. The answer from Dr Hutchison and the elaboration from Carrie Lindsay on teacher numbers was really interesting and important. I want to be absolutely clear: you think that consideration, whether in our public discourse, media commentary or analysis, should be given to the pupil teacher ratio rather than teacher numbers. Was I correct in taking that as your overarching message?

Dr Hutchison: That is certainly my view. There is a logic to the pupil teacher ratio. If, collectively, we reach a decision that we should aspire to a particular ratio, whatever that is, that makes sense. As your pupil numbers decline, if you are in a falling roll situation because the population in that part of the country is declining, you will not need as many teachers, so, as teachers retire, leave the profession or whatever, they will not be replaced, but the pupil teacher ratio will be maintained.

However, if the focus is on absolute numbers, that does not make sense if you have a declining roll. One year, your numbers might go down—our primary numbers have gone down by several hundred, but secondary numbers in Glasgow have gone up by several hundred, so it has almost netted itself off. The main issue is where you have a declining roll situation. As was mentioned, there are things that are funded, but they are funded on a flat cash basis. The strategic equity funding, for example, is flat cash, as is the pupil equity funding. Therefore, if I could buy 10 teachers last year, with a pay rise, I will not be able to buy 10 teachers this year, but I will still be required to maintain teacher numbers as an absolute. That does not make sense. In broad terms, there is a logic to a focus on the pupil teacher ratio that people can understand. I struggle to understand the logic of absolute numbers.

Ben Macpherson: Thank you for that emphasis and clarification.

Kirsty Flanagan: I agree that there is a logic to the pupil teacher ratio over and above pupil numbers. The Verity house agreement talks about having a

"focus on the achievement of better outcomes".

I still think that the pupil teacher ratio is an input measure, rather than a focus on the outputs and outcomes. It is better than absolute teacher numbers, but there should be more of a focus on the outcomes.

The Convener: Carrying on the theme of teacher numbers and so on, I will bring in Willie Rennie.

Willie Rennie: Why do we still have so many teachers on short-term contracts? Who wants to answer that? Douglas, do you want to have a go?

Dr Hutchison: I would be interested in seeing the data. As I sit here, I do not know whether there are more teachers on short-term contracts now than there were previously. I know that around 900 supply teachers were used in Glasgow last year, with just over 300 on fixed-term contracts. I presume that those fixed-term contracts are being used to cover maternity leave, but we have a number of supply teachers to cover short-term absences or teachers on secondment. As regards your question, I do not know; I would have to look at year-on-year figures. I have certainly seen media reports, but I do not know what they are based on. I would need to see the data in order to come to a view on whether the reality is that we have more or fewer now.

Overall, whether there are likely to be posts for the number of people who are going into initial teacher education is a matter for the national workforce planning group. Sometimes we have got that right, and sometimes we have got it wrong. I started off as head of education at South Ayrshire Council. In around 2014-15, you could not get a supply teacher for love nor money, because the number of people going into initial teacher education had been reduced drastically due to negative headlines about unemployed teachers. The numbers going in were reduced significantly, and that led to a crisis in the availability of short-term supply teachers, among others. It was challenging at that time to get English teachers, for example.

That is a matter for the national workforce planning group. It takes account of a broad range of indicators, but sometimes there are too few or too many. Without the data, I could not answer your question.

09:45

Carrie Lindsay: I agree with what Douglas Hutchison said: without the data, it is hard to answer the question. Obviously, we have a significant female population, so a number of teachers will be on maternity leave, and those posts are always filled temporarily. There are also people who might come into a temporary post in a school during the year. Sometimes, there is a bit of a misnomer—that might not be the right word—and people do not understand that a teacher in that position is full time but is temporary to that school. At the end of that year, when they go into a permanent post, people think that there are lots of vacant posts, but there are not; people are just being moved around. In that respect, when people see those posts becoming available, they often think that they are not available to them to apply for.

However, I think that there are significant challenges in filling posts in particular subjects. At the moment, we have many more primary staff than are required, and we have a problem in secondary schools in particular subjects. As Douglas said, we are in a healthy position when it comes to supply staff for primary schools, but that means that those people are on temporary, not permanent, contracts.

Willie Rennie: In that light, do you think that we are educating too many primary school teachers?

Carrie Lindsay: That question is for the workforce planning group, obviously.

Willie Rennie: Neatly dodged.

Carrie Lindsay: That is what it looks at. I have been involved in education for many years, as has Douglas, and we have seen the demographic of society change. On this occasion, it was probably a bit less obvious. I think that the pandemic has had an impact on family size and when people start their family. There has been a significant shift in the birth rate over the past few years, which we now see coming into the organisations.

Willie Rennie: You will have received communications and letters similar to the ones that I have received from primary school teachers who gave up other careers or have been really passionate about teaching young people and have had their dreams torn away from them. Some can only get a series of short-term contracts—in some cases, for up to six years—and others cannot find a job at all. We have not got it right just now, have we? I get that it is a difficult balancing act and that the situation goes in cycles, but it is particularly bad just now, is it not?

Carrie Lindsay: Again, we do not have the data in front of us to know what the picture has looked like over the past few years. Anecdotally, there are stories about people who are in exactly the situations that you describe. Equally, there are people who have got permanent jobs and are comfortable, having gone through the training. For periods of time in education, people have expected to go into supply teaching first and then find a permanent job. However, with the probationer system, there is almost an expectation that you will get a permanent job if you have had a probationer post. It is seen as a bit like training for

your permanent role. Perhaps we need to do something to help the profession to understand that a probationer post does not give an automatic right to a permanent job at the end of it, because some of the people coming out of university believe that that is their right.

The Convener: Liam Kerr wants to come in on this area.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): I have a brief question on absolute numbers. Several of my colleagues and I were at a very good event about engineering last night. Is there a concern that, when we talk about changes in overall numbers due to, perhaps, declining rolls, that masks specific challenges such as—as we heard last night—the fact that there are 300 fewer English teachers, 300 fewer maths teachers and 178 fewer computer science teachers than there were in 2008? I presume that those are the sorts of areas that we absolutely need to focus on, if we are to have a future in which we are sufficiently upskilled in science, technology, engineering and mathematic subjects for areas such as engineering.

Dr Hutchison: There might be a reason why there are fewer English and maths teachers compared with 2008, and it might be population related. Within living memory, there were 59 secondary schools in Glasgow; there are now 30 secondary schools in Glasgow, because the population has shifted. Without comparing the population in 2008 with the population now, it is difficult to comment on absolute teacher numbers. However, in general, I agree that there are some areas where there are concerns. Recruiting computing teachers is a real challenge. Recruiting technical teachers is another area of challenge. It is difficult to find home economics teachers for secondary schools.

Generally speaking, we can fill all our vacancies from our probationers, which is why they are interviewed, given a score and allocated, but this year we have struggled to fill all the vacancies for maths and technical teachers. Recruiting computing science teachers is a challenge, as is finding home economics teachers. There are some areas where the vacancies are harder to fill. You are right: they are in the key areas for STEM careers, where we want young people to develop their skills. You are right to say that there are some challenges within the overall picture.

Liam Kerr: I am grateful for that answer.

The Convener: Carrie Lindsay wants to respond to that question as well.

Carrie Lindsay: There are schemes to attract STEM subject teachers that give bursaries and various things. There is an acknowledgement that that area is a difficulty. In some parts of Scotland, it is impossible to get subject specialists, because people just do not want to move to there. Places such as Aberdeenshire have struggled to get people to “move up”, as we would class it in Scotland. As part of the workforce planning group, we have to consider how to encourage people not to only want to be in the central belt, where it is much easier to fill the subjects, although even there it is not as easy as it used to be.

The Convener: Pam Duncan-Glancy, over to you.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: May I indulge in asking about one point that was mentioned by Carrie Lindsay and Dr Hutchison? Why is there a difficulty in recruiting maths, technical and computing teachers?

Dr Hutchison: I presume that it is because, if you have a STEM degree, you might have more attractive options elsewhere. That would be my guess, but I do not know.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: On free school meals, my first question is about the current provision for primary 1 to primary 5. Local government put a joint submission to the Finance and Public Administration Committee stating that there was a shortfall in the funding for that. What is that shortfall and how is it being met?

Kirsty Flanagan: I am not sure. Do you mean the quantum of funding? I would imagine that the shortfall in funding is due to the inflationary aspects of free school meal provision, which I touched on earlier. We are all finding in our pockets when we go to the supermarket that things are way more expensive. When that policy commitment was made, as with many policy commitments, we got it funded in the first year and that funding was then rolled forward. It is not inflated, but this is an area of severe inflation.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: What are councils doing to maintain the provision?

Kirsty Flanagan: They are having to make savings in other service areas in order to maintain that service provision.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Do you know where those savings are broadly coming from across the piece?

Kirsty Flanagan: No. It will vary from authority to authority, so I could not answer that. It will not be directly linked. An authority will not be saying, “Well, I’m going to cut the roads funding because I’m having to meet the inflation of free school meals.” The funding will come from across the broad range of services.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Does the panel have an understanding of what the cost for extending free

school meal provision to P6 and P7 will be and how that will be funded?

Kirsty Flanagan: We are working on pulling together that information. We could have capital costs as well as increased revenue costs, because expansions to kitchens might be required. When this was talked about a couple of years ago, not enough funding had been set aside, so it was delayed. I do not know what we need at this time; as I said, the information-gathering exercise is taking place just now. However, we would need to have it fully funded in order to deliver on that commitment.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Is there a risk that you may not be able to do so in the timescale that the cabinet secretary set out?

Kirsty Flanagan: The timescale now is 2026, if I remember rightly. Depending on the funding that we get and when the funding is announced in order to plan for that, 2026 is probably doable. It depends on the funding.

When we were trying to deliver on that commitment before—I think that it was supposed to come in a couple of years ago—and we had not had the funding announced, there was no way that we were going to deliver on the commitment, because we could not plan. As long as we have the funding confirmed, we can plan.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Will there be any impact on the capital expenditure to make the infrastructure changes that might be needed as a result of finding reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete—RAAC—in schools? Will that impact on the available budget?

Dr Hutchison: In general terms, the expansion of free school meals also requires capital investment. One of the savings that were made in my previous local authority a few years ago was to reduce the number of production kitchens. We centralised production kitchens in particular schools and removed them from others. It was quite contentious at the time. However, as we begin to roll out free school meals and the uptake is bigger, we need those production kitchens back. It is that kind of capital investment that is needed.

