



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Education, Children and Young People Committee

Wednesday 29 May 2024

Session 6



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CONTENTS

	Col.
SUBORDINATE LEGISLATION	1
Education (Fees and Student Support) (Miscellaneous Amendments) (Scotland) Regulations 2024 (SS1 2024/140)	1
SCOTTISH TECHNOLOGY ECOSYSTEM REVIEW	3
CHILD-FRIENDLY COMPLAINTS HANDLING PRINCIPLES	31

EDUCATION, CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE COMMITTEE

17th Meeting 2024, 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:

Rosemary Agnew (Scottish Public Services Ombudsman)
Josh Barnham (Scottish Public Services Ombudsman)
Professor Mark Logan (University of Glasgow)
Andrew Sheridan (Scottish Public Services Ombudsman)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Pauline McIntyre

LOCATION

The Adam Smith Room (CR5)

Scottish Parliament
**Education, Children and Young
People Committee**

Wednesday 29 May 2024

*[The Deputy Convener opened the meeting at
09:15]*

Subordinate Legislation

**Education (Fees and Student Support)
(Miscellaneous Amendments) (Scotland)
Regulations 2024 (SSI 2024/140)**

The Deputy Convener (Ruth Maguire): Good morning, and welcome to the 17th meeting in 2024 of the Education, Children and Young People Committee. We have received apologies from Stephanie Callaghan.

Our first agenda item is consideration of the Education (Fees and Student Support) (Miscellaneous Amendments) (Scotland) Regulations 2024, which are being considered under the negative procedure.

Do members have any issues that they wish to raise?

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): I appreciate the opportunity to put something on the record. My comments relate not directly to the specific provisions in these regulations but to provisions on fees in general. As members will know, the part-time student fee grant is available to students with an income of less than £25,000 per year, but neither the level of the grant nor the threshold to access it has changed in a decade.

Concerns are being raised, particularly by those from the Open University, as 69 per cent of its students are part time. One student has said that they received a cost of living pay increase from their employer that pushed them just over the £25,000 threshold, meaning that they could no longer afford their studies. Another student, who works in the national health service, said that the lowest-paid full-time NHS Scotland employee now earns £25,368, so they are outwith the bracket of people who can access the grant, even though they need to access their course as part of their work.

I draw members' attention to that and ask whether there is anything that we can do to draw it to the Government's attention.

The Deputy Convener: Those comments are on the record, and we will be able to discuss the matter further in private session.

Does the committee agree that it does not wish to make any recommendations in relation to the instrument that is in front of us?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Scottish Technology Ecosystem Review

09:17

The Deputy Convener: Agenda item 2 is an update on the Scottish technology ecosystem review, and we will take evidence from Professor Mark Logan. I welcome Professor Logan and ask him to briefly introduce himself to the committee.

Professor Mark Logan (University of Glasgow): Hi, everybody. I have a number of roles, one of which is the chief entrepreneur adviser to the Scottish Government. I am also a professor of computing science at the University of Glasgow, and I work with start-ups and scale-ups in Scotland and internationally to help companies to grow. That is a quick summary.

The Deputy Convener: Thank you for being with us this morning. Your STER report made a total of 34 recommendations, 11 of which related to education. In your assessment, to what extent has progress been made on the education recommendations?

Professor Logan: I would like to put the answer to that question in a couple of contexts—one is the context of the wider progress that has been made on the Scottish technology ecosystem review, and the other is the economic context—because I think that that will help us to better understand the progress that has or has not been made.

On the review—which I will call STER from now on, because that is a little bit easier to say than the longer version—there has generally been very good progress. For example, the Techscaler network has been established, and we now have 11 sites across Scotland. After just over a year, there are more than 540 start-ups in the network, 3,000 members, 100 active mentors and more than 50 partnerships with other ecosystem organisations.

The ecosystem fund and the pathways pre-start fund have come to fruition, which will help to stimulate the ecosystem, and the northern scale-up fund has been established, which was another STER recommendation. There has also been some meaningful progress on the aspect of the report on entrepreneurial campuses, which I will come on to. Generally, progress has been strong in those areas.

There are two parts to progress on education. The first relates to what is happening at university level, and the second relates to what is happening at school level. At university level, STER and some of its successor sub-reports push for Scotland to make its university sector absolutely world class at entrepreneurial stimulation. We do

that by looking at the very best universities in the world at entrepreneurial stimulation, spin-out creation and so on and asking ourselves whether we are doing those things and, if not, how we can do them.

I am reasonably pleased with progress on that aspect of education in the sense that, after a slightly slow start, the university sector has responded energetically to the entrepreneurial campus definition. I have seen many universities report back in detail on how they plan to meet the goals of that initiative, and many projects—roughly 25—have been put in place to start to edge us closer towards that definition.

I would like to see us go faster and put more money into that initiative, and I think that the indications are that that will be possible this year. I see progress in that regard.

The Deputy Convener: Can you give us a flavour of what an entrepreneurial campus might look like for a student?

Professor Logan: Certainly. We can think of that as consisting of two elements—what does an entrepreneurial campus look like at undergraduate level, and what does it look like at spin-out, postgraduate and academic level? In each case, an entrepreneurial campus would have certain visible attributes.

For example, undergraduates in all faculties and schools would be educated on entrepreneurialism, how to bring products to market and so on. There would be high-quality incubators where students could test out their ideas. There would be a collision of disciplines. For example, artificial intelligence students and biotech students would mix together and do projects together, because that is where the next wave of biotechs will come from—there is no longer any separation of such things. Summer schools would encourage that kind of activity. Large numbers of entrepreneurs would be in residence on the campuses, because we cannot necessarily expect academics to be great academics and great entrepreneurs, so there must be a mixed base.

At postgraduate level, there would be strong pathways for identifying researchers, PhD students and academics who had the potential to spin out, and there would be support for them so that, when they did so, they would know something about business and an appropriate equity stake would be taken in their spin-out so that it did not disincentivise other investors. There would also be pathways into assets such as the Techscaler network or something similar. That is what you would see.

Some universities are doing really well in that regard. Last year, the University of Strathclyde was awarded the title of European entrepreneurial

university of the year. We are doing some things well, but we know that, in every campus, no matter how grand it is, there is a deficit in some areas. That is okay as long as we are working on doing the right things to reduce it.

The Deputy Convener: Wonderful. Liam Kerr has a supplementary question.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): Good morning, Professor Logan. Yesterday, when I was at the University of the West of Scotland, I saw exactly what you are talking about. It was brilliant, and I think that I have seen exactly the same at the University of Stirling. It is hugely exciting to listen to what you have said, but it begs some questions. On whom is the onus to set up and continue to drive forward such campuses? Where will the funding come from?

Professor Logan: Universities are independent organisations so, in the end, they have to make the choice, but I prefer to think about it as a partnership between universities and other stakeholders such as the Scottish Government and the enterprise agencies. I expect universities to understand that, to be truly world class, they cannot be great only at research and teaching; they have to be great at entrepreneurial stimulation, as the very best universities on this earth are.

However, in difficult financial times for universities, it helps if some additional stimulation is provided. There has been some initial financial stimulation from the Scottish Government, and my expectation is that there will be more this year. For example, I mentioned the large number of projects that have been executed to move aspects of university campuses towards these kinds of goals, and a lot of the funding came from the ecosystem fund, which I mentioned earlier and which was a STER recommendation.

I hope that this does not sound idealistic, but Scotland still has the largest number of world-class universities per capita anywhere on earth. Are we fully utilising that resource to drive Scotland's economy? I think that everybody, if they were being candid, would say that we are not doing that to the extent that we could. Using those assets requires partnership between stakeholders.

The idea of entrepreneurial campuses has been useful because it has acted as a concentration point for discussion. It acts as a directional indicator in saying, "This is what good looks like." Generally, universities are moving in that direction and funding is starting to align around that. I would love for there to be more funding and for us to go faster, but progress is being made.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I want to follow that theme for a few minutes. Do you think that universities have the ownership of intellectual

property right when it comes to spin-outs, licences and so on? Are they feeling the financial pressure to raise money for the institution, or are they setting things free to allow them to be much more beneficial to the wider economy? That is my first question.

Secondly, are you finding growth in the wider ecosystem? Basically, are graduates who have set up their own businesses staying in the area and contributing to the further development of their former institutions in an entrepreneurial way?

Professor Logan: On your first question—which, to recap, is on whether universities are handling their IP aspects properly—the answer is no. Things are improving, but no.

The issue is that the bigger the equity stake a university takes in a spin-out, by whichever mechanism or form, the less incentive there is for people to try to spin out or for follow-on investment to be made. For example—and this is an extreme case, but it did happen—if an investor looks at a company with only 50 per cent equity, they will not invest in it. They will know that the founder will be diluted to near zero, and it is not good to have a founder who is not incentivised to continue. Awareness of this area is rising in Scotland, although, actually, it is a United Kingdom problem; the equity stake taken in the UK is on average twice that taken in Europe as a whole.

The situation is improving, but it is nuanced. If a spin-out has spent 10 years utilising deep tech that only the university can supply, a case can be made for its taking a reasonably large equity stake. However, if we are talking about a consumer internet tech spin-out that happened to use the university's canteen and an office, the stake should be less.

Something that it would be important to inculcate in universities can be seen at Stanford University in the United States, where the flow-back from alumni in personal time, grants to the university and so on is enormous. The university's brand also improves if it is creating great spin-outs; if you have a high spin-out rate, you can get payback over many, many years. As I say, the picture is not uniform—different universities are in different states of enlightenment on this point—but it is still an active discussion.

As for the second question whether spin-outs are staying in and giving back to Scotland, the picture is improving, but it takes us into the territory of the rest of STER. How do we create an environment in Scotland where spin-outs—and, indeed, other start-ups—can thrive, and not just when they are small? Can they get to scale here, too? In the past five years, the environment has significantly improved as far as that goal is

concerned, but it is still the case that the job is not fully done.

We have a great start-up environment at the moment, but the next stage is to turn it into a great scale-up environment. For a software-only company, things are in good shape to some extent, but if we are talking about deep tech companies—say, a robotics company that wants to prototype a robotarium, which is a world-class facility that manufactures at limited scale to test an idea further—we have to put those pathways in place. That issue is very much on my mind, and I am having discussions about how we do that. Again, the picture is improving, but it is fair to say that it is still mixed.

Convener, I would just like to ensure that I can conclude my opening remarks, because we have not yet talked about computing science in schools.

09:30

The Deputy Convener: Colleagues will ask questions on that, and we will certainly give you the opportunity to talk about it.

Professor Logan: Okay.

Willie Rennie: We do celebrate success in this place, but equally we are here to try to solve problems. Where do you think the strategy is not working, and why is that?

Professor Logan: I am sorry—which areas?

Willie Rennie: You have made a number of recommendations. Which one is least progress being made on?

Professor Logan: That brings me back to computing science in schools, because that is the only area where we are not making the progress that we should be.

Perhaps I can, as I suggested in my opening remarks, put this in an economic context for a moment. Before we ask about what progress we are making, it is worth asking why this even matters—and, indeed, that question does get asked. We have already touched on this briefly, but the health of the tech sector in Scotland is quite strong, and I would say that we have more credible start-ups than we have had in my working career here, which, sadly, is longer than I would like to admit. The support environment for those start-ups, partly because of the implementation of STER but because of the work of many other important stakeholders, is stronger than it has ever been.

However, the entire tech sector is a function of the number of engineers that you can supply to it. It is certainly true that a typical tech company does not employ only engineers, but you can be sure that every other job—product manager, project

manager, human relations people, admin people, security guards et cetera—are all dependent on engineers. After all, if there is no product, there is no cause to have those other roles.

If we look at countries that are about the same size as Scotland and which have absorbed this point—I am thinking of countries such as Estonia, a very small country with an extremely strong tech sector; Lithuania and Finland—they all have very strong tech sectors that contribute huge job creation and huge tax revenues, and they have all paid a lot of attention to how to get talent into that ecosystem. There are different ways of doing the same in Scotland, but the main route is through the education system, as it should be.

In that context, one of STER's major recommendations was that computing science become a peer of the other sciences. That does not seem too much to ask; after all, it is an important subject. There are important bright spots—and I think that it is useful, for a balanced picture, to talk about them, as I hope we will—but looking at this from a numbers perspective, we see that, in Scotland today, at least 32,500 pupils, or about 12 per cent of the total base, have no access to a computing science teacher in their schools. I say "at least", because the data is gathered from local authorities, and some of it is not in a form that allows us to fully understand the situation. We are talking about 66 schools, including 27 schools with more than 500 pupils and 10 with more than 1,000. That is not a great picture.

Things are worse than that, though, because another bunch of schools have only one computing science teacher, and 25 of them have more than 1,000 pupils. Let us not fool ourselves: that is not really computing science provision in schools with more than 1,000 pupils.

It is even worse, though, because the problem is not evenly distributed. We have computing science deserts in Scotland. In the north of Scotland, for example, over half of schools have no qualified computing science teacher, while in the south of Scotland, it is two thirds of schools—

Willie Rennie: Two thirds?

Professor Logan: Yes, 10 of the 16. It all adds up to a bad static picture; indeed, to me, it sounds like a crisis. It is worse again, because you have to look at the trend in these things, and to understand the trend that really matters, you have to look at teacher numbers. Inevitably, if there are no teachers, you cannot teach the subject. Since 2008, teacher numbers have fallen by 25 per cent. This year, we have the lowest number of computing science teachers on record; we had 766 in 2008 and 578 now. Indeed, the number has fallen by about 25 since STER was published.

As for recruitment rates, we were for several years recruiting about 44 teachers a year into the profession—that is, they were finishing their qualification and going into teaching. In 2022, however, that number was 26, and last year, it was 16.

It is even worse again, though. If we look at the demographics of the teaching base, we see that approximately eight times as many computing science teachers are over 55 as under 25. That is not the case with all the sciences—it is a computing science challenge.

If you intersect the different aspects—the fall in recruitment, the demographic time bomb, the fact that a lot of departments have one computing science teacher, which makes them very vulnerable, and so on—I think that it is fair to say that we are in difficulty. We can potentially talk about why more is not getting done in that area, what we should be doing and what my prognosis is—and I will be guided by your questions—but it is important that we understand the starting conditions. That is why I raised this in STER as a priority area, but we have not made the progress that is required.

The Deputy Convener: I will bring in Ben Macpherson for a supplementary, and then Pam Duncan-Glancy and Michelle Thomson will probe this very topic a bit more.

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): Convener, I will let colleagues ask their questions and see what happens.

The Deputy Convener: So you might come in at the end. Willie, are you content?

Willie Rennie: I am quite happy. I know that other members have questions on this topic.

The Deputy Convener: I call Pam Duncan-Glancy.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Good morning. Thank you for joining us, and thank you for the work that you have done so far in this area. I am interested in exploring what you have said about education and schools, and computing science in particular.

At the committee's evidence session in 2021, you highlighted—as you have done today—the challenges to do with the perception of computing science in schools. You suggested that, essentially, it was perceived to be a third-tier subject. I note the point that you have made about the need for it to be taken seriously, alongside other sciences. Do you think that any progress has been made on that? What are the barriers to progress? How can we address the issue in schools?

Professor Logan: I will address your first question, about whether any progress has been

made, first. The answer is yes. There is one area where very substantial progress has been made, and that is on the setting up of the STACS group, which the committee might have heard of. STACS stands for Scottish Teachers Advancing Computing Science. After STER was published, I produced a further document that was not published, but which was circulated among stakeholders. One of the things that it recommended was that we should create an organisation that would be led by teachers, for teachers. That became STACS.

I will explain why STACS is profoundly important in a second, but first I will explain how it works. We have two teachers who have transferred into STACS full time, and they work with what I would term an expert teachers group of Scotland's most experienced computing science teachers. Every computing science teacher in Scotland can be a member of STACS. Its remit is to create best practice and to share it across all schools; it is also to support teachers with the teachability of the subject.

I will give an example of a valuable initiative that has come from that. As I think I mentioned in the evidence that I gave in 2021, one of the issues that computing science has had is that a fair section of the teaching base was not particularly confident in teaching the subject. It is quite a technical subject. For example, a large number of teachers did not feel confident about teaching advanced higher or higher. Those were often teachers who had come from other disciplines. That was having an effect on the curriculum and the numbers that could be taught.

STACS has implemented a fantastic model that should, in my view, be replicated in all the sciences. That model involves using material that our most experienced teachers have created to teach our less experienced teachers in the areas in which they are currently feeling challenged. We host that learning platform at the University of Glasgow; it is a free platform. The teachers have created that material largely in their own time. That has had a phenomenal response—it has received very good feedback from teachers.

There has been a very good partnership between the Scottish Qualifications Authority and STACS. Every year, the SQA identifies the areas where students have struggled in the public exams. We take that as a proxy for areas where teachers are having trouble teaching, and STACS then builds material to support teachers in those areas. The great thing about it is that it is a national-scale programme right away, because it uses the teaching network. In my view, networks usually trump hierarchies. As well as being a national-scale programme that has the good will of

the teachers, STACS is very cost effective, so it has been a great success.

Another bright spot is the fact that STACS has created some excellent teaching resources for first and second year—the broad general education stage. As we go forward—as we go through this session, perhaps we will talk about how I think we should move forward—STACS should move into the centre of our education process. If we can engage teachers, who are the people who know what the challenges and the difficulties are, in enthusiastically raising up the subject through that network, instead of simply having things visited upon them, that is a powerful tool. There has been progress in that regard.

Your second question was about what the barriers are. In order to understand the barriers, you need to go inside the black box of Government and go to the departmental level. It will come as no surprise to hear that the economy directorate—where the economic imperative that I have talked about is well understood—gets this. Over the past four years, I have found that the areas in which we have made progress have tended to be led by the economy directorate. The work on STACS was led by the economy directorate. It was also supported by some funding from the learning directorate—I was very grateful to Shirley-Anne Somerville for bringing that about in her time as the cabinet secretary.

For most of the past four years—I sense that there has been a significant change in recent times, which I am encouraged by—the problem was that Education Scotland and the other main education authorities did not consider computing science to be important and did not believe that the subject was in a dynamic crisis. Addressing the issues that I was raising was non-trivial, because there is no single ownership, as the learning directorate, the SQA, Education Scotland, the local authorities, the General Teaching Council for Scotland and headteachers are all involved. Other opinions are available, but my interpretation is that those authorities did not think that computing science was important and did not think that it was in crisis, and thought, therefore, that it was not worth taking action.

My experience over most of the past four years is that, when energy was expended, it was usually expended in defending the situation and hoping that I would go away, rather than in trying to lead on these issues. Leadership is what is needed here. Recently, I have seen change, which is encouraging. Obviously, I would like to see change that extends beyond this committee, but it is encouraging that there has been some change. Later on, perhaps we will move on to discuss what we should do next. I am more encouraged, but we have not got further than we have because

computing science has not been considered important.

09:45

Pam Duncan-Glancy: How do you think that we should change the perception of computing science? How could we attract more teachers? Earlier, you spoke about a “demographic time bomb”, given the number of people who are leaving the profession. What would you do to change that? How would you attract more people to the profession?

Professor Logan: I would think about it in this way. The perception at large is not a bad perception. Computing science is one of the coolest things that can be found in society today. We are all mesmerised by ChatGPT and so on. Well, guess what? That is computing science. Quantum computing is computing science. I could go on.