If RAAC goes on to become an issue, it is part of the same capital budget.

The Convener: We will have a question specifically on that later, if you do not mind. Thank you.

Dr Hutchison: Okay.

The Convener: Could the member keep to her topic, please?

Pam Duncan-Glancy: The delivery of free school meals is dependent on infrastructure, and I am keen to understand whether, if the budget were to be squeezed from other places, including for RAAC—that is not an unreasonable statement—that would risk the delivery of free school meals.

Dr Hutchison: It is difficult to answer that question. All I will say is that the delivery of free school meals also requires capital investment. As Kirsty Flanagan said, we can deliver the policy as long as the capital and revenue costs are funded.

Kirsty Flanagan: That is the key point. In order for us to deliver on the Scottish Government commitments, they need to be fully funded.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Finally, what outcomes arising from the expenditure on free school meals are you seeing across the piece?

Carrie Lindsay: The very short-term outcomes are that children are fed and they are able to access education. There are so many contributing factors to attainment outcomes that it would be hard to say that we were seeing that in the attainment outcomes of our young people, but the question is whether, over time, we can say that there is a cause-and-effect relationship. However, we are seeing young people who might not otherwise receive breakfast, in particular. We have extended breakfast provision in a lot of local authorities so that breakfast is available in secondary schools as well as primary schools. Having that meal or food that they can access during the day makes young people much readier to learn.

The Convener: May I follow up on that? This question is specifically for you, Carrie. How are the educational outcomes of the universal free school meals being monitored at a local level? Do you think that local government might like the Scottish Government to consider the relative cost effectiveness of the universal provision, given that you have spoken about the challenges and choices that you are making in your budgets?

Carrie Lindsay: The measure for this policy is inputs, not outcomes. As I said, it is hard to say whether there is cause and effect when it comes to attainment outcomes, but the input at the moment shows that large numbers of our children are receiving food during the day. There are also some families who do not wish to take up free school meals. The challenge is that, when you have a universal provision such as this, some families will not access it or may feel that they do not need to access it because they are able to provide for their children themselves. I am not aware that we are recording outcomes; it is more the inputs.

Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): The conversation around free school meals is very interesting, and it demonstrates really well that it is all about

prioritisation. If children are sitting in school and they are hungry, they will not learn at their best or perform at their best level. It is all about choices, and there is evidence that having universal free school meals increases the uptake of school meals among those children who need it most, as it reduces the stigma. We are talking about further investment and the finance behind it, and I appreciate that there are capital costs as well, but surely it is a priority for all local authority areas.

The Convener: Who would like to pick up on that? Is it a priority for all local authority areas?

Carrie Lindsay: I am happy to have a stab at that question. It is about the amount of funding that is required to be able to deliver on a policy such as that and whether the ultimate outcomes are beneficial to the other policy areas that we are trying to address. If we think about what PEF is trying to do and the challenge of trying to close the attainment gap and then consider the funding that is going to some families who might not require that type of support—I am trying to put that quite carefully—we see that having a universal programme means that we cannot then have interventions for the parts of the population that we want to give most to in order to allow them to close the poverty-related attainment gap. Nobody would ever say that it is not a good thing to have food available universally for our children and young people. Rather, it is about cost and balancing that against other policy areas in which we may be able to invest.

10:00

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): I have a couple of questions about additional support needs, but, as a precursor—this is relevant—I go back to Michelle Thomson's and Ben Macpherson's line of questioning on the Verity house agreement. What flexibilities, such as the removal of ring fencing, from Verity house will be in place for the coming financial year for education? Is it your expectation that there will be no ring-fenced pots in the coming year? I cannot remember exactly how it is phrased, but will there be the equivalent agreements between local government and national Government rather than ring-fenced pots, and will that take place from 2024-25?

Kirsty Flanagan: I am not sure that that is what I expect from 2024-25. The Verity house agreement is about moving to no ring fencing or direction. For 2024-25, we are focusing on in-year transfers. It would be nice if we could have it from 2024-25. Although we are moving in that direction, it may happen in future years.

Ross Greer: I will press you on that a little bit, because that is really helpful. In that case, what is your expectation for 2024-25? Is it just the in-year transfer flexibility that you referenced, or are you expecting some, but not all, of the currently ring-fenced funds to become flexible and go into the general grant?

Kirsty Flanagan: We need to be careful when we talk about ring fencing, because it is about directed funds as well. Sometimes it is specific grants, such as the childcare-specific early learning grant, that could go into the general pot. I would like to see a relaxation of the payments that we have to give our health and social care partnerships. Teacher numbers, and the absolute nature of that, might be too quick a step for 2024-25, but that remains to be seen. I have not been involved in the discussions that COSLA has been having. If COSLA had been here, it might have been able to comment.

Ross Greer: On additional support needs, I am interested, in the first instance, in the guidance that is provided to local authorities on completing their local financial returns. It is quite interesting that some local authorities are able to detail their spend on ASN across primary, secondary and special schools. They can break it down and disaggregate it. Some local authorities record an ASN spend of zero outside of special schools either because they feel that they can or because the guidance is not clear enough for them—I am not sure. Whatever the reason is, their return states that ASN spend is zero, certainly for primary and secondary schools. They have integrated it into their wider spend. Is the guidance on what is expected of local authorities in a local financial return clear enough? I ask that specifically about ASN, but, if you want to speak more generally about the expectation of a local financial return on education spend, that would be helpful as well.

Kirsty Flanagan: I apologise, but I am not able to answer that question. I do not fill out the LFR, so I am not involved in that level of detail. I can come back to you on that, however.

Ross Greer: That would be useful. Thank you.

Dr Hutchison: I am aware of the LFR and the provisional outturn and budget estimates, but I tend to defer to colleagues who deal with accounts and returns. I do not know any detail on the guidance, but, in broad terms, some local authorities have their spend at zero because of the complexity of what constitutes a resource for additional support needs. I will not go into the detail of staged intervention, but stage 1 is the class teacher, differentiating material and so on. Does that count as an ASN resource when the class teacher is the first person who meets additional support needs? Probably not. You therefore go along the continuum, all the way up to specialist external placement, where it is very easy

to determine, but there is a grey area in between normal provision and additional provision that may make doing that difficult. I do not know about the guidance on the LFR, however, so I probably cannot answer.

Ross Greer: I can ask the question in more general terms, because I recognise that that was a very specific technical question. Do you, in your local authorities, feel confident that you are directing spend as appropriate for children with additional support needs? There are a number of points of tension here. In the first instance, the Morgan review tells us that we need to see all education as ASN education and that it needs to be mainstream. That leads you towards a position where it is very hard to disaggregate the data, but we all recognise that the outcomes for children with additional support needs are not nearly as good as they should be and are not nearly as good as they often are for children without additional support needs. We need to be confident that we are putting in the right resources. There is obviously a tension here. How do you manage that in your local authorities so that you are confident that the resources are going to the individual children who need them and that you are directing resources at class and school level towards those where there is a higher prevalence of ASN in general and of specific, more complex needs that require additional resource?

Dr Hutchison: I have been involved in additional support needs for a long time, and there is a constant tension because the legal responsibility on us is to meet every need, but the reality, as we are discussing today, is that there is a limited resource. Systems need to be put in place to ensure that the allocation of the resource is as fair and equitable as possible. The 2005 legislation recognised that there would be tension, which is why it included remedies that did not exist before, such as informal mediation, dispute resolution and access to tribunal. Those remedies were put into the primary legislation because there was a recognition that there will always be that tension between a limited resource and an almost limitless demand.

How we address that is through systems and processes such as staged intervention, which I referred to. At stage 1, I would expect a class teacher to identify that there might be issues with a child, monitor them for a while and put in place resources. At stage 2, it is flagged up at school level, so there might be an additional support for learning teacher who will do some assessment. At stage 3, you are beginning to look externally to the school, to the psychological service. At stage 4, you are potentially looking at a specialist placement within the authority or outside it. All local authorities will have some form of staged intervention, and it is through staged intervention that we try, as best we can, to allocate the resource in as fair a way as we can.

On the issue of universal allocation, broadly speaking, the scheme of delegation for devolved resources to schools has some kind of formula that applies across local authorities. There will be some kind of formula that takes account of overall population, levels of deprivation and levels of additional support need in the allocation of resources.

Broadly speaking, those are the systems and processes that are in place across the country that attempt to address the really difficult challenge of allocating resources as fairly as possible. I recognise that it is hugely contentious. My inbox has been filled—as, I am sure, some of yours have been—with complaints about children and young people not being allocated a specialist place. However, that is done by a central monitoring group, for example, which looks at the broad range and says that there is space for a certain group of young people and that another group of young people will be managed and supported within their local mainstream primary or secondary schools.

Ross Greer: On that last issue, there is an important point about whether we support kids with ASN either in mainstream or special education. Do you feel that, at the moment, in some cases at least, that is coming down to a question of resource and that there are children in mainstream education because of the lack of capacity in special educational settings? I recognise that there are two points here. The first is where the judgment is made that the child with additional support needs would thrive more in a mainstream setting. However, secondly, on the basis of what we get in our inboxes, there is the implication that local authorities are putting kids with more complex additional needs who would be better off in special educational settings into mainstream settings due to a lack of resource.

Dr Hutchison: All of that depends on the context but, broadly speaking, local authorities aim to make decisions that are child and young person centred, and we operate in line with the presumption of mainstream education and of children and young people being educated in their community, because, as soon as you take them out of their community into some specialist facility where they are not known locally and do not make connections, they can end up coming out of school having no connections in the local area. We operate in line with the presumption of mainstream education generally.

With regard to local context, I was an HMIE inspector for five years. In that time, I focused mainly on inspecting specialist provision. It depends on what is available locally. I visited a

mainstream primary school in Campbeltown. In that school, they support children who, in many other local authority areas, would be in a specialist facility, but it is Campbeltown, so there is no special school. The travel makes it prohibitive, so they support those children in their local mainstream secondary school. It depends on the context. In Glasgow, we have a large additional support for learning estate—a legacy of the Strathclyde era, probably. The bigger centres of population may have it. A lot depends on the local context.

Ross Greer: I have one final question if we have time, convener.

The Convener: Briefly.