The issue is not the perception at large. The issue is that we are not trying to recruit. We could divide the solution set into two: we have to recruit more teachers, and we have to retain and engage the teachers that we have. Let us look at the first part of that. At the moment, computing science has the smallest allocation of teaching recruitment of all the sciences. However, in recent years, we have not been filling that allocation. For four years, I have argued that we should try to fill it, but I have had a lot of people explaining to me why there is no point in trying to do so, because it would not work.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: What would trying to do that involve?

Professor Logan: It would involve, for example, going to computing science students in our universities and saying, “Have you thought about teaching?” I am a professor at Glasgow university. I have 100 students a year, and I know that about 40 per cent of them do not want to become software engineers but want to use their computing science qualification. There is a constituency there and, contrary to another myth, teaching salaries are actually okay. There are a number of computing science students who would, in my opinion—based on my anecdotal checking of this—be quite comfortable about going for those salaries. The problem has been that we have spent more energy on explaining why we should not try to do that than we have on we should try to do it.

I will give an example of a really cost-effective way of doing that. Why do we not ask our computing science teachers to go to our universities and speak to students about how much they love teaching computing science? That would not cost very much. I think that it would cost

as much as the day rate to get a teacher taken out of the classroom and backfilled, which is about £250 per teacher. It would not cost a lot of money. In the context of a £2 billion education budget, there would be no ripple. I think that that could be quite effective.

Another thing that we could do—again, these are not new ideas; we have been talking about such things for an awfully long time—is that we could look at how we create pathways inside universities and colleges to get more computing science students. For example, it is very standard for students in third and fourth year of a computing science degree to have options that they can take. They can specialise in things such as AI. Why do we not combine a professional graduate diploma in education and a computing science course so that, in third and fourth year, students would study those elements of computing science that they would need in order to become a teacher? Why do we not do that?

There are myriad ideas, but I have been frustrated by the attitude, “That’s an interesting idea. Good luck with that. Let us know how you get on.” My ask is that the authorities that are charged with educating our children should lead on this as though they mean it. That has not really been evident.

To address the retention part, you could do a lot worse than sit down with members of the STACS team, because they spend all their time with computing science teachers. Of the 578 computing science teachers in Scotland, 490 have already signed up for STACS in its first year. They have done that voluntarily—they were not forced to do it. The STACS team knows what teachers think. There are about 50 small issues. I would say that a great many of those would not cost money to fix. That would make the subject a lot easier to teach and would raise teacher morale.

I will give one example of that. There are tools that computing science teachers need to use in the classroom. In order to be able to use those, they need to have data protection approval. They need to go through a process. Every local authority needs such approval. Today, it cannot be done nationally. Typically, teachers are directed centrally to go and solve that for themselves. Teachers do not really know how to do that, and they should not be being asked to liaise with their local authority to get a data protection impact assessment. That should be done for them. Someone should be knocking heads together to get that sorted. Interestingly, our independent schools do not have that problem. They can use all those tools because they have a sensible approach to the general data protection regulation. There is a state/public school divide there.

I would like the responsible leaders to sit down with the STACS team and say, “What is it you need? We’ll get that done for you.” We would not get all those things done at once, but we could work through that list over the next 24 months. We do not need committees to be formed. I mean no disrespect to this committee—committees have value, but I have gone through the committee approach. We convened a committee of people from different education bodies, and we tried to make progress.

I spent about a year and a half in that process. It felt very inertial. There was a lack of leadership in the room. It was like walking through cold treacle backwards, dragging a heavily sedated bull elephant. At the end of it, we got to the point where we agreed that we needed to recruit more computing science teachers, and that was costed. We also agreed that we needed to ask students whether they wanted to become computing science teachers, and that was costed, too, but, of course, that was not funded by the education authorities, so, essentially, that whole process was a waste of time. We need to go faster. That time has been wasted, and we cannot get it back. My elephant is still stuck in the treacle.

We need to change that model. As we go forward, I want this activity to be sponsored at the most senior levels of Government. I would like STACS to be adopted centrally—I want people to say, “What do you need? How do we get that for you?” A lot of what is required does not need money; it just needs someone to lead on it and to use their convening power. I want us to be inventive, to believe that there is a crisis and to try to solve it.

It is not a case of, as is sometimes said, putting computing science above the other sciences; it is a case of repairing the gap. As I said earlier, we have lost a quarter of our teachers since 2008. Yes, other sciences have challenges, too, but we have lost three times as many computing science teachers as we have physics teachers, for example. I have found that there is limited utility in talking about important solutions if the deeper issue is that we do not think that the subject is important. That is where the change needs to happen. It needs to take place at a senior level in the relevant authorities.

Recently, I have seen some positive signs of that in the encouraging conversations that I have had with the new director general of education, Neil Rennick, and with some of his senior staff. We need to lead on this issue as though it matters to the economy, because it matters to the economy. In my opinion, that is what we need, rather than resistance to addressing the issue, which, frankly, is what I have experienced in 95 per cent of my engagement in this area.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Do we have time for one more question from me, deputy convener?

The Deputy Convener: Yes, we do.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Thank you.

That is all very helpful. What would you do at primary level, and what conversations have you had with the deans of education about that?

Professor Logan: If you look at a country such as Estonia, you will see that it is teaching their children the pedagogy of logic, which is a precursor to programming, at primary school. There have been some Education Scotland initiatives in that area. The issue is always one of scale and priority. It is not enough to tackle an issue in a couple of schools; the approach must be deployed more widely.

I would like it to end there, at primary level, but I do not think that we should start there. That is because, in an ideal world, I would want us to be doing a bunch of stuff. However, we have to get to that ideal world. I would start by arresting the decline in teachers, addressing the teachability of the subject and trying to recruit for secondary school level.

At primary level, we have resources available. I would like us to look at how we intertwine those with the curriculum in a way that supports teachers and is teachable within their other responsibilities. I accept that that is not trivial. If we do not think that that is important, it will never happen. However, I would very much start at secondary level, because that is where we can get the quickest return, frankly.

Scottish students are arriving at university level with programming abilities that are, in general, well below those of their eastern European counterparts. The quickest way to address that is to stabilise the subject at secondary level and then we can work our way down to primary school level, which I accept gets challenging. As I said, I would not want to start there, because there are some easy things that we could do at secondary level that we are just not doing.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Understood. Thank you—that is very helpful.

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): Good morning, Professor Logan. Thank you for joining us. One area that I want to explore that has not come up yet is the issue of gender stereotyping in computing science and so on. I know that one of your 34 recommendations was on that issue. You gave a status report on the teaching profession. Can you break down those numbers for us and say what percentage of teachers are women, and will you give us a flavour of where we are in relation to making progress in that area?

Professor Logan: It is good to look at teacher and pupil numbers in that regard. Teacher numbers are better than pupil numbers. The percentage of females in teaching is about 60 per cent. On the pupil number side, it varies slightly year to year, but, unfortunately, only about 20 per cent of candidates at national 5 and higher level are girls. We have a significant gender imbalance in computing science—it is the worst of all the sciences. Mathematics is about 50:50.

To be fair to Education Scotland, it has launched a number of initiatives in that area. However, the societal response needs to be greater than simply asking Education Scotland to sort out the situation.

It is a very interesting area. If we go back in history to when programming started as a discipline back in the 1950s, 100 per cent of programmers were women, as I know that you are aware. Why was that? In those days, hardware was cool—there were big rooms full of flashing lights and stuff like that. That cool stuff was obviously men's work, right? The programming of those computers was seen as a secretarial task, so that was obviously women's work.

It turned out that women were awfully good at programming. Most of the early computing science that we still use today was created by Grace Hopper and other great minds. Software engineering became the dominant discipline. It became more powerful than hardware so, of course, it became a men's discipline, and salaries went up. Then we started to explain why we, as a society, really needed men to programme computers, which was because, cognitively, they were better at it—it was all fantastical stuff that conformed to the prejudices of the day. Even then, if you were to look at the make-up of a computing science class at university level in the 1970s or the early 1980s, it was quite gender balanced.

However, then something else happened: the home computer came along. The home computer was marketed as a boys' toy. After that, we have seen a decline in gender balance. Certainly, in our schools, the gender balance in computing science has got worse over the years. It is now stable at rock bottom, but it used to be better.

10:00

Why am I indulging myself in this history tour? It is because the situation is rooted in our societal sexism. Unless we start talking about that, it is difficult to change things. If you ask parents to rate the intelligence of their children—their babies or one-year-olds—the majority will repeatedly overrate the intelligence quotient of their male children and underrate the IQ of their female

children. Every generation is passing on its prejudice to the next generation.

How do we arrest that? It is not just about going into schools and talking to the kids about gender balance. It is also about us. It is about society not accepting the situation. I would love to see us spending money educating adults on the topic, or at least not making it taboo to talk about it, because it is kind of taboo. We scratch our heads and say, "What's wrong with girls not wanting to do computing science?" We know that the issue is what is wrong with society—that is the truth. We are still maintaining notions that somehow computing science is a boys' subject. In doing so, we are losing half of our best programmers.

I am not sure what the answers are, but I am certain that the question goes beyond what we can cover within our scope today and what Education Scotland can do. A societal response is required. I would love to see us pass a misogyny bill, for example, because these things are all on the same spectrum.

There is a wider topic there, but my point is that we can do certain things to encourage a rebalancing that are within the scope of this committee. We can bring exemplars into the classroom. We can use non-gendered stereotypes when we are teaching and so on. A lot of those things are being done, but that 80:20 rule applies in every area of society, does it not? There is a deeper topic than I could fairly ask Education Scotland to fix, although it is part of it.

Michelle Thomson: I feel as though we could talk for hours about the systemic issues for women in such professions.

If I make the link back to teaching, an issue is the percentage of women in teaching compared with that of men. Sometimes, we will bemoan that because that brings other issues. However, are we missing a trick in not getting more teachers to teach computing science and attracting women to those roles? For other reasons, which I am not saying are right because they also play to societal bias, are we missing a trick by not just attracting teachers but attracting female teachers, because that would be one of the steps that would make that change?