Ross Greer: It is just about additional support needs support staff or ASN assistants—the job title varies massively, and that is the point of my question. A couple of years ago, the Government statisticians who compiled the school staff census merged the categories of "classroom assistant" and "ASN assistant" into "pupil support assistant". Our predecessor committee in that session brought them in to give evidence on that. Essentially, they said that there was no longer enough distinction in many settings between a general classroom assistant and somebody assigned to work specifically with kids with additional support needs, so they were unable to give us numbers on how many ASN assistants there were. Does it present a challenge for you that we are unable to count how many support staff work directly with children with additional needs rather than providing general support to the whole class?

Dr Hutchison: I think that that merging of the categories was probably just consistent with practice out there. If my memory serves me, classroom assistants came in at the time of the McCrone agreement, and things have moved on from there. The vast majority of them were involved in directly supporting children and young people. In a lot of local authorities, negotiations took place so that they all went on to a single contract, because they were paid the same anyway. The classroom assistant is a historical legacy from the McCrone agreement. My presumption—I may be wrong—is that the vast majority are involved in supporting children and young people with additional support needs.

Ross Greer: Thanks.

Ruth Maguire: I have a couple of questions about children's services. The first is about the Promise. I am interested in the witnesses' reflections on the practicalities of delivering the local government elements of the Promise in the current financial context. While you are thinking, I point out that a live issue for the committee is the Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Bill, which obviously has implications for local government, so perhaps you can speak to that a little.

10:15

Carrie Lindsay: I am happy to go first to give Douglas Hutchison a wee bit of thinking time, since he has been speaking.

I think that everybody accepts that the Promise is a really useful tool for us with which to change the way that local authorities work with our most vulnerable young people. At the outset, there was an expectation that there would be no funding or very little funding. There is some funding for particular projects, but there was none of the money that would normally have come through COSLA to local authorities. For me, that was the right and the wrong decision, if I can put it that way, because there is an expectation that you look at all your processes and systems—you do not always need money to do that—to be able to deliver some of the asks.

In education, some funding through the PEF—I cannot remember exactly what it is called—supports care-experienced young people, so such funding supports some implementation of the Promise and the expectations for education. Across children's services, people have been working really hard at a partnership level to identify where they need to pull funds together to be able to deliver on that. If some funding had gone to all children's services partnerships to support the delivery of the actions in the Promise, that would have been beneficial.

Dr Hutchison: I echo what Carrie Lindsay has said. We are all absolutely committed to the Promise, and we recognise that there is significant scope to improve outcomes for care-experienced children and young people. The care-experienced pupil equity funding—I do not think that it is called that—is certainly making a difference and is helping. In Glasgow, the Glasgow virtual school team is working intensively to support better outcomes for care-experienced children and young people. We are absolutely committed to the Promise, and we will find ways to deliver it, regardless.

Ruth Maguire: There is a reduction in real terms in the expected net spend on children and families social work services in 2023-24 in comparison with the 2019-20 net spend. What might that reduction look like in practice for children and families services and for the children and families who use those services?

Carrie Lindsay: Until I retired recently, I was a director of education and children's services, so I had responsibility for children and families

services. I will speak from that perspective, not in my ADES role.

We have seen that our young people want to stay in their communities for the same reasons that we want ASN young people to be in their communities, as we said. In Fife, young people who had been away from home returned home when they reached the age of 16. Many local authorities, including Fife Council, took the decision to think about how they could support young people to stay at home rather than removing them to another place, which, at the time, might have seemed to be the best thing to do. There has been a significant reduction in the number of high-cost placements for residential care, and you will see that people across Scotland have tried really hard.

The Promise has helped with that a lot in relation to keeping brothers and sisters together and making sure that families are supported in their homes. There has been a shift in the way in which children and families services work in a lot of local authorities. They now provide support in a much more preventative way, or family support might be provided along with statutory social work support. The reduction in cost was—I hope, based on what I saw in Fife—from the reduction in the number of high-cost placements; there was not a reduction in what we were able to offer families. In fact, it was quite the reverse—we were able to use the money much more effectively to support families and keep them together, which was of benefit to the children and young people.

Ruth Maguire: That is interesting. Does Kirsty Flanagan have any comments on that?

Kirsty Flanagan: I have nothing to add.

Dr Hutchison: Education services and children and families social work services work very closely together, so a challenge for either of us has implications for both of us. The whole family wellbeing fund provides a great opportunity, because it is focused on transformational change. Carrie Lindsay mentioned bringing young people back from expensive external placements, and Glasgow has been particularly successful at that. The whole family wellbeing fund provides the opportunity for that kind of transformational change that involves getting young people back in their community with the right support.

The Convener: That is helpful. Thank you.

Liam Kerr: I would like to investigate some areas of capital expenditure. Do any of you have a view on the design of the Scottish Government's learning estate investment programme, particularly given that, I presume, local authorities pay the up-front costs of that?

The Convener: Everyone is looking at Kirsty Flanagan.

Kirsty Flanagan: Yes, there is a risk that local authorities have to take with the current programme. We have to borrow or fund up front, and we get funding only if we meet a number of criteria. I do not know all the details, but the criteria relate to energy and such things. Therefore, there is a risk, but I would like to think that the risk is low if we are trying to deliver a better estate, which is what the programme is all about. It is disappointing that we have not had the announcement of the third phase of the learning estate investment programme. We were expecting the announcement before Christmas, but it has been delayed and delayed.

Liam Kerr: I will follow up on that exact point. As I understand it, funding for the third phase was meant to be allocated last year but has not been. What impact will that have on any capital investment programme, and, bluntly, will it affect the building of new schools?

Kirsty Flanagan: It might well do. Last year, we produced in September the business case for the funding that we applied for, but costs have moved on since then. Even if an announcement is made, local authorities will have to assess whether, in the current financial climate, they will still be able to deliver what they hoped to deliver last September.

Liam Kerr: I have a final question. As we heard from Pam Duncan-Glancy, into this context has come the RAAC situation. Do you have any concerns that addressing the RAAC situation might have a detrimental impact on future LEIP funding?

Kirsty Flanagan: I am hearing that that could be one source of funding to deal with the RAAC situation. Will it have a detrimental impact? If there are RAAC issues in the current school estate, we will need to deal with them, because the safety of children is important. Yes, there could be a detrimental impact on the building of new schools that are probably much needed.

Liam Kerr: How are local authorities preparing to deal with the RAAC situation and fund any necessary work?

Kirsty Flanagan: COSLA could probably give you a better answer to that. I have not been involved in that work; it is more my property colleagues who have been involved in it. In Argyll and Bute, only one school has elements of RAAC, and it is just small elements. We were aware of that, and we are dealing with it as part of routine maintenance and are putting mitigation measures in place. However, I know that, in some local authorities, a number of establishments are affected, so there will be a huge financial challenge for them.

I cannot provide any further comments on that. Other colleagues might have more information.

The Convener: I see that no one else wants to come in on the subject.

Liam Kerr: I am grateful for those answers.

The Convener: I thank the witnesses for their time today. We will now have a suspension to allow for a change of witnesses.

10:25

Meeting suspended.

10:40

On resuming—

Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment

The Convener: The second item on our agenda is an evidence session on the report of the independent review of qualifications and assessment. I welcome Professor Louise Hayward, professor of educational assessment and innovation at the University of Glasgow and chair of the independent review of qualifications and assessment; Professor Ken Muir, honorary professor at the University of the West of Scotland and a member of the independent review of qualifications and assessment group; and Peter Bain, headteacher at Oban High School and a member of the independent review of qualifications and assessment group. I thank you all for joining us.

We will begin with a short opening statement from Professor Hayward. Professor, you have up to three minutes.

Professor Louise Hayward (Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment): Thank you very much for that, convener, and thank you to the committee for taking the time to discuss the independent review with us and for having taken the time to read it. We are grateful to you for the investment of your time in the process.

There are five key issues that we would like to draw to your attention. The first is that the report offers a longer-term direction of travel for qualifications and assessment in Scotland. This is not a quick fix; it is about thinking about the future and making sure that we have a future that serves every learner, and Scotland as a nation, well.

Secondly, although I keep seeing it referred to as such in the press, this is not the “Hayward report”. Nothing could be further from the truth. This is a report that has engaged communities across the country, which have been actively engaged in working through ideas. So, what you have in front of you is the thinking and the agreed position across all those different communities. That is a really important issue.

The third point that we would like to make is that the vision is absolutely crucial. It is really important that we have a very clear idea about what we are trying to achieve. Then, everything that we do should be directed towards that. The vision is not only important at the beginning of the process. Often, innovation begins with good ideas, but, over time, the developments in practice begin to differ from the vision. That is our experience in Scotland, and there is evidence that it also happens internationally. If that is not picked up quickly

enough, you get to a point, a number of years down the line, where you have to go through the whole process again. So, the vision is the touchstone, and, as ideas develop in practice, it is really important that we go back to that vision and gather evidence of what is happening in practice to make sure that we stay consistent with those key ideas.

That leads me to our fourth point. What we have learned from the curriculum in Scotland, but also internationally, is that it is not enough to plan for the educational aspect of innovation; there has to be a plan for change. The process of change has to be carefully planned, and, to be effective, it has to be co-constructed. So, everyone who is involved in making it work has to be involved in the process. The pace of putting ideas into practice should depend on the level of resourcing that is available. It is about working through the ideas and being realistic about the investment that can be made as they develop.

The fifth point that we would like to make is that there is no idea contained in the report that is not already in practice in at least one country. Indeed, many of the ideas are already in practice in some schools and colleges in Scotland. So, the report, "It's Our Future", is both principled and practical. It is about seeking to make high-quality provision available for every learner.

The colleagues that I have with me have been chosen very carefully.

The Convener: No pressure.

Professor Hayward: Ken Muir was originally a geography teacher, but he has had a range of roles across the education system and is now working internationally. Peter Bain is a highly respected headteacher who has worked in a range of areas across Scotland in leadership roles and holds leadership positions in School Leaders Scotland and Building on Collaboration, Supporting Headteachers. So, in policy, research and practice, we hope that we have a range of perspectives, and we are looking forward to engaging with you in discussion.

The Convener: Thank you. This should be an exciting session, with all that experience in front of us. Thank you very much for that opening statement and for submitting the paper, which was formed around those five points.

I will ask the first question, before we move on to questions from elsewhere. We have heard a lot about the common approach that is taken in Scotland of having two or three years of externally marked exams, and how that is quite rare. What evidence do you have that that approach needs to change?

Professor Hayward: I will start, and then I will perhaps pass to Peter Bain.

There has been consistent evidence across a range of reports that there are real challenges with the idea of having three consecutive years of examinations. We heard consistently from young people and teachers deep frustration about the balance of time spent in assessment and examination processes as opposed to focusing and deepening learning and teaching.

10:45

Professor Stobart's report indicated that Scotland is almost unique in having three points of high-stakes assessments one after the other, and the evidence that we had from learners was that much of their experience in the senior phase is focused on preparing for examinations. They have practice tests, past papers and prelims. In some schools, there were three prelims over the course of every year. The amount of time, therefore, that is spent in rehearsal for the high-stakes exam has led to disillusionment in the young people and frustration among teachers about the way in which the senior phase has been developing.

The Convener: Are you saying that there is a real disconnect between what the young people are doing in their senior phase, curriculum for excellence and that focus? It is taking me back. I have shivers down my spine from remembering all those things when I was at school.

Professor Hayward: Peter Bain may want to comment on that.

Peter Bain (Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment): Before I begin, if you do not mind, I want to say that these are not just my personal views. What I am about to tell you has come from a very large number of senior leaders in schools across the country.

I chaired a community collaborative of school leaders on behalf of the independent review group. There were 11 members, and they were chosen deliberately to gain access to schools in the independent sector, to Catholic schools and to Gaelic schools. They covered everywhere from the Highlands and Islands to the Borders and everywhere in between. Each member was tasked with creating their own collaborative of roughly another 10 headteachers from a variety of schools taken from that wide range of communities and, of course, their own local authorities. Those 11 members—12 including me—could be multiplied by 10 at a minimum. Each member was also tasked with discussing it with their deputes, their senior leadership teams, their principal teachers and, of course, their school communities. What I am about to tell you comes from across the country and not just from me.

This issue was one of the most vocally put forward as a failing of the current system. In my opinion, you would be hard pressed to find a school leader who does not think that curriculum for excellence is a wonderful ideology that is to be aspired to. When it was introduced, through a series of documents published by Education Scotland called "Building the Curriculum", it was welcomed because of the support it got. "Building the Curriculum 3" set the vision, and then "Building the Curriculum 4" sought to build on that by promoting skills and experiences that would give breadth and relevance to the learning that we were providing in our schools.

Shortly after that, however, "Building the Curriculum 5" was published, and it was about assessment models. Very quickly, schools were diverted from the development of skills and experiences that would better prepare youngsters for life after school, life straight in at the workplace or life at the workplace after further or higher education. It concentrated on exams. The consequence of that continued pattern of behaviour was that we continued to seek to produce statistics that showed our schools, our local authorities and the country in a good light by comparing those sitting five or more higher exams in particular, although not exclusively, year on year.

The trouble with doing that is that we continue to teach the same narrowly based subjects in order to secure our continuing pass rates so that we do not fall down whatever artificial league table we produce. That unfortunately has a perverse impact on our curriculums in many schools—not all, but many—in that, by narrowing the curriculum to try to hit the five or more higher exams, we are not offering the correct pathway or the desired pathway of many youngsters, who may find it more beneficial to do national progression awards, to acquire skills for work or merely to drop a couple of subjects, because we are now able to produce what are called "flexible learning plans" and have them with employers, getting youngsters ready for the workplace. That means that not only headteachers but school leaders are frustrated by the continual focus on an exam-only system, and they feel that that has been perpetuated down the years.

To get right into your point, convener, if the focus is on trying to get as many exam passes as possible, rather than the acquisition of knowledge, skills and experiences, to achieve that goal, we do exams, we do prelims and schools do practice prelims. In fact, many schools do two prelims—one in November and another one in March—because the Scottish Qualifications Authority requires a degree of robust evidence that cannot be achieved in November, as we are only two thirds or, in some cases, one third of the way through a course. The whole system is designed to enable our youngsters to pass exams and not to prepare them for life after school.

The Convener: Thank you very much. Professor Muir, do you want to come in on that as well?

Professor Kenneth Muir (Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment): Thanks, convener. As many of you know, I authored the report "Putting Learners at the Centre", which was published just over a year ago. One of the things that I did was undertake a very extensive survey of not only practitioners but children and young people. A number of the messages that came back gave significant evidence that aligns with what Louise Hayward found in her review of assessment and qualifications. There were concerns about the two-term dash to higher, and that has been very consistent in Scottish education; the three-year back-to-back examinations—as Peter suggested, there is even more of that—the lack of articulation between broad general education and the aspirations of curriculum for excellence and the assessment and qualification system; what is perceived by many as a very heavy, knowledge and understanding content-laden curriculum, with the kinds of skills and competencies that are deemed to be appropriate for current and future learners largely missing from the curriculum; and a compression of time. All of those things came through very significantly in my report. Again, from working with Louise Hayward and her team, I know that they came through very significantly for her as well.

I say in my report that we have an examination-dominated system in Scotland. I was quite concerned after speaking to primary headteachers, because they made the point that the curriculum in primary schools is being directed by what is required in secondary schools, which is largely driven by what the exams require. I make the point that the kind of metric that we talk about in Scottish education as being a measure of quality—the number of highers that a young person might achieve in a single sitting in secondary 5—is not appropriate for the future. As Louise Hayward suggested, we have had a narrowing of the curriculum, largely because the main thrust for quality assurance purposes is how well young people do in examinations and standardised assessments. We know that young people and children, even in primary school, achieve much more than simply passes in examinations. One of the things that we tried to do in the report was look at how we can change some of the mindset and culture in Scottish education—in particular, the assessment and examination requirements.

The Convener: Thank you very much. I have a brief supplementary question before I bring in Willie Rennie. This is directly for Peter Bain. If there is the flexibility that you speak about to do a range of things, where does the pressure lie to continue as we have always done?

Peter Bain: The pressure lies largely in the way in which we report on our success. There is a societal pressure—not helped by national newspapers—to publish league tables. The Scottish Government obviously does not publish those itself, but reporters formulate them. That impacts on parents' views on the success or otherwise of a school, which then impacts on elected members, directors of education and headteachers in schools. The publication of the artificial league table does not help. That is where a lot of the pressure comes from. However, I would argue that many headteachers and local authorities have, in the past five, six or seven years, woken up to that threat and are prepared to tell the full story about the success of individual schools and that it is not just about passing five highers or five national 5s. They are prepared to stand up and illustrate the positive destinations that are reached by their youngsters.

You will find that youngsters in schools that are in areas with high levels of employment opportunities leave school and go directly into the workplace. That is to be applauded. Doing so reduces the percentage of those who clock up five-plus highers, but the success is there. These days, we are providing an education system that is full of experiences, skills development and knowledge acquisition. It is getting a lot more of the young people into apprenticeships and the world of work, rather than keeping them on at school, trying to clock up qualifications that will just get them into the workplace later. That is not to say that we are harming those who wish to go to university—statistics show that that is not the case. Insight, a programme that schools use for self-evaluation, shows that, often, those who go on to university, if that is the journey that they wish to take, still secure the percentage pass rate and get seven, eight or nine highers.

Willie Rennie: Mr Bain, thank you for the clarity with which you are speaking this morning, which is helpful. You mentioned Insight. Is Insight part of the problem? Are we measuring the right things with Insight?

Peter Bain: Personally—I am not speaking for the other people I mentioned earlier—I think that Insight is a very valuable tool. It allows us to deep dive—to use a schooly phrase—and get to the nub of how our additional support needs pupils are doing and how the pupils in our hostels and school care accommodation services are getting on. It allows us to go in depth and work out what support is needed to allow the young people to achieve the qualifications that they wish to have or need. It is a valuable tool. Unfortunately, everyone homes in on the "Breadth and Depth" part of Insight, and many do not use it to its full capacity to deliver the best choices for our youngsters. It is a good tool, but one part of it is used very badly. That is my personal view.

Bill Kidd: How well understood and trusted is the current suite of qualifications that is taken in Scotland's schools? Do people understand and trust it, in depth?

Peter Bain: I am sure, but not positive, that our school leaders and teachers across the country are very aware of the suite of opportunities that is available now and how the qualifications link to the Scottish Credit and Qualification Framework, which all schools are now using extensively and which is heavily promoted by Skills Development Scotland as well as the schools and local authorities. That has helped our education communities to understand our parity of esteem. Gradually, over the past few years, our parent bodies—through the work done online and with additional meetings by ACQF framework personnel, SDS and schools—are becoming more aware of the value of national progression awards, skills for work, baccalaureates and, in particular, foundation apprenticeships, in which a large rise in uptake has been seen because of their value. That is slow, steady and very positive progress. However, you would be right in saying that not everybody fully gets it. I have parents who think that we still do O-levels, and we never did them in the first place.

11:00

Professor Hayward: I support what Peter Bain has said. The difficulty with asking a question like that is that there are many different answers, and it depends on who the individual is and what area you are talking about. One of the issues that was interesting during the review was that employers talked about the limited use that they make of the evidence that comes from qualifications. After six months in the workplace, nobody will ever ask you again what qualifications you have. Similarly, universities use the qualifications as a means of deciding who will get entry to which course. However, if we are serious, as a society, about ideas of lifelong learning, we need to think about a system in which it is not like falling off a cliff when you leave school or college but your experience transitions with you into the next stage and you can build and grow from that. The evidence that we have about the speed of change in society suggests that learners will have to be flexible learners all of their life because of the speed at which things are changing. We need a system that

supports all our learners through those processes and in which what they have achieved in school or college goes with them into the next stage of their life and they continue to build from that.

The other issue that your question interestingly raises is that, perhaps, as an education system, we have, in the past, paid insufficient attention to a communication strategy. Any innovation has to have a clear communication strategy, not simply one that is linked to the point when the innovation is introduced but one that recognises that the strategy has to develop over time and be sustained, so that we build up the changes and understanding across society over time.

Bill Kidd: That is helpful.

Professor Muir: You raise an interesting point about trust and confidence in the education system. When I compare the trust and confidence in the assessment and qualifications system in Scotland with what I see, particularly, in the Nordic countries, it is transformationally different. Those countries have a very high-trust system, and that is perhaps less so in Scotland. Yet, we have experts on the ground and practitioners in our schools who are well trained and ready to operate as experts in the system, and we make little use of that expertise in the qualifications and examinations system—much less than many other countries do.