Professor Logan: That is a great point, and we are missing a number of tricks there. Off the top of my head, there are a number of things that we could do. Take CodeClan for example. CodeClan, which unfortunately discontinued last year, is coming back. Its student base tends to be people over 30, with a very strong gender balance. Why would we not take people from other disciplines—CodeClan was there to convert people into software engineers—put them through the intensive new CodeClan course, which is quite a

quick process, give them access to a professional graduate diploma in education course in a full or concentrated form and then put them into teaching, supported by STACS, so that they can be confident of having support the help of that network in those early years? That is a new channel. The source material is much more gender balanced; that also applies to the students coming in. Consequently, more female teachers will come out the other side of that. There are lots of things like that we could do.

I hope that my comments to Pam Duncan-Glancy did not sound overly frustrated. It is just that we could do those things, so let us just do them; they are not hard.

Scotland very often has the assets, and it is about putting those assets in combination and stepping outside of our fiercely protected departmental boundaries in order to get stuff done. All that I ask is that we step across those boundaries like we did during the Covid pandemic. Let us treat this like a crisis. Not every crisis lasts a month. Some crises happen over months and years. Computing science is one of those. Let us step across a few boundaries and just get stuff done. Then we could do things like that and it would work. I know that it would work.

Michelle Thomson: Finally, AI is pervasive. What are the barriers that restrict women's access to a profession in that area, and what are the opportunities? I do not know whether you have given that issue any thought at all.

Professor Logan: On that issue, and in a wider context, AI is very interesting. It is a huge disruptor. It comes with its own problems. For example, AI that has been trained by white male tech bros in Silicon Valley tends to have a white male tech bro bias.

AI relates to this discussion in other ways, too. It is disrupting software engineering, so that job is changing. As an aside, that requires us to be able to change our curriculum much faster than every five years, otherwise what we are teaching will be diminishing in relevance. That is a challenge.

It also creates enormous teaching opportunities. Essentially, you could teach yourself many computing science disciplines by working with ChatGPT, to name just one tool. We should be harnessing those tools. That can give us scale. When we lack teaching numbers, we can blend that in somehow to be your tutor at home or something like that.

There are other ways of achieving the same thing. For example, Robert Gordon's College has created a fully online computing science higher and national 5 curriculum. It is an independent school, and it is very open to sharing that resource in a part-funded way. Where a school does not

have a computing science teacher, tomorrow, we could have the children in that school—they might be from one of the 25 schools with more than 1,000 pupils—learning virtually. They could have an AI assistant to help them when they need to ask someone questions.

I hope what comes across as a meta point is the rate of change in respect of the discipline and how the previous models of slow consideration and hierarchical deployment are not working any more in computing science. We have to increase our speed of change. That requires a networked response, not a hierarchical response. That is why I think that, especially in computing science—but not just in computing science—organisations such as STACS should be moved front and centre. My point is essentially what Ken Muir was saying in his report: let us get teaching networks in place and use them.

We need to have that speed of iteration that allows us to consider those questions, otherwise we will not only fall behind, but we will become an educational laughing stock in the programme for international student assessment results. The world is changing at an exponential rate and we cannot operate like this is the 17th century any more.

Michelle Thomson: You have cited Estonia quite a lot. Some of the gender issues that you have outlined are replicated elsewhere. Just for the record, how do the stats for Scotland compare with those for other countries, such as Estonia, for computing science teachers and the general profession?

Professor Logan: I do not know what the Estonia gender split is, I am afraid, so I cannot comment on that point. That is one that I can take away and look at.

Michelle Thomson: Okay. Thank you.

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): This might be a quick question. It is a wee bit different, but it is linked to everything else that you have been talking about. Since the STER report was published, there have been several changes in the Administration. Does that suggest, one way or the other, that the Scottish Government remains committed to implementing the report's recommendations?

Professor Logan: Of the report, overall—yes. It is an inevitability in politics over an extended period that there will be a change of personnel at both political and senior civil servant levels. In both cases, there is an element of people like me who are trying to prosecute a long-term project having to reiterate or re-educate on some points.

As regards STER as a whole, I have not seen a decommitment to it, so I do not think that that is a

major issue. In fact, I would go further: there are two types of view that we need to be conscious of the difference of in Scotland—or, indeed, anywhere, but we are in Scotland. One is opinions. We all have opinions, and they can be changed with additional information or a better argument. The other is convictions, which do not change with the weather or with a change of First Minister. For example, I do not think that it would be controversial around this table, which is made up of members of a number of different political affiliations, to say that we should have hospitals and we should educate children. I think that we would all agree on that. We do not put that in our manifestos, and it does not get debated in the Parliament.

It has to be a conviction that Scotland needs a vibrant start-up economy. Encouragingly, I think that that is becoming a conviction. In the parliamentary and committee debates that I have been able to watch, I have not seen members argue against that, as well they should not. There is relative stability in that regard. It obviously varies by subsections of STER, but it is not a concern in terms of STER's principles.

Bill Kidd: That is useful. On the back of what you were talking about with Michelle Thomson on the number of women and young girls becoming interested and getting opportunities, do you think that the Scottish Administration needs to concentrate more on that side of it to push it further?

Professor Logan: Yes. I would like more focus from the Government and all parties on that issue. You have to think of it as a spectrum. If society tolerates, for example, extreme trolling of female politicians, which it does, it is more likely to tolerate gender imbalance in entrepreneurship. You have to think about a spectrum response, and you have to challenge your view of normal. We have all grown up with normal being extreme imbalance, and we have to reassess that. I would like the Scottish Government to talk about that more, and I would like more action on the extremes of the issue and more action centrally.

That said, if you take, for example, the main focus in my role, which is entrepreneurship, Kate Forbes commissioned the pathways review, which I think that members will be familiar with, and the Government has committed to implementing that, which is great. What is exciting is that Ana Stewart and I, as the co-authors of the report, have been approached by a lot of private organisations saying, "We want to implement pathways, too, in our organisations". That has led to Ana Stewart starting the movement Pathways Forward, whereby organisations of many flavours commit to how they implement pathways in their businesses. To take an example that I was pleased to see, the

Scottish National Investment Bank has committed to implementing pathways recommendations, which are things such as the SNIB not investing in companies where the other investors do not have a proper gender balance in their partner base, which is a common issue that leads to investment not going to women and so on.

We can get depressed about these issues, but the difference is action, and action comes from leadership. I sense that there is a rising leadership in our society that says that this is not tolerable in all the different flavours that we see it. I would love us—I am not talking to the female members of the committee; I am talking to the male members and men beyond—to have the bravery to talk about the unacceptability of extreme gender imbalance in all the fields in which we encounter it. More could be done by all politicians, because you have a platform, and you should use it.

Liam Kerr: I return to Pam Duncan-Glancy's line of questioning. In early 2023, you appeared before the Economy and Fair Work Committee and talked about a teacher upskilling programme. At the time, you talked about it launching shortly. For the avoidance of doubt, is that the same programme as STACS? In any event, what level of demand has been experienced? Is it having the impact that you wanted and, if not, given the statistics that you put out earlier, who needs to step up?

10:15

Professor Logan: The short answer is that it is the same initiative that I talked about earlier. In summary, it is having an impact. In fact, it is potentially exceeding what I thought would happen in the first iteration. Why do I say that? When it was first launched, which was shortly after that committee meeting—I forget the exact date, but it was certainly in the same year—as it was a new initiative, the STACS team initially focused on a subset of teachers who wanted to be able to teach advanced higher computing science, because that is, naturally, the hardest subject to teach in the computing science stable. I will not get these figures exactly right, but, from memory, they put about 60 teachers through that programme. In its next incarnation, they moved to widen it to national 5 and higher. With the caveat that I would like to confirm these figures to you, I think that about 150 teachers have been participating in that programme. That is an encouraging start.

The feedback from teachers has been very positive both anecdotally and in their end of course systematic feedback. Teachers who go through the programme feel supported. Interestingly, if you look back over 20 years of computing science teacher number data, what you tend to see—I could not prove this, but I think that

it is significant—is that, whenever the curriculum changed, which, for good reasons, was roughly once every four years, there was a slight spike in the resignation rate of teachers. I interpret that as a confidence issue, with teachers saying, “This will be too hard for me now, so I will leave the profession. Object-oriented programming—I do not know what that is”. What the initiative does is create the conditions to take that away, and it creates a feeling that, although someone might be the only computing science teacher in a school, they are connected to others.

A natural question is: what are the results on teaching numbers? It is too early to say. We have had a general decline for a long time. The initiative is now running, and the leading indicators are very positive. It remains to be seen whether it, along with other tools, helps us to arrest the decline and improve things. However, I think that it is going well.

Liam Kerr: In a previous evidence session with the Economy and Fair Work Committee, you suggested that more work was required to increase effective retraining routes into careers in digital. You suggested that colleges perhaps do not perform quite as well as private initiatives such as CodeClan. Since then, CodeClan has, of course, gone into liquidation. Has the rest of the ecosystem stepped up since that happened? Who should be doing more on that? For example, we were promised a digital strategy last September. Do you know where that is? What did you mean earlier when you said that CodeClan is coming back?

Professor Logan: There are a lot of questions there. I hope that there is a prize for remembering all of them.

When I talked at the committee meeting about colleges not being as effective and that being why CodeClan existed, my measure for that was that employers would hire software engineers directly from universities. They had started to take them from CodeClan, but they were not taking them directly from colleges in significant numbers. That is not to disparage the individual efforts of people in colleges but, structurally, that was the problem. It could be argued—and people did argue—that CodeClan should not have to exist if that path was working. That was the genesis of my point.

As you mentioned, CodeClan has ceased trading. I will jump ahead a little and address two questions at once.

CodeClan is coming back very soon. I do not want to pre-empt an announcement, or I will get into terrible trouble, but as it comes back, the model will, I think, improve the first issue. To really be effective, CodeClan needs to be scalable across the population. The model needs to be

sustainable financially, it needs to be a model that employers are willing to consume financially, and it needs to be constantly renewed with the very best material. As I talked about in my remarks to Michelle Thomson, that is the hard thing to do.

In the model that will return, there will be a partnership involving CodeBase, which bought the assets for CodeClan and the brand, the college network and an online world-class training organisation. The idea is that that will allow us to have scaled training with constantly refreshed material that is tested at scale internationally and offline in-person tutoring through the college network. In its initial incarnation, that will be done with a small number of colleges because it is always sensible to ensure that such things work before we scale them. However, my expectation is that a lot of colleges will sign up for that.

That is the college network stepping up, and the return of CodeClan is much needed. My understanding is that the financial model will be such that things will be significantly cheaper for students than they used to be. That was one of the issues for students and employers. I think that that is good news, and it is good to see that return. Therefore, I think that the participants are stepping up.

Did I miss a question?

Liam Kerr: No, you are very good.

On a similar note, I was very pleased to hear you bringing up an initiative when you talked about Robert Gordon's College. I think that you referred to the RGC online programme. For the avoidance of doubt, Robert Gordon's College is an independent school in Aberdeen. It launched the RGC online programme in 2021, and it has just extended that to mature students nationwide. That seems to me to be exactly the kind of thing that you are suggesting that we need to look at. That begs the question: who or which agency should be looking at that, investigating what seems to be best practice, and saying, "How do we scale that to deliver the best outcomes?"

Professor Logan: The organisational structure in Government is not my area of deep expertise, but I think that either Education Scotland or the learning directorate should run with that. A frustration that I have had in the area is that, where we have had progress, a lot of the heavy lifting has been done out of the economy directorate. I welcome that, of course, but I want to see heavy lifting being done by the education authorities in their various configurations. I have very recently started to see that happening, so I would be more encouraged to say that that is where we should put the ownership of such an initiative.

What do I mean by that? For example, the University of Aberdeen put forward an initiative just over a year ago to increase the number of teaching places for PGDE students in computing science from the north of Scotland. Earlier, I mentioned the computing science deserts. My belief is that the reason why we have those computing science deserts is that the vast majority of computing science teachers are educated in Glasgow and the University of Strathclyde. That is in the central belt, and we would expect to get the results that we get.

That initiative was around for some time. I could not get much traction in the education authorities when it appeared, but there has been very good progress there in recent weeks. I think that there was a good working relationship between the learning directorate and the economy directorate to bring that to fruition so that it will go active in 2025.

Provided that, in the senior leadership, including at the ministerial level—I would very much welcome Ms Gilruth's leadership in the area—there is not just an acceptance but an embrace of the facts that computing science matters to the economy, the economy matters to education, and there is a slow-burn crisis that will soon become a fast-burn crisis because of the demographic issue, those things can be led by whichever education authority is most appropriate.

There are the beginnings of some hope there, but I am coming out of four years of dragging that elephant through the treacle, so I would like to see more evidence that that will crystallise beyond my appearance today.

Ben Macpherson: Good morning, Professor Logan. I want to go into how we attract young people into computer science and related industries and pathways, and the variety of opportunities that exist. I also have a few questions about the challenge of attracting people to teach and to speak to young people about the opportunities.

Like your STER report, the Withers review garnered a lot of respect and interest. To what extent might the structural changes to the skills landscape in Scotland proposed in the Withers review help to address some of the barriers to increasing digital skills?

Professor Logan: That is a very interesting question. You have to look at two aspects of that, the first of which is the theoretical case. If we could wave a wand today and the recommendations of the Withers review were implemented and bedded in tomorrow, would there be a better state of affairs for how we operate? I do not know, but I believe that the answer to that is yes.

The second aspect is the state change from here to there and the inherent risks in that state change. My worry is that the organisations involved will get consumed with the active change and that that will almost become an excuse not to address the on-the-ground realities.

Let us think about that in visceral terms. Over the next three years, most of the senior leadership of the organisations affected will spend most of their time in meetings about implementing the Withers recommendations. To be honest, I would prefer them to spend their time addressing the things that we are talking about today, or at least if “We would love to put out that fire there, but we’re busy implementing Withers” cannot become an excuse.

That is a general problem that any country has when it effects large-scale change. That could be applied to Brexit as well. The state that you end up in is one thing, but the state change is the tricky bit.

I am apprehensive not because I do not think that the Withers report is a great report—I think that it is a great report—but because I worry about our ability to implement that change without that becoming a reason for why we stop dealing with the issues of the day.

Ben Macpherson: One of the key points in the Withers review is about having parity of esteem of different routes, so that people can find their best role in the world, use their skills and pursue their passions. Whether it is creating a start-up or going to work for an established entity, is there enough creativity in how young people are able to progress into the opportunities of the digital economy?

Professor Logan: No, certainly not. Looking at this over a longer period, the tension has always been between making a subject interesting and teaching it at scale. If you go to the Royal Conservatoire, for example—I do not know whether anyone has visited it—

Michelle Thomson: I am a graduate.

10:30

Professor Logan: Well done. A graduate! That is even better. I expect a performance shortly.

You will know that that environment teaches in small batches and that it blends theory with practice. Most of the subjects in the Royal Conservatoire are actually technical subjects. Set building and set design are very technical subjects. You have to understand engineering principles, or people die when things fall on top of them. The engagement from students there is strong, because they are learning and doing, learning and doing. However, if you want to teach

250 mechanical engineering students about mechanical engineering, you cannot take that approach, so you spend the first three years teaching them abstract maths and you say, “I’m afraid, everybody, you will not touch anything physical until third year.” You make the subject boring. That is just an example.

The problem that we have in our school and university system is that we have scaled it and made it boring in the process. That affects many subjects. Mathematics is a magical subject. Does anyone in this room agree with me? Probably not, because it is not taught well. That is not to do with the individual teachers; it is about the way that we teach it at scale.

Computing science absolutely suffers from the same thing. Computing science is modern magic. You will remember the famous Arthur C Clarke definition about technology and magic. For people even 10 years ago, the things that we take for granted now would seem magical, such as large language models and AI. Inherently, that should switch young people on but, if they go into a teaching environment where the teacher who is teaching the subject is not very confident about teaching programming—because he or she has converted from home economics or business studies and, therefore, the syllabus has had to be reduced in complexity to be teachable, so we are teaching the children about things such as GDPR instead of building a super cool app that controls the lighting in the school—that switches children off.

I have put three children through a good state school and the three of them told me, “I was interested in computing science at the start, but I was not interested at the end.”

Ben Macpherson: So you are still strongly of the view that the curriculum needs to change to make it more attractive.

Professor Logan: Computing science is about building stuff. It is about studying some rules and applying them, and I do not think that we do enough of that in our classrooms today. One of the things that I wanted to happen was to deal with that in a fast way by dramatically expanding the provision of extracurricular computing science clubs and so on, and we have not done that. I stopped asking about it, because it was number 7 on my list of things that I thought were important, and I was still arguing with people about number two. However, yes, I am still of that view.

Ben Macpherson: A bit of that extracurricular programming initiative happens in my constituency, but it is third sector led, in collaboration with the school through pupil equity fund money.

That leads into my next question. You are of the view that the curriculum needs to change to make it more attractive, but do we need to get more people who are working and succeeding in the digital sphere, in all its variety, into classrooms to talk about the huge opportunities that there are, whether that is working in software engineering for a big financial firm or designing code in the computer games industry? That would expose young people to the huge plethora of opportunities that there are and to the idea that the opportunities will grow. How do we do that? Anecdotally, that will be happening a lot, but how do we get it more systematically, comprehensively and consistently into a position where young people are realising the opportunities that they could be engaged in?

Professor Logan: Letting children see what the end state is of this endeavour is extremely valuable. There are a number of initiatives that are trying to do that or have been doing it. For example, ScotlandIS's critical friends programme, in which an industry person would partner with a teacher and support them in teaching the subject, was a very good and well received initiative. The trick is looking at how we scale those things. Organisations such as ScotlandIS have limited scale and can reach only so many schools. The question should be how we scale such initiatives more broadly across Scotland. That has not been a discussion that has been particularly active.

We have to be very careful to note that sometimes—I have seen this over a few years now—when an exciting initiative is taking place in one or two schools, there is a tendency, when committees such as this one ask the Government for an update, you get a list of bullets back and it says, "We are doing X in this area." It is easy to think that there are good things happening there but, if that is happening in 2 per cent of schools, it is not a solution. For every initiative that we see that looks effective, such as the critical friends programme and others, those who are responsible for the issue need to ask ourselves how we scale that across Scotland without incurring a huge bill. We must get away from the tick-box culture of thinking, "We did a trial; therefore, things are happening." It cannot be about activity; it needs to be about outcomes. We absolutely need to move in that direction.

I think that industry, within its constraints, is very willing to do that. There are constraints—for example, in Scotland, you cannot have an industry person teaching a class without the teacher present—but we can live with those things. We just need to understand the rules of engagement and look at how we scale initiatives. The essence of how you scale them is that networks trump hierarchy, so can we use business networks and teacher networks to get those things scaled?

There is more to be done there, but there are encouraging early shoots.

Ben Macpherson: Thank you.

The Deputy Convener: The final question is from our convener, Sue Webber.

Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con): Apologies for being late, Professor Logan. I will circle back a little and pick up on some of the questions that Michelle Thomson asked. I had a constituent email me the other week. She has a luxury fashion brand and she was talking about what she calls "the female entrepreneurial dilemma". I will read what she has emailed me:

"As a female entrepreneur, I often feel like I am fighting with one hand tied behind my back. The gender disparity in access to funding is staggering. Despite the fact that one in five entrepreneurs in Scotland is female, only 2% of the funding is allocated to women. I have personally experienced the frustration of pitching my business to male investors who seem disinterested or dismissive simply because it is in the fashion industry. It's high time for the Scottish Government to step up and support female-led businesses like mine."