Of course, that is one of the reasons why we suffered the problems that we did with the two years of Covid, when the examinations system had to operate very differently. The Nordic countries did not suffer anything like the same fragmentation and the same problems as Scotland faced. That in itself demonstrates that building trust and confidence that is similar to what we see in some other countries is part of the culture shift that we need to make in the Scottish system. It also demonstrates that there are systems in the world that use teacher expertise and professional judgment to a far greater extent than Scotland does.

Bill Kidd: Thank you. That potentially helps. I will read this out, because it is important that it goes on the record. The review developed this vision:

> "An inclusive and highly regarded qualifications and assessment system that inspires learning, values the diverse achievements of every learner in Scotland and supports all learners into the next phase of their lives, socially, culturally and economically."

That is a brilliant vision. To what degree was the current suite of qualifications used to support the vision that is set out in the review? How was the current qualifications system used to shape the vision?

Professor Hayward: The current qualifications system would serve aspects of the vision, but the independent review group was clear that the current system does not serve all the aspects of the vision. You will know that there were three phases to the consultation. The first phase was agreeing the vision across all the communities that we described, getting to a point where we say, "Okay, this is the direction of travel that we would like for Scottish education and Scottish society." The second phase was around what the parameters are and what that vision might begin to look like in practice, and the third phase involved the development of a model from the feedback and consultation on that. However, our clear starting point was that our current system does not meet all aspects of that vision.

Peter Bain: Mr Kidd, you mentioned the suite. It would be remiss not to separate the system from the suite of qualifications. In our view, the collective view of those who were involved in my work was, clearly, that this system is failing our youngsters. The suite of qualifications is not challenged. There is a wonderful array of qualifications delivered by educationalists across the country, whether in schools or further education, that serve the needs of our youngsters. The number varies, but the Scottish Qualifications Authority currently oversees around a couple of hundred courses, and it is only one qualification body that we use to tease out a wealth of qualifications best suited for our youngsters, particularly those going into vocational and professional environments.

However, a criticism of the suite was that, as much as we had all these professionals providing discrete educational experiences and knowledge, they were not tying up—that is why the interdisciplinary learning part of the Scottish diploma of achievement came about. In real life, we do not just talk history, we talk history when we are discussing economics or our family tree, and, similarly, we talk geography when discussing geopolitics or where we want to go on holiday. The main criticism of the suite is not its breadth; it is the fact that we do not talk to each other. I hope that the new qualifications awarding body will seek to develop interdisciplinary understanding and courses that better allow our youngsters to see the relevance of all these important topics, because, if they see more relevance and see how they can be used, they might buy into them in even greater number and pass not necessarily their exams but the assessments.

Professor Muir: I will just add that it is important to remember that this is not just about qualifications; this is about achievements. Young people and children, from the early years all the way through primary and into secondary, make achievements in their learning that, currently, with

the metrics that we use in the system, are largely about performance, standard nationalised assessments and examinations. In some cases, those achievements are significant, particularly for children presenting with an additional support need or learning disability. Currently, we do not openly recognise and value those in the way that we value qualifications. Part of the vision is trying to recognise and find a mechanism for recognising those wider achievements that young people make. That is one reason why the personal pathway is an important element of the diploma that is being proposed.

Bill Kidd: Hence, what the vision says about supporting

"all learners into the next phase of their lives, socially, culturally and economically".

Professor Muir: Absolutely, very much so. It is not just about examinations and qualifications.

Professor Hayward: Another important thing in the vision is the issue of inspiring learning, and there are various kinds of opportunities in that regard. Young people commonly tell us that they want to make a difference to the world. They want opportunities to use the knowledge that they are developing in the subject areas. They recognise that the subject knowledge is important, but they want to be able to think about how they can use that knowledge to improve society. This would give them an opportunity to do that. What is really interesting is that those are exactly the qualities that are required.

We often talk about knowledge and skills as if they are separate. You cannot develop skills without knowledge, and there is no point in having knowledge unless you can think about how you use it. In that context, those are the kinds of things that, employers suggested, were absolutely crucial for the future of each young person. The universities were also arguing that it is the combination of knowledge and skills that is really important and that, both in the workplace and in colleges and universities, many of the approaches that we propose in the Scottish diploma of achievement are already in place. We are looking to develop approaches to learning, achievement and progression that will better support learners into the next phase of their life.

Bill Kidd: That sounds quite inspiring.

The Convener: Thank you very much for that scene setting.

Liam Kerr: Good morning. I have just a couple of quick questions on the process of the review group. Professor Hayward, the review was based on an integrity model of change. How do the work that you undertook and the final report reflect that integrity model?

Professor Hayward: To someone who has spent her entire life trying to demystify and remove jargon from assessment the "integrity model of change" sounds awfully jargonistic, but it is very simple. It was an empirical model that was developed from work done originally in Scotland around a programme called assessment is for learning. It was described by the then education minister as a "quiet revolution" in Scottish education in that it made differences to what teachers were doing in classrooms, and previous innovations had not had that level of impact. School inspectors who were going into schools were saying that they did not come across a teacher or school who had not heard about it. That is unusual for that kind of innovation.

As part of that, at the end, as a piece of research, we interviewed learners, teachers, local and national policy makers and all the people who were involved in the process. When we analysed the evidence, three things mattered. The first was educational integrity: people had to have a clear vision and they needed to be clear about what they were doing and that it was going to make a positive difference to young people's learning. In the review, we then began working with the Scottish Youth Parliament and the Children's Parliament towards developing a vision that, we believe, is in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The second thing was personal and professional integrity. That means that all the people who have a role in making the innovation work have to be involved in its development from the beginning, so they think through the issues as they develop the model. The model that we developed, which was the matrix model, was for those for whom qualifications matter most: learners and, as appropriate, parents or carers. A second group of people was made up of those who were involved in the design and development and those who offer qualifications. The third set of people was made up of those who use qualifications. All of those people matter if qualifications are to be effective and credible in the system. On the other side of the matrix, we had to make sure that the programme was as well informed as it could be. We had a number of research communities where we brought together national and international experts in different fields, including curriculum, assessment qualifications, process of change, equity and policy alignment. That is the personal and professional integrity bit.

The third thing was the systemic integrity, which I hope that you will see reflected in the recommendations. Innovation is a little like removing the back from an old-fashioned watch and seeing all the little cogs turning. If any one of those cogs stops, the watch does not work. For example, you need initial teacher education to be

involved. As people come into the profession, there are expectations that they will have from the beginning. When school inspectors go into schools, they need to be looking for evidence of the Scottish diploma of achievement. It is about all those bits together. You need to make sure that the data that is being gathered reflects the key ideas in the Scottish diploma of achievement. That is the systemic integrity bit. That was the model on which the whole development was based.

11:15

Liam Kerr: I understand. Thank you for that detail. I think that you talked about the second part of the matrix when it comes to personal and professional integrity. The cabinet secretary said that, before taking forward any reform of the qualifications, she needs to hear from teachers, particularly secondary school teachers, whom she says will be key in driving forward any changes. Pre-empting that, how did your review ensure that it heard from those teachers? What did that group broadly tell you, and how did those discussions impact on the final output?

Professor Hayward: That is a really interesting question. In addition to the independent review group, with all the communities and the community collaborative groups that you have heard about, we set up a process whereby, for each of the three phases of the consultation, we developed packages of materials that were sent out to every school and college in the country. We assumed that those would get to every teacher in Scotland but we discovered that, although that was a really good approach in theory, it was, in practice, patchy. It became blocked at different points in the system. I will ask Peter Bain and Ken Muir to talk about examples of where it worked, and worked very well. I received feedback, via social media in particular, from teachers who said, "Nobody has asked me." You then start to realise that it was getting through to some areas, but, in other areas, it did not seem to be working terribly effectively. There is learning to be done in that regard.

The cabinet secretary says that she wants to hear from every teacher in the country. That is a really important part of the process. It is important to have those conversations, because everyone should be involved in that process. From the model that we developed, there is learning to be done about how those systems work in practice. Our group argues that, if we are talking about changing culture, we need ways of engaging at scale with key people in the education system. There is learning to be done from the approach that we undertook—the model and the means for involving people. In order for the innovation to be successful, the process need to continue. It is about cultural change.

Not all of the meetings of the independent review group were uncontentious. We had really interesting, and sometimes quite heated, debates about issues. Our position was that, unless you work the issues through as the programme is developing, you are going to have to deal with the problems later. It is a process by which you deal in a principled and practical way with the future. We argue that, for cultural change to be developed, those processes have to continue in which everyone has a voice and everyone's voice is part of coming through to agreed positions.

The Convener: Peter Bain, do you want to come in? Professor Hayward suggested that you may want to.

Peter Bain: I was just checking to see whether Professor Muir wanted to come in before I started speaking again. Some of the discussions that we had in those meetings in the course of just over a year were interesting indeed. Right at the beginning, Professor Hayward said that the review is not the "Hayward report". At each stage, after each of those meetings, Louise Hayward asked, "Do we agree? Are we content to move forward as a collective position?" The universities, the trade unions, the school leaders and the youngsters were there. That was always measured as we went.

In that example, when we all gathered together and talked about each stage in that journey, we came to a consensus through communication and the acquisition of understanding. Herein lies the problem that Mr Kerr alluded to: all these teachers are saying, "I don't know anything about this," and, "I'm no sure about this and I don't like it." I have to say that, in the year that I spent doing this—and since, because I get the opportunity to speak to other local authorities, other schools and other groups on the subject just because I was in those discussions—when I held a session, even if it was just for a couple of hours, with a group of school leaders, teachers or whoever, I found that, when we talked it through and they understood the background to some of the recommendations, they said, "Aye. I'll sign up for that. Yeah, I'll agree to that."

I held a session just last week for School Leaders Scotland, where all the local authorities were represented. The first question was—it is on the PowerPoint that got issued to all schools—"Do you support the Scottish diploma of achievement in principle?" Everyone bar two said yes, because we had had a discussion and they understood it. If you just go to a teacher cold, they are gonnae go "Naw," because, naturally and justifiably, they have fears about workload in particular. This is something new. Anybody—it doesnae matter what their occupation is—if you suggest something new, they are always going to say, "I'm already too

busy.” If you talk through what it is that we could give up or change or adapt to create the time to make the system and the opportunities better, they will go, “Aye. As long as I get time, as long as I get some money and as long as I get some resources, I’ll sign up for that.” That is where we are just now.