My question is: what can we do to help Antoinette?

Professor Logan: That is a very important question. I sometimes joke that the best way to clear a room of investors quickly is to enter it and say that you want to talk about your menopause app, because the response is, "I don't do menopause; I do blockchain, so I'll go and see if I can find a woman to talk to you." That is a real issue, for a whole bunch of reasons.

Most of our investment community is of a demographic different to Antoinette's. On that particular score, that is why, for example, "Pathways: A New Approach for Women in Entrepreneurship" tries to use the levers that we have available to influence that. For example, it recommends that Scottish Enterprise, the Scottish Government and the Scottish National Investment Bank co-invest only where the other investment partners have an equal balance among the partners or senior investment personnel on their payroll. If you want to address the issue, you have to have more women in the room. That is one thing that we are trying to do, and we are seeing quite a strong response, including from some investment houses and very much from the National Investment Bank and Scottish Enterprise.

Another thing that is happening is that the Techscaler network has very carefully designed curation rules. Organisations apply to be members of Techscaler and then go through a curation process. As of the last time that I looked at the data, which was a few weeks ago, Techscaler had 35 per cent female founders, whereas the average has been much less than that. That is not 50 per cent, but there is a very conscious effort to

overcome what I would describe as decades, if not centuries, of positive discrimination in favour of men.

There is some progress in those areas, but there is a journey to go on, and it has to be a sustained journey. The more that women see other women as founders, the more that women will step into being founders and the more that men will get used to the idea that women can start tech companies, too. That will help with investment attitudes et cetera.

I go back to my societal points. Every single one of us has been conditioned to believe that boys play with Scalextric and girls do not. I think that more of a national discussion is required on the issue. Ana Stewart and I worked on the “Pathways” report, which essentially recommends that the Government, the National Investment Bank or Scottish Enterprise pull a number of levers in the area of entrepreneurship. You can try to pull a similar set of levers in education, and we talked about some of those earlier. However, the root issue is that we gender stereotype from age zero and we think that it is okay. How does society start to recondition itself at that level? I am not 100 per cent sure of the answers there, but where is the committee on that? Maybe it exists, but why are we not talking about the issue all the time?

It is not just about a societal lack of opportunity based on gender; it is that, in any one field, half of our best people are being removed. Can Scotland afford that? With 5 million people, can we take out half of our best engineers? Of course we cannot afford that. Conversely, if we were to make a real dent in the issue, Scotland would have added a whole bunch of talent to some key fields. You could talk about the number of chief executive officers who are women and so on. I would love us to be talking about the issue, not by domain only—although that is welcome—but as a country. We need to remove the taboo at political level and the idea that it is okay to have these things.

A final comment from me is that I often hear people say things such as, “We hope to increase the number of female directors in the business by 10 per cent over the next five years.” However, 10 per cent of 10 per cent is 1 per cent, but people want a high five about that. We have to anchor ourselves by saying that anything less than a 50:50 balance in many professions is failure, as opposed to thinking, “If I add 1 per cent over the next 10 years, that is success.” We treat gender balance as aspirational and therefore optional, and all of us in society are guilty of that. I just think that we should start asking ourselves loudly—men and women—whether we think that that is the right thing to do and see what comes from that.

The Deputy Convener: On that wonderful note, that brings our evidence session to a conclusion.

Thank you, Professor Logan. I know that it has been informative for all of us around the table.

We will now have a suspension until 10.55 to allow for a change of witnesses.

10:43

Meeting suspended.

10:56

On resuming—

Child-friendly Complaints Handling Principles

The Convener (Sue Webber): Welcome back. I thank my deputy convener for chairing the first part of the meeting this morning.

Our next item is to hear evidence on the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman's child-friendly complaint-handling principles. I welcome Rosemary Agnew, the ombudsman, Andrew Sheridan, head of improvement, standards and engagement, and Josh Barnham, improvement standards and engagement reviewing officer, all from the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman—I am having difficulty with saying that.

I believe that you are about to make an opening statement. Rosemary Agnew, you have up to three minutes, please.

Rosemary Agnew (Scottish Public Services Ombudsman): Thank you very much, everybody, for inviting us. As you will gather, we are very enthusiastic about it. We thought it might be helpful to give you a very quick run through of why the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman is doing child-friendly complaints in compliance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024.

This actually started back in 2020 when the original act was going through Parliament. We know about all the issues with the Supreme Court and all that, but at the time we agreed with the Scottish Government that we could use our powers under the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman Act 2002 to set complaint-handling standards to develop process, procedures and an approach to complaint handling that would be UNCRC compliant. That meant that we were able to start and carry out a project that took a long time but also took an effective co-design approach. We were able to talk to lots of children, young people and other stakeholders.

The approach that we took does not simply say that a child-friendly complaint process is one that is written in child-friendly language. What came out of all our consultation and co-design was that there are three types of complaint. Some are made by children directly, but drawing on the feedback that we have had from children and other ombudsmen, we do not expect there to be a huge number of those. There are those complaints where the child is in control but they might be supported by an adult advocate. Then, as we can already see, the majority of complaints are made by an adult concerning the service that a child has received.

Effectively, we went through the co-design approach and produced some complaint-handling principles. That is what is before you and it is the same approach that we take with complaints generally. There is a set of principles with a set of guidance sitting behind it.

The starting point for us was not to reinvent complaint handling. We have produced principles that you must adhere to for child-friendly complaints, and additional guidance, and we can explain those next. The principles help you to apply existing complaint-handling procedures in a way that is child-friendly and compliant with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child—I am having the same difficulty with saying that as the convener had with saying SPSO earlier.

11:00

I have a couple of important things to say. Although the principles will make complaint handling UNCRC compliant, I will have oversight only over the organisations that are in my jurisdiction. Although the materials and resources that we produce will be as transferable as possible to any organisation, there are still whole areas of public service—the police and the judiciary—where I will have no oversight of compliance with UNCRC principles and rights because those areas are not in my jurisdiction.

The other thing worth saying is that we are not experts on the UNCRC and children's rights. We are pretty good at things that relate to complaint handling, but we are looking at one small area of the UNCRC act when it comes into force and what it will mean for public bodies, specifically on the complaint-handling side.

The other significant difference is that the child-friendly complaint approach is not process-based; it is rights-based. If you compare the principles that we have put before you with general complaint-handling principles, which tend to be about timely delivery, good quality and so on, they are more about ensuring that you meet the rights of the child. For complaint handling, the fundamental difference is that meeting the rights of the child is a balance. The child's rights have to be balanced with the parents' rights and with other rights, but they must remain fundamentally at the centre of the approach that you are taking to investigate the service.

We will probably get into some of that detail in questions, so I do not want to take up too much time. However, I thought it important to highlight that we are very focused on complaints for UNCRC compliance but we will have oversight only over the public bodies that are in my jurisdiction.

The Convener: That is a good place for us to start. The line of questioning that we are moving to next will, I hope, ask for more specifics.

Willie Rennie: I would like you to talk a little bit more about the co-design process. Who and how many did you consult? Were they able to substantially engage? Do you think that you reached all parts of the young people community, if we can call it that? People obviously have a variety of different needs and priorities. How did you capture everyone?

Rosemary Agnew: We probably did not capture every single person, but I will ask Josh Barnham to speak to that because he is the one who did all the hard work and knows it inside out. Over to you, Josh.

Josh Barnham (Scottish Public Services Ombudsman): The main body of the workshops that we did was in classrooms. I went to a primary school in Fife to speak to young children of all primary school ages. I then did the same thing in a high school. There were 30 young people in each of those, which meant that we had a pretty reasonable mix, but we were cognisant of the fact that we would not capture some of the more vulnerable groups. While I was in those schools, I made sure to stop in with the support bases or departments that are supporting children who are having difficulties and are not in mainstream classes for whatever reason. We were aware that they are probably the children who need to use these principles more.

In line with that, we identified specific groups that we wanted to capture. For example, we spoke to a group of young carers down in Dumfries and Galloway. We went to a charity in Alloa that supports vulnerable young people and which had refugees there. We also spoke to the parents of children with additional support needs. We see a lot of complaints from those parents about additional support needs and how the support is applied. We tried to use our existing experience to identify the groups that we thought would most need to engage with the process.

As Rosemary Agnew said, we did not capture absolutely everybody and I would have loved to have been able to do more, but we did capture those vulnerable groups that we think will make most use of the process.

Willie Rennie: Was there anything that surprised you from that engagement? What new things did you learn from it?

Josh Barnham: There was nothing but surprises.

Rosemary Agnew: There were a few things. They were not surprises as such but we were hearing children and young people's perspectives.

We were obviously engaging with responsible adults and kids. At one meeting, we asked how children should get access to make complaints and the answer was, "An app. Put an app on the phone." Then, in the first workshop that Josh did, we were told, "We do not want an app". The surprises were challenging our grown-up thinking to look at things from a different perspective. I did not go to all the workshops but I did go to some of them. Hearing the different perspectives made the later ones not such a surprise.

For me, the other big thing that came out of it, which will certainly feed into our future guidance and communication, is how and what we communicated. The questions were not, "Do you want to make a complaint? How do you complain?" They were more like, "Who do you trust?"

Josh Barnham: We started with a blank slate. Some of what we got in the initial workshops was completely weird and wonderful, which is one of the great things about co-designing things with children. I asked open questions about what they would like to see. We spoke about what would make them most comfortable if they wanted to raise a concern, and who they would like to raise it with. Top of the list were cats and dogs. If we took literally what the children told me, we would be doing the complaint process in a river full of books and dolphins.

I drilled down by asking further follow-up questions, and the great thing about that is that at the core of every one of those quite fantastical asks was the kernel of truth that we have been able to put into the principles and the guidance that we are putting together. They want to speak to their cats and dogs because they know that those cats and dogs will not pass on their worries and concerns without their permission. That took us down the road of privacy and how important it is to make children feel safe and comfortable.

Willie Rennie: Are you transferring any of your learning from this process to the adults' complaint process?

Rosemary Agnew: We identified a number of themes, such as trust, kindness, adaptability and balance, and we reflected those in the principles. The purpose of the principles is to give us a foundation, and the additional guidance that we are now in the process of writing will guide adults on how to apply the complaint process with a child-friendly lens.

Some additional or different things need to be done. There will be different approaches to making sure that the voice of the child is heard and that you act in their best interest. We also have to build in help not just for the public bodies that are delivering the complaint process, but for parents

too. One of our first sets of guidance will be for parents, on their children's rights and how they can support them and understand them. One of the positive things—and we have piloted this with a couple of bodies—is that children who have engaged with the complaint process through their parents have been happy to let their parents or responsible adult do it, but it is still about hearing their voice and involving them in the right way. A lot of the early guidance that we will be writing will not be aimed directly at children for that reason.

This is not meant to sound flippant, but there are not that many ways of approaching complaint handling. The fundamental principles are about what happened, what should have happened and whether the difference is down to maladministration. That is a fundamental process. For us, the challenge is about ensuring that we provide support for front-line services to handle complaints in that way. By the time a complaint reaches us, it should have been through a complaint process. Over and above that, every day is a school day and we have definitely learned things about communication that we will also weave into other things.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Good morning to the panel. Perhaps I can take the point about the right to express views—particularly with regard to article 12 of the UNCRC, on the right to be heard—a little bit further. First, how does the SPSO envisage the principles being used? Who would use them? Specifically with regard to article 12, how would you support children and young people in exercising their right to express their views?

Rosemary Agnew: The fact that the rights are in the principles means that we would expect public bodies to ensure that, as part of their approach to the complaint, they spoke to children. We will share—next week, I hope—the first draft of our guidance, which covers a whole range of things, including guidance on deciding whether to inform an adult if a child has made a complaint. What does informed consent mean? How do you seek it? How do you have the first discussion with the child and/or the responsible adult?

Instead of producing a process in which we say, “Do this, do this and do this”—which does not lend itself well to a rights-based approach—we are setting out all those areas, such as best interests, trust and confidentiality, and giving some guidance on how to apply them.

I will ask Josh Barnham to give you some feedback from the pilots, because they have been quite informative.

Josh Barnham: One key thing that came out of the pilots is that, in the vast majority of cases, children might choose not to give their views. In a

lot of cases, they might be very happy to do so with their parents and have their parents be their voice. Now, I am talking about the numerical majority; that is not to say that we do not need a really robust process for children who might not have someone to do that for them. That is important, too.

One of the key things in the principles—and, indeed, a key theme that came out of all our co-design work—is the need for children to have someone whom they know and trust. Children told us that a big thing for them was to be able to choose whom they spoke to about their concerns or complaints—and they should be able to do so as far as is practicable. In different public bodies, that sort of thing will be easier or harder. If we are talking about a guidance teacher or their favourite teacher, it will probably be quite easy, but it might be a little trickier if it is a nurse that they might like and they are in a hospital setting. However, we have said in the guidance that, whenever possible, children should be given the choice about whom they speak to, because that is important in making them feel comfortable enough to share their views.

As Rosemary Agnew has said, the guidance contains sections on how you can make children more comfortable and the sorts of things that we need to do to make the whole thing feel less like a formal process and more like a conversation. That is one of the key things that came out.

Andrew Sheridan (Scottish Public Services Ombudsman): It is important to add that, although we have co-designed this with children, we are continuing to engage with bodies and professionals that already do this work. We know that there is good practice out there, having engaged with local authority networks and chief social work officers.

Part of our role has been to strengthen that work and reassure people that a lot of the things that we are asking them to do will already have been embedded in their own processes, systems and good practice. We just want to make sure that they are consistently applied and that there is a voice for all children in the process.

Early on in this work, we focused on where children would normally be—say, a school environment. Actually, though, some children do not have access to that—they are in alternative environments. How do we tap into that? We knew the professional networks would be important in that, too.

We are taking a two-pronged approach here. First, we are ensuring that good practice is highlighted and are continuing to support that and, secondly, we are bringing the children's voice in through everything that we are developing.

11:15

Pam Duncan-Glancy: What about your own processes and the staff in your own office? Have you changed anything as a result of the experiences that you have heard throughout this process? What training are you giving your own staff? There will be questions later about wider public bodies.

Rosemary Agnew: That piece of work is on-going. The principles were, for us, a milestone in a much longer project. I think that that work is going on in Andrew Sheridan's team—I do not know, Andrew, whether you want to say something about that.

Andrew Sheridan: We have already started to look at how the complaints reviewers within our organisation are able to mirror what happens elsewhere, as happens in our current complaints-handling procedure. Josh Barnham and another officer on the team have been delivering internal sessions with the complaints reviewers, talking through how these principles will impact on any complaints that come in, what to look for and what the process is.

We have also started to develop some flow charts and process notes internally to ensure that, if a young person or an advocate contacts the SPSO, everybody across the organisation has a good basis of knowledge on how to take the matter through the system. As Rosemary Agnew has said, by the time that a complaint comes to us, it should have gone through a very similar process in whatever service the young person, the parent or the advocate is not happy with.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I have a final question. As you will know, going through a complaints process is difficult for anyone, and it can, in some circumstances, be quite traumatic, not just because the person has to relive what has happened but because of the nature of the process itself. What consideration have you given to the impact of the process on children and young people, and how will you take that into account in your organisation's processes?

Rosemary Agnew: In a way, we started on that before we even started on the issue of children and young people. All of our complaint handlers and reviewers have had trauma-informed training, and we have used some of the excellent materials on the NHS Education for Scotland website on the impact of past trauma and how not to create trauma. That is part of the journey that we are on.

As far as children are concerned, though, there is a specific difference, which is to do with timing. Something that takes a couple of weeks or a couple of months will take up a significant part of a child's time; if it takes a school term and a half to resolve, that represents a significant chunk of their

schooling time. One of the things that we will continue to work on and engage with is advocacy in some of the support bodies to ensure that there is somebody else for a child to talk to and get support from.

Did you want to add anything, Andrew?

Andrew Sheridan: Something that we have been looking at is making sure, as Josh Barnham has said, that the child talks to somebody whom they trust and know. With the service in question, that is probably quite easy. By the time that they come to us, a trusted adult of some sort will, we hope, be involved in the process.

That is why we have been engaging with other networks. If the child is at school, the person whom they trust is likely to be somebody in the school—say, a teacher or a support assistant. If that is not the case, it might be somebody in the service that they are accessing. One bit of work that Josh Barnham did very early on was to make sure that that was in the guidance. We stayed away from specific language about what that person would be called; it is just somebody whom the child can trust and whom they can have as an advocate to support them. We are open for that to happen at any part of the process to ensure that they never have to go through it alone.

Rosemary Agnew: What you have touched on raises a much wider issue with regard to complaints and engagement with public services and access to justice—that is, the level and inconsistency of advocacy and support services. We have tried to engage as much as we can with the third sector, which provides some of these services in different contexts, but I think that that is part of the unknown that we are facing here.

I would love to sit here and say, "We have developed a perfect approach", but, in reality, this is a new approach that is rights based, children focused and focused, too, on the UNCRC act, not just our own legislation. Our approach is that we will be as good as we can possibly be at any point in time, but we are open to learning and adapting, too. That is important, because we do not want something set in stone that we have to make work, simply because it has to work.

That brings me back full circle to the principles, which are the constant around which we will adapt the guidance and resources to continue to meet that set of rights. I should say that we have not covered all the rights in the UNCRC; instead, we have focused on those most appropriate to complaint handling.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Thank you—I appreciate that.

Ben Macpherson: Good morning, and thank you for your time.

Building on what has already been said—and I appreciate the comments that have already been made about the process—can you say a bit more about what redress children and young people might have if the principles are not followed? What is the process for seeking redress?

Rosemary Agnew: Fundamentally, the redress comes through the complaint, which is handled in a rights-based context. In some cases, redress will not look that different from what it would look like in the usual complaint-handling process.

The fundamental principle of redress is to put somebody back where they were. That might mean putting in place, say, extra support in a school, requiring an educational authority to do some extra work to ensure that staff are properly trained or doing something directly for the child. We have to remember that it comes back to that fundamental principle. This is not compensatory redress that we are talking about; instead, it is about trying to put a child, or whoever is making the complaint for them, back to where they should have been—and, indeed, to ensure that they get the service that they should have been getting. That is fundamental, too.

This is also about learning and improvement, just as all complaint handling is at the moment. We do not want things to be the same for the next child that goes through the service in question. We also have some complaints of our own that we can draw on and which show us what redress can look like.

I do not know this for certain, but we might well try to have more resolution of complaints instead of having full-blown investigations and something that says, “This is what you do” at the end of it. A good example is some of the complaints that we have had on kinship care allowance, where we have managed to get the correct financial settlement for someone who did not get what they were entitled to—but we have done so much more quickly. That, I think, will be the big challenge. It is not so much what the redress is, but achieving it in a timescale that is more appropriate for children.

I do not know whether my colleagues want to add anything.

Andrew Sheridan: We are very much focused on learning and improvement in the public service that is complained about. We already have that within the SPSO; we work with whatever public body it is and always look to ensure that the next child, young person or adult who accesses that service is not subject to the same thing.