I mentioned the 11 headteachers, their groups of 10 and all their school communities. If you go to those schools, you find that they are okay with the SDA. They wish to accept it in principle, but they still want to know the devil in the detail. They want to move into a planning for implementation stage, but they accept it in principle. The teachers or the schools that did not engage and do not understand it are the ones that are more vocally saying, “Hold on a minute.” There are a fair few of them, so it is quite natural that the cabinet secretary has taken pause—measure twice, cut once, and no harm will be done. They will come to the agreement that everyone else has once they understand it: that it is a good idea that needs to be teased out.

Liam Kerr: Thank you.

The Convener: Ben Macpherson has a short supplementary question.

Ben Macpherson: This will be my main question, because it is related to the area that we have been discussing.

I thank the panel for their evidence. I have been thinking back to when I was in the second year of higher still, with the implementation of NABs and that initial culture change. The position of coursework and continuous assessment then altered in the following years. That speaks to the point that Professor Hayward made at the beginning about the need to continually emphasise the vision through practical implementation. We also need to consider the points that Peter Bain has just made.

Following on from the consultation with teachers in the short term, and as we enter the implementation phase with the considerations of workload and buy-in, teacher training and continuous professional development seem to me to be crucial as we think ahead to the process of implementing the SDA and making it work. Have you had any reflections on that?

Professor Hayward: Yes.

The Convener: Can you expand on that? [*Laughter*.]

Professor Hayward: I used one word there because I cannot emphasise that strongly enough.

The Convener: We like concise answers. We like positive, strong answers.

Professor Hayward: The countries that make the greatest progress on supporting learners’ achievements are those that invest in their teachers. It is really important to invest in the professionalism of teachers in Scotland. An interesting thing that we found in the review was how many creative but frustrated teachers there are in Scotland. All teachers care deeply about the learners with whom they work. Many of them expressed frustration that the current system in the senior phase drives them into fairly predictable behaviours where they are involved in a lot of rehearsal with learners rather than exciting them about learning and having passion for what they are doing.

It is interesting that, in the schools that we have been in—Ken Muir might have some really good examples of this—that have been involved in the project learning approach, the level of enthusiasm from learners and teachers is incredible. People have to be supported through that. The system also has to recognise that, if this is the way forward, teachers will be introduced at the beginning of initial teacher education to these ideas about what it is to be a teacher. They will expect to work in subject areas, but they will also expect to work across subject areas, be involved in project learning and have conversations with learners about their personal pathways. We will build capacity through that process.

We use the term “teacher” as though there was a single teacher. The truth is that we have teachers who are in different circumstances and at different stages in their thinking. We therefore need to be supportive towards people, starting from where they are and supporting them through the process. I could not agree with you more strongly that these things are really important.

Ben Macpherson: Given the changes that were made in that first period of the implementation of higher still and the alterations that were made to assessment, is it important to learn from that process? Is it important to have a consistent, stable position for a good period in order to properly embed the implementation of curriculum for excellence in this next important phase?

Professor Hayward: Absolutely—without doubt.

The Convener: Thank you. Professor Muir, I will let you respond as well.

11:30

Professor Muir: Ben Macpherson’s questions relate back to what Mr Kerr talked about. As a system, we genuinely need to learn lessons from the introduction of curriculum for excellence. It is questionable how successful we were in doing that. Professional learning and the engagement of all staff in the philosophy of any reform or change is critical. That is where the cabinet secretary’s

survey might be helpful, particularly as it will enable schools to begin to think about what that reform could look like so that they are at least in the starting blocks, if you like, in thinking about the reform.

On specific things that are happening, as Peter Bain said, many elements of the diploma are already happening out there, particularly in project learning that involves an interdisciplinary approach to learning. It provides young people with problem-solving challenges to which they can bring their knowledge and experience from a range of subjects and disciplines. An example is what is happening in Ms Thomson's constituency, where the Falkirk-based organisation Fuel Change is offering an SCQF level 6 qualification this year. It has more than 600 students across, I think, 21 local authorities in Scotland undertaking the kind of project learning that we anticipate being part of the Scottish diploma of achievement.

We also have the Vardy Foundation, which offers a Gen+ experience to students in about six local authority areas. That allows them to develop what are generally referred to as meta-skills—such as resilience, leadership, co-operation and collaboration—through the kind of problem-solving activities that all the international research shows to be the educational experiences that current and future generations of young people will need if they are to deal with the challenges that they will face not just in school but throughout their lives.

A good number of things are happening. It is about learning lessons from where we did not get it quite right in introducing curriculum for excellence. It is about sharing the philosophy, developing the understanding and, critically, ensuring that teacher education programmes in Scotland and the continuing professional development that teachers require are provided up front as part of the reform process.

The Convener: Thank you. In my role as convener, I have my eye on the clock. We are getting some really great responses from the panel, but I have to ask you to curtail your answers and keep them as concise as possible, as we still have an awful lot of questions to get through. I am sorry, because we are getting some good responses.

We will move on to some questions from Pam Duncan-Glancy about the recommendations.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Thank you for answering the questions so far and for the information that you gave us in advance. I am struck by the importance that you all rightly place on the role of teachers, by the point that some have felt blocked and by Professor Muir's point about the impact of the distance between teachers and decision makers. How can we ensure that all three elements of the diploma are applied consistently across schools and are manageable for schools to assess?

Professor Hayward: That is a really important question. The answer lies in the collaborative approach that we have described. It is not about one or two people producing things in a darkened room that then go out into the world. It is about groups of schools working with local and national agencies and being involved in the development of the next phase, so that we build capacity across the country.

We also need to target and to be clear. If we are looking for consistency across the country, we need to design a system that will explore consistency across the country. It comes back to being clear about what we are setting out to achieve and designing approaches with people, recognising that different parts of the country will have different needs. It is about allowing flexibility but building national standards so that there is a shared understanding across the country and we build a sense of fairness.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Are the proposed structures fit for purpose to do that?

Professor Hayward: There is no reason why we cannot develop structures to do that. Once we are clear about what we are seeking to achieve, we need to look at the structures to make sure that they will facilitate those processes. One of the dangers with any innovation is that people think that, once they have agreed the vision, they can forget it and get into the practice. In fact, we really need to change the way that we think. It is about constantly asking why we are doing something, and it is then about the what, the how and the when. Once we are clear about the why, it is about asking how we can make the thing happen and how agencies can come in to support it.

I promise that this is the last long answer that I will give, convener. Linking it to a previous point that was made, I note that teachers should not have to start from a blank sheet of paper. There are things that it makes sense to do collectively. We can consider project learning as an example of that. We have examples in the system already that we can begin to build from. As part of that process, we should have the national agencies for the curriculum and assessment qualifications working collaboratively with groups of schools to develop examples of what project learning might look like. Schools will then be able to take those and adapt them to their circumstances. Schools that are already doing that work will be able to build on what they are doing. Schools for which some of the practices are more innovative will be able to build from the examples, rather than everybody having to starting from a blank sheet of paper. We learned that from higher still.

Professor Muir: I point out that not all of the three elements that are being proposed in the diploma will be assessed. The programmes of learning are akin to what we currently have at SCQF levels 6 and 7 in highers and advanced highers. The project learning that we are talking about includes teacher evaluation and teacher assessment with some kind of moderation that involves a pass or a fail.

Critically, the personal pathway will not be assessed, but it is an important part of the proposed diploma because it will contain a record of the achievements that the young person has made throughout their learning experience. It will help to change the existing culture and mindset that learning becomes important only when a pupil chooses their subjects in the second or third year in school. It is about also giving due recognition to the learning that takes place in the early years and at primary school and is built on throughout their school career.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: You have said a little about interdisciplinary working. To what degree do pupils already get opportunities to do that? Why has progress on it been slower than expected?

Professor Hayward: The reality is that some students get those opportunities and some do not. As the independent review panel, we are keen to establish that that is not good enough. Every learner in the country must have opportunities to develop the skills that are identified and to use the knowledge through skills in order to make sure that they are well supported into the next phase.

I go back to the old-fashioned watch idea. When students are in initial teacher education, much of their time—quite rightly, because this is the way that the parameters are set—is spent within individual subjects. They are supported for that particular role, but it is not the case that students in every institution across the country are supported into working in ways that cross disciplines. For that interdisciplinary approach to exist, people need to be supported to develop the skills that will allow that. That is an example of how, if one cog is not moving, we see the result in what happens in practice.

The Convener: I ask Peter Bain to be brief.

Peter Bain: I will be brief, convener. Schools are generally busy trying to put many minutes and hours of effort into the passing of exams. That proves that we are doing well and it means that the youngsters leave with a suite of qualifications that are viewed as good, albeit that there could be better alternatives for them. It is not that doing exams is necessarily bad. They are good if pupils acquire them, but they are bad if they were not the right choices in the first place. Because we are spending so much time doing that work, we are in many cases doing interdisciplinary learning only because the HMI are gonnae come in and assess us on it.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Do you have any concern that the Government will not accept your recommendations on exams?

Peter Bain: The cabinet secretary is still to go through the second tier of listening. I am hopeful that the bit of the profession that has not spoken positively about the SDA will support it and that the cabinet secretary and the Scottish Government will take the recommendations forward once they have heard from everybody.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Could the vision that you have described be delivered in the classroom environment that we have now, considering current classroom numbers and non-contact time? Could teachers do that now or will those things need to change?

Peter Bain: As Professor Hayward said, we need a systemic change. That will begin with support for teachers not just through initial teacher education, which is fabulous these days and produces great teachers, but through CPD, which needs to happen in schools for teachers who are currently in the system.

I am pretty confident that we could do that if we understand what we are trying to achieve and we put robust support packages in place. The time will come from a review of the examinations system. If we do not just do practice exams, prelims and exams and we trust teacher judgment based on the development of teachers' understanding of standards, all the time that is spent constantly teaching to the test could be transferred over to developing the skills of and opportunities for our young people.

The Convener: That line of questioning leads nicely into that of our next questioner, Stephanie Callaghan.