We engage continually. It is not a matter of saying, “Here are the findings”, and then moving away. If our team engages with a local authority, for example, they will continue to go back and support that engagement by giving guidance and

support materials and having those discussions to ensure that there is an improvement for the next person who goes through the service. We are very much focussed on improving the service and, as Rosemary Agnew has said, making sure that people get the service that they should be getting.

Rosemary Agnew: Some of this is almost an emotional thing. The voice of the child must be heard and listened to, and part of the redress lies in demonstrating that that has happened. In the same way, what those who make a complaint want to hear is not just, “Here’s your answer—we’ve upheld it”, or “We’ve not upheld it”, but whether you did what you said you would do and whether things have been explained. That conversation is a much more important part of a child-friendly approach, instead of the more traditional approach of writing emails, sending letters and looking at documents. I honestly do not know how it will pan out, though.

Ben Macpherson: So time will tell. Thank you.

The Convener: I call Liam Kerr—I am sorry; I meant Bill Kidd.

Bill Kidd: I do believe that Liam, as a name, is similar to Bill.

The Convener: I am really sorry.

Bill Kidd: I have a wee question on the practicalities of all this. How will public bodies be made aware of the revised principles? Do you liaise with public bodies across the field?

Rosemary Agnew: The short answer is yes, but I will pass that to my colleagues, if they would like to elaborate on “yes”.

Josh Barnham: We have been keeping all public bodies under our jurisdiction up to date with the project at each key stage. They have all been sent draft versions. They were all notified of the pilot and offered the opportunity to take part. If and when the principles are approved, we will let them all know, and we will set out very clearly in that communication exactly what our expectations are of how the principles should be used and what they need to do with them.

Bill Kidd: I would imagine that the public bodies will enable children and young people to relate to you more quickly. They will be able to spread the word, and they will be able to react in an appropriate manner if they are approached in any way.

Andrew Sheridan: The other point is that we realise that we cannot get our message across to every public service in the same depth. We have been trying to use networks to do that: we have engaged a lot with the Scottish Government and we know that it has other groups that are heavily involved what we are going through. We are

sharing the process with them, step by step. We have on-going meetings so that everybody is kept up to pace.

For those harder-to-reach bodies or bodies that are not under our jurisdiction, we are talking to the Scottish Government and we are very clear that our material will be developed in such a way that services will be able to adapt it, if they choose to use it. We are making sure that it is future proofed and that we can adapt it as we go along. Other people will be able to use that if they wish.

We are also thinking about how we use our social media and how we will spread the word. We want to be able to say, "Here is a revision to this," and, "This is where we are." We are actively trying to use that medium to reach professionals as well as young people and parents.

Bill Kidd: That is very helpful. Thank you very much.

The Convener: That was very swift, Mr Kidd, was it not?

Bill Kidd: It was.

Liam Kerr: I have a question on that exact point, which Andrew Sheridan is perhaps best placed to answer. Bill Kidd was asking about awareness, but will training be offered to help the public bodies under your remit to put into practice not only the principles of the approach but the ethos underlying it?

Andrew Sheridan: As we move forward with support and guidance across the piece—we are calling this phase 2—one of the materials will be a standalone training module that all public bodies can access, which will take them through the journey. We will explain the principles, the three types of complaints and why they are important. We will touch on the UNCRC and the articles that are impacted. That is the first piece of training that we would like to deliver to support public bodies.

The other important thing—I have said this a few times—is the engagement with the networks and with all the officers in our team. Josh Barnham delivered a piece to our team so that when people contact anyone in our team—it does not have to be Josh or myself—they will get a consistent answer. If any of our officers are at local government, speaking to chief social work officers or whatever it is, they will be using the same material and giving the same answer. There will be a consistent message about how to apply the principles and what they mean.

11:30

Liam Kerr: That is very encouraging. Another question relates to where Bill Kidd was going. Bill asked you about making public bodies aware of

the principles, but that begs a question about how children, young people, parents and carers will be made aware of the revised principles. Is the onus on the public bodies themselves to do that?

Andrew Sheridan: There is a bit of both there, honestly. Obviously, some of the materials, as Rosemary Agnew said, will be guidance for parents. We will circulate that through networks and schools, where we know we can get the most exposure. There will be child materials as well.

Across the piece, we find that schools are very good at this—they have been going through rights and the UNCRC—and it is the parents who we need to help first of all, because a lot of parents are not as up to speed on what the rights mean. There will be a bit of both. We will try to support the public bodies to support parents and children, and we will use our networks to try to support them as well. Josh Barnham might want to add a little bit to that.

Josh Barnham: Another interesting point to note is that children told us quite clearly through the co-design work that if it feels like they have to access a formal process, they will not do it. One of the core things with the process is trying to make it feel informal. We are very much focused on awareness-raising with front-line staff. We are thinking about all the guidance materials that we can make over the next year or so, to try to make as many teachers, paediatricians and so on aware of the change as possible, so that they can offer their guidance in a way that feels safe, manageable and informal, and feels like a conversation.

As well as training, one of the key things—because we are talking about potentially every front-line public servant in Scotland—is making the guidance as pick-up-and-play as possible. That is something that we have tried to do already, but we will do more on it in the next year and in further guidance materials. With the best will in the world, a single teacher might not use the guidance more than once a year or once every couple of years. Therefore, it is important that we raise awareness and that they have something they can go to as a touch point, as well as the training.

Rosemary Agnew: We have to keep reminding ourselves—you may have gathered that we are quite enthusiastic about this—that my powers and my remit are complaint handling, even though it is tempting to try to do everything related to UNCRC rights. We are trying to add the greatest value where we can.

The other thing that we have been doing, more informally, is talking to some of the ombudsmen from outside the UK—particularly some of the European ombudsmen and children's rights ombudsmen. Part of what we will be doing next is

going and having a wider look at what resources are already there. We recognise that we have a very limited resource to develop our guidance and we want to try to do as much as we can that is useful as soon as we can, because July when the UNCRC act comes into force, is not very far away.

Liam Kerr: I understand.

Michelle Thomson: I just have a couple of questions. I appreciate the challenges that you have set out around developing the principles and the concept of balancing rights and making sure that it does not slip into, in effect, a hierarchy of rights, which is where many organisations have fallen foul. What, if any, international comparisons were you able to draw from when developing your principles?

Rosemary Agnew: I do not think it is about making comparisons so much as drawing on approaches that others have taken. Certainly, in the early stages, we talked to other ombudsmen, including, I think, the Irish Ombudsman for Children, and we talked about the approaches that they take. That was quite a good example, because it was the first one where we heard people say, “Actually, we do not get that many complaints from children”. That started making us think.

Some of the European children’s ombudsmen and rights ombudsmen take quite a different approach, because they have been doing it for a lot longer. What I have picked up from them is the approach that they take to the balancing of rights. Rather than focus on, say, this right or that right, they look at the best decision that involves children.

My colleagues should please feel free to add to this—Josh Barnham did a big literature review at the start of the process. One of the other things that I picked up is that the communication will not be the same, and we will probably need to communicate in a different way. For me, one of the pieces of learning is that although these are children’s rights, the principles are very, very informative for a rights-based approach for anybody’s rights of any sort. In that context, talking to human rights organisations has been quite interesting.

Personally, my communication has been more informal, as I have been talking to my network of international ombudsmen, particularly in Europe, but we have certainly had some consultation. I would say that we have learned a lot, and we have probably contributed. Fundamentally, our biggest difference is that we have recognised in our processes and our approach three different types of complaint. That is significant, because we have realised that adults making complaints about children’s services is at risk of being the bit of the

system where children’s rights are least respected—not deliberately, but because it just does not happen that way.

Josh, given your literature review, I do not know whether you want to add to that.

Michelle Thomson: That is fine. It was just a throwaway question.

You mentioned earlier that you have piloted the approach with a couple of bodies. Can you tell me a bit more about your roll-out processes and, in particular, what success looks like? How are you measuring that?

Josh Barnham: For the pilot, as I said earlier, we put out a call to all public bodies asking for volunteers. Aberdeen City Council has been the key partner for the pilot. It is doing a child-friendly cities bid at the moment, which was part of the driving force behind that. Effectively, the council has been using the guidance and the principles for all of its complaints involving children since June last year. I have been working quite closely with its complaints leads to understand the impact of that, what is happening and the resourcing impact, which has not been as serious as we first thought it might be, because so many children were happy to let their parents take the driving seat.

In terms of wider roll-out, because we have done those call-outs, many or all of the public bodies under our jurisdiction are aware that the change is coming and they are preparing for it already. Many have done hypothetical reviews to understand numbers. A lot of health boards have been running the numbers to understand how many complaints will be affected and what the likely impact will be.

Success will look like the principles being used consistently when children are involved. We will do a monitoring phase for the next six months or so after launch, to very closely monitor how and where they are being used and make sure that they are getting used. I think that complaints handlers will require to undergo quite a big cultural shift. As people have touched on already, we have seen that the sectors that are child focused, such as social work and education, are already using the principles for the most part and are very good at that, but complaints handlers sometimes sit quite separately. Things like a best-interest consideration are quite a new concept to a lot of complaints handlers. It is about us being very hands on and present to give advice in cases, and we are making sure that all public bodies are aware of that.

Michelle Thomson: That probably goes back to the comment you just made about the different types of complaints and where the weaknesses are from a rights-based perspective.

Rosemary Agnew: There are the softer things that Andrew Sheridan mentioned, such as the training and advice that we give. We can see how much we are approached for that, how many times our training materials are accessed and how often we get enquiries. At the moment, success seems to be measured by how many times we are invited to go and tell everybody—not just in Scotland—about what we have been doing, because there is quite a lot of interest in it. Ultimately, the measures of success will be the ones that sit way beyond complaints, and they are good outcomes for children.

The Convener: That is where we will draw this morning's questions to an end. Thank you very much for coming. The public part of today's meeting is now at an end and we will consider our final agenda items in private.

11:39

Meeting continued in private until 11:59.

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