Stephanie Callaghan: Yes, it does. First, however, I will make a point about recommendation 6, which states that all three elements—programmes of learning, project learning and the personal pathway—need to be covered and that the diploma will not be awarded if they are not. I am a bit concerned about any risks that there might be around that, particularly with, for example, a pupil who does not have a parent who is particularly supportive or has not had great support from teachers and is missing out on that element.

Professor Muir: We said that because, if what we propose in the report is accepted as the way forward, those three elements will be the fundamental drivers for the mindset and cultural shift that the system requires. That is why we said

that the three elements need to be there. We see each of them as having an important role in changing from our current examination-driven system to one that recognises wider achievement and that better prepares children and young people for the uncertainties of the future.

Stephanie Callaghan: It is more about ensuring that that part happens.

Professor Muir: It is very much designed to emphasise some of the things that we have been talking about this morning that need to be in place in order to make it happen.

Stephanie Callaghan: That is great. Thank you.

I will move on to the practicalities of delivering the change. Culturally, we hear people in this country talk about the three Rs. It is such a huge thing. We very much pride ourselves on it. It is in the fabric of us all. We all talk about education and have a real pride in it. However, a lot of people really do not like change. Peter Bain mentioned that all the teachers you have spoken to have really come on board with the proposals, as well as young people, parents, educators and employers. How do we ensure that the remainder come on board? How do we deliver that practically on the ground and create space to develop the structures that need to change and be used in classrooms? Also, the media and press were mentioned. How do we offer a bit of protection against an attack on the approach and the fact that the qualification is not definitive in the sense that they would be marked A, B or C? How can we ensure that they open their minds and see the wider picture?

11:45

The Convener: Peter Bain, do you want to come in first on that?

Peter Bain: Yes. Communication is the answer. Those who think that the Scottish diploma of achievement is a good idea said that only after we had talked it through and they understood it and how it all fits together. To give it resilience, we need to keep going with the collaborative approach, using all the stakeholders, as the independent review group did in the initial work. We should continue to talk to our parent bodies, the youngsters and, of course, those in schools and colleges, and ask for their views as we tease it out.

I used the phrase “planning for implementation”. That is not a formal phrase; it is just my way of trying to describe how we should move forward. We need to plan for implementation. If we think that the principles are good and that the SDA is worth moving forward with in its entirety, which most people I speak to, after discussion, think that it is, in planning for implementation, we need to keep stakeholder engagement. We need to keep involving them and, as Louise Hayward said, not just put a bunch of people in a room and come up with a bunch of papers. If we do that, we can positively go out to the media. Whether they publish what we find depends on the individual paper, of course. However, if we continue to promote collaboration and positive, practical, achievable aims in that implementation, the communities will buy into it as they have the initial idea.

The Convener: Professor Hayward also wants to respond to your question, Stephanie.

Professor Hayward: We need to be creative and think about the ways in which we engage with people. I was struck by work that I did in Ireland. In introducing work in which there was a significant change, they developed a video that was shown on television and in cinemas. It was the story of Orla. It was a cartoon in which the young person went through the system. It began by asking, “Why are we doing this?” and “What will it look like for your child?”

We need to be creative in how we begin to engage with communities and to think about whom we are trying to engage in the process and how we are most likely to get to people. We have long moved beyond the position in which we believe that the letter going home in the school bag is an effective way of communicating. We need to think about such things more carefully.

That creativity also comes into the ideas of professional learning. For some people, professional learning is still the course that you go to or the event that you attend. Reframing it to say that professional learning is about the role that you play in taking forward the ideas, working with others, means that, as teachers build their expertise, they can share it with other teachers. You are therefore building capacity in the system at the same time as developing the ideas.

Stephanie Callaghan: Is part of that talking about it being foreseen that there might be a decrease in the number of national 5s or higher subjects because young people are going in a direction that is much more suitable for them? Does that play a part in it?

Professor Hayward: That is absolutely right. Someone—I think that it was Peter Bain—said that some parents are still talking about O-levels. We have to recognise that. Those of us who are steeped in education are sometimes in danger of making assumptions about where the outside world is with education. That links to your question about the extent to which people understand the system. We have a responsibility there, too.

To tackle some of the issues head on—for example, when talking with a parental group—we should ask what issues parents are likely to be concerned about and then use that as the basis for thinking about how we communicate. Therefore, we develop our communication strategy with people. Doing that identifies the issues that matter to them, and we match the communication strategy to that. It is a more sophisticated way of looking at communication.

Peter Bain: May I come in with a practical example?

The Convener: Yes—a short, practical example, if that is okay. Sorry, but I am keeping my eye on the clock.

Peter Bain: It is a very short, practical example, and it goes back to an issue that we have already raised. Many schools, in order to keep up the historical percentage of, say, national 5 pass rates, will produce packs of materials for youngsters who are not engaging as fully as they or we would wish. We get them qualifications by spoon feeding them. That happens in every local authority, although not in every school. Perhaps a better way to put it is that it happens across the country.

If the headteacher is brave enough to see a reduction in the number or percentage of national 5 passes and trade that off to ensure that a large number of youngsters get experiences that will allow them to go straight into a job—whether that be an apprenticeship or a job in the local economy—it will be worth it. Instead of those youngsters being put in a room and made to go through worksheets to pass basic qualifications, they go into the workplace better prepared and more work ready. That way, the employers are a lot happier, and so are the kids.

The Convener: Willie Rennie, it is over to you.

Willie Rennie: I would be interested in your reaction to Fiona Robertson's comments at the committee meeting last week. In particular, she warned about

"unintended consequences, particularly around equity and the personal pathway element."

She said that

"it would be important that such an SDA could benefit all learners, whatever their pathway … particularly around equity and the personal pathway element."—[*Official Report, Education, Children and Young People Committee*, 13 September 2023, c 39.]

The Convener: Professor Muir, would you like to come in first?

Professor Muir: That is the very reason why the SDA that we are proposing has those three elements. We need a different kind of recognition of achievement from the one that we have, which is heavily dominated by examination performance. It is very easy to set out a list of risks when changing any system. My personal view is that the bigger risk for us would be to not change the system. We know that there are significant issues with the system as it is currently set up and that the environment that the current generation of children and young people and future generations will go into will be radically different from the one that we have now.

The thinking behind the three elements is to ensure that young people are as well placed as they can be to deal with the kinds of problems, issues and challenges that Scottish society and global society will face. To do that, we need transformation in the curriculum that we offer and in how we assess and evaluate the performance and achievements of young people as a result.

Willie Rennie: I suppose that Fiona Robertson was setting out that there is a tension. There are tensions throughout this—I get that—but there is a tension between the choice for those people who will go down a particular path and the choice for others. A choice might have to be made as to whose interests are put first. Ultimately, this is about the timetable: can we get it to work? We are reducing teacher contact time, and extra elements will be brought into the timetable. Have you modelled that? I know that you are still at the high principle level, but have you modelled it to see how it would look and what the compromises would be?

Peter Bain: Yes, it has been modelled in a variety of schools across the country. There are lots of examples of headteachers coming together to share existing good practice. I mentioned brave headteachers who are prepared to see a drop in the pass-rate percentages, and they are doing that because they are facilitating and encouraging partnerships with other organisations, whether that is the Outward Bound Trust, the Ocean Youth Trust Scotland or local businesses and employers that provide experiences that are best suited for the young people. That needs to be recorded somewhere. Some pupils are not passing their highers or national 5s. The personal pathway element of the SDA would allow some recognition of the acquisition of skills and experiences through partnership working. Exactly how that would work still needs to be teased out, but, in principle, we already do that across the country. We share those experiences on an almost weekly basis.

Willie Rennie: Okay. Thank you.

Peter Bain: I can give you practical examples, if you want to contact me.

The Convener: Thank you. [*Interruption*.] Sorry. Professor Hayward wants to come in.

Professor Hayward: I will be brief. The review group took the issue of equity incredibly seriously, as you will see in the report. In some aspects of education we are concerned with fairness, and there are others in which we are almost prepared to turn a blind eye. For example, we have an industry of tutors in Scotland who prepare learners for examinations. Is that an issue of fairness? There are issues around that that we need to begin to explore.

As a committee, we had a very serious discussion around equity. We realised that the qualifications and assessment system does not cause the inequity, but it shines a light on it. We had an option: we had lifted up a stone, and we either put the stone back down or we addressed it. We then started conversations around what it means to have an education in Scotland and to what should every learner be entitled.

In terms of the personal pathway, we made it clear that it is not about the number or the location of experiences but about the idea that every learner should have experiences that allow them to talk about the things that they are engaged in. We decided not to put the stone back down but to shine a light on inequity, ask what it is to have an education in Scotland and say that those three parts of the experience are entitlements for every learner.

The Convener: I will bring in Michelle Thomson. Thank you for waiting patiently.

Michelle Thomson: I thank the witnesses for a very engaging session thus far. I want to ask about artificial intelligence. They say that AI is like quantum physics: if you claim that you understand it, you are merely proving that you do not. I note Professor Hayward's recommendation 12 for the Scottish Government to establish a cross-sector commission on AI urgently. Do you agree that it is vital that industry and academics, as well as practitioners and Government, are involved in that? Will you set out briefly what key themes you would like to see evaluated? The nub of my question is this: is there, in your opinion, a risk that some of the known issues with AI, particularly cheating, could push people back into teaching to the exam to alleviate said cheating rather than embracing the much wider perspective that you have outlined this morning?

Professor Hayward: That is a really interesting question. Of course, artificial intelligence came out of the blue, in a sense, midway through the review. All countries are struggling to decide how to respond to artificial intelligence just now. You will know from the report that there were two fundamental views. One view was that we should go back to tests and examinations, because at least you can control those. Another view, which came initially through the international baccalaureate, was that the learners with whom we are working will have to live with artificial intelligence and we have a responsibility to make sure that they are able to cope with that.

AI may change the nature of tasks. For example, it becomes fundamentally important that learners are able to discern the difference between what is fake and what is real. That is an issue for all of us. That will become not something in the margins but a fundamental skill. For example, it may change the nature of assessment tasks. There may be a task whereby you would ask young people to generate a response using artificial intelligence, but the task would be for them to critique it, to identify some element of dependable evidence within that and to ask where the false news is.

12:00

Those are skills that we have to develop. It will change the nature of assessment tasks, but those approaches will be fundamental to what it is to be an educated citizen in the mid-to-late 21st century. Those are the issues that the Government has to explore. I totally support your view that it is not an issue for education alone. Again, it is about bringing together the collective.

Next week, countries from the International Educational Assessment Network are meeting to look at what is happening in relation to artificial intelligence across those 12 nations. We need learning about AI within the country but also learning beyond the country. Ultimately, we have to deal with artificial intelligence.

Michelle Thomson: On that point, do you think that the fact that you even had those two facets indicates that there is still a relatively low level of awareness, regardless of whether it is among Government or wider practitioners, of exactly what the threats and the opportunities are of artificial intelligence?

Professor Hayward: Absolutely. We therefore need to involve those who are at the leading edge in those discussions. The people who have been involved in developing the process need to be part of the discussion.

Ben Macpherson: As well as ensuring that young people can consider sources and what is truth, is there a need to make sure that our young people have the knowledge and skills to use AI and utilise its opportunities? That may be something that we need to talk more about.

Professor Hayward: That is a very important point. Absolutely. The same is true of teachers, if I may reflect that back into the discussion. From what I read about artificial intelligence, there are significant opportunities, for example, for it to

support the reduction of some of the more bureaucratic tasks that teachers engage in. However, that will happen only if teachers are supported to develop those skills and approaches. It is about identifying the potential and putting support mechanisms in place to ensure that that potential is realised.

Ross Greer: I am incredibly enthusiastic about the whole package of reform that you have proposed. It is probably fair to say that the element that has captured public attention the most is the question about the status of high-stakes end-of-term exams and alternative assessment methods. You have not prescribed exactly what those alternative methods would be when it comes to what continuous assessment, et cetera, might look like.

To illustrate the options, I will pick Ken Muir's subject. Five years from now, if a 16-year-old were to take geography, what could that assessment look like? If it is not the high-stakes end-of-term exam model, what might that experience be and what options are available?

Professor Hayward: Thank you for your comments. One thing to make clear is that we are not advocating for the end of exams; we are saying that you need a broad range of approaches to assessment, and an exam can be one part of that. It is about broadening that range.

I will hand over to Ken, as the expert geographer, to respond to your question.

Professor Muir: Over the years, geography has been a subject area that has set some of the direction of travel, through the investigations and assignments that have been part and parcel of the examination system. Where they have tended to fall down has been in regard to the time that it takes to engage in some of those activities.

When we look to the future, part of what I see a geography curriculum, for example, comprising would be not just so-called pure geography but opportunities for children to engage in some of the interdisciplinary learning that we are proposing through the project learning element of the SDA, and much more on-going assessment and evaluation by children and young people of the skills that they themselves are developing.

One of the criticisms that I certainly came across from students as well as practitioners when I was doing my report was that the opportunity to develop the kind of skills and competencies that I felt were necessary for the future were not necessarily in the curriculum. That is one reason why the project learning element is so important—it gives the opportunity to develop those meta-skills, such as working in collaboration. Given that we are talking about a potential two-year period over which to gain an SCQF level 6 higher, for example, I see young people themselves identifying, through the personal pathway, their development and expertise in some of those skills and competencies that the system currently does not necessarily include in the curriculum as formally as we feel is necessary for the future.

As Louise Hayward said, we are not advocating for the end of examinations. The programmes of learning are fundamentally what we see just now. It is about how any subject area, not just geography, offers the opportunities to develop the other two elements of the SDA.

Ross Greer: You mentioned some of the potential new elements. Touching on what you said at the start of your answer, to what extent will it also be about recognising work that is already taking place? For example, you mentioned some of the assessment project work that is already happening in geography but does not currently count towards the final grade that a young person gets. How much of it is simply about bringing that into the mix of what makes up the collective assessment for their final grade? That would address some of the perfectly legitimate concerns that teachers have about workload, for example. It is about not just adding new stuff but recognising some of the good work that goes on that does not currently make up what decides the grade and what goes on the SQA certificate at the end of the year.

Professor Muir: As I said earlier, we are not talking about a situation where all three elements are examined. That is an important part of the cultural shift that we are trying to generate through the SDA. Part of the answer to that goes back to what I said about the fact that some activities that schools already engage in demonstrate how the likes of project learning and the personal pathway can be developed. For example, as part of what the Vardy Foundation is doing with the Gen+ programme, a perfectly good digital e-portfolio is developed that encourages the young people who are engaged in that programme to reflect on their learning, to evaluate where they are in their skills development and to use that to plan for their next steps in learning. There are elements already in the system that could be built on.

It is about building teachers' confidence, which is where the whole professional learning and CPD angle comes back in. Although many teachers in secondary school see themselves very much as subject experts, part of that cultural shift is about how they prepare young people for the very different world in which they will live. Although the subject element is important, so are the other elements that they, as learners, recognise, how they are developing and having a say in that as part of their learning journey.

Professor Hayward: In our discussions with young people, we were also struck by the weakness, sometimes, of the evidence base for the decisions that they took about the next stage in their life. We heard things such as, "I'm going to do X at college, because it wasn't a subject at school, so it will be new," or, "My dad did this, so I'm going to do the same." The personal pathway is also about trying to encourage the conversations that allow learners to make better decisions about the next steps that they take in their journeys.

Ross Greer: My next question touches on Willie Rennie's line of questioning on the SQA and is about how this is taken forward and what specific proposals are adopted in taking forward your recommendations. I will ask a two-part question, because one part is a bit provocative and you might not want to answer it. How credible can the approach be if the SQA in its current form takes a lead on making decisions about what the new models of assessment might look like and what the balance of assessment might be?

You might want to sidestep that—although I urge you not to—so I will ask a general question. Who should Government involve in the next step of making those specific decisions on the balance of assessment and the models of assessment for each course, on the basis of your recommendations?

Professor Hayward: Those are tricky questions. Do you want to start on that, Ken, or do you want me to do so?

Professor Muir: I am happy to offer my view. In Scotland, we have a single awarding body that sets the examinations and so on. As I said earlier, Scotland has a heavily examination-driven system, and that includes the curriculum. If you ask many teachers who is responsible for the curriculum in Scotland, certainly in secondary schools, they will say that it is the qualifications body. Personally, I do not think that that is healthy, because there is a huge amount of expertise at grass-roots level that needs to be used more effectively in determining what the curriculum looks like and how and when it changes, and in ensuring that it is not simply amended when a decision is taken to change the examinations.

I am hopeful—I hint at this in my report—that the proposed new qualifications and awarding body would be sympathetic to what we are proposing in the SDA, and that the activities and engagement of that body with the wider system would be at a high level, so that the young people benefit from not only examination results but the wider range of achievements that the education system in Scotland offers them currently and, arguably, could offer much more consistently and in a better way in the future.

Ross Greer: Professor Muir, you deserve a lot of credit for being one of the driving forces behind the organisational reform that is taking place, but, realistically, we are probably three to four years away from having the new qualifications body established, bedded in and operational. I presume that you would not want us to wait until we have the new body—hopefully, with its new culture—before engaging in the implementation of the recommendations. That leaves us with the question of the current SQA and its role in taking this forward.

Professor Muir: As I understand it, the Government is already moving forward on the introduction of a new qualifications and assessment body. That body's culture will be significant in ensuring the success, or otherwise, of what we are proposing in the SDA.

The Convener: Liam Kerr has the final question. I am looking at the time. If we have time, there will be one more question.

Liam Kerr: Qualifications, as they are set currently, are key to monitoring how the system is performing. Professor Hayward, can a Scottish diploma of achievement meaningfully allow for similar metrics to be gathered?

Professor Hayward: Yes, because it would give a broader range of evidence that would allow the policy makers to consider the system. To go back to a point that Peter Bain raised earlier, it would give evidence on every learner rather than only a number of learners and so would be a more comprehensive basis of evidence.

One of the issues that we raise in the report, but which I think is outside our remit—forgive me for that—is a suggestion that, in the future, Scotland may wish to reconsider the idea of having a national survey. National surveys can give bodies such as this committee specific information related to specific questions, and, because the evidence that is gathered does not identify individual schools, there is the advantage of not getting the negative washback effects that Peter Bain described. Although the diploma will give committees such as this a broader evidence base on which to make decisions, thinking about alternative ways of providing evidence for policy communities would be worth serious consideration in the longer term.

12:15

Liam Kerr: It could be argued that an examinations system provides an objective benchmark against which people can be assessed that might not be there with some kind of continuous assessment. How could you ensure parity in the assessment process in a continuous assessment framework, where different or more

subjective means of assessment by the assessors might be applied?

Professor Hayward: I will start answering that question, and then I will hand over.

The Convener: We probably do not have time for more than one panel member to answer.

Professor Hayward: May I make one comment?

The Convener: Yes.

Professor Hayward: The research evidence suggests that we overestimate the dependability of external assessment and underestimate the dependability of teacher assessment. The truth lies somewhere in the middle. There are cultural issues that we need to address, and that is part of a communication strategy.

Peter Bain: On exams, there is nothing wrong with assessment. Teachers need assessment because, without it, we are unable to determine whether they are working through the agreed programme of work and that there is the acquisition of skills and knowledge that we need. Teachers do assessments all the time, but more time and moderation are crucial to making that work in a continual assessment model. The people who mark the exam papers are teachers who work in a variety of schools and come together once a year.

There is nothing to say that a new qualifications agency will not spend as much time doing exams, but it will spend part of its time doing moderation activities in which existing teachers carry out the same type of activity but across the year. That would benefit a number of youngsters who cannot cope with being put in a big hall—

The Convener: I want to bring in Stephanie Callaghan.

Peter Bain: Sorry.

The Convener: She has promised me that it will be a brief supplementary.

Stephanie Callaghan: I am looking for a yes or no answer. Would it be fair to say that this is a shift away from quantitative data to look more at qualitative data that comes from the teachers, the pupils and their experiences, to get a better balance?

Peter Bain: It is a balance.

Professor Hayward: It is both quantitative and qualitative.

The Convener: We have managed to get everyone in. We have come to a screeching halt when we could carry on the conversation for some time. I thank the panel members for their time today.

12:18

Meeting continued in private until 12:34.

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

All documents are available on
the Scottish Parliament website at:

www.parliament.scot

Information on non-endorsed print suppliers
is available here:

www.parliament.scot/documents

For information on the Scottish Parliament contact
Public Information on:

Telephone: 0131 348 5000
Textphone: 0800 092 7100
Email: sp.info@parliament.scot

The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba