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Education, Children and Young People Committee

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EDUCATION, CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE COMMITTEE
11th Meeting 2026, Session 6

CONVENER

*Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*George Adam (Paisley) (SNP)
*Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con)
*Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green)
*Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)
*John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)
*Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP)
*Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab)
*Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Debbi McCulloch (Spartans Community Foundation)
Mark Williams (Denis Law Legacy Trust)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Pauline McIntyre

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Education, Children and Young People Committee

Wednesday 18 March 2026

[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:09]

Community Sporting Initiatives for Children and Young People

The Convener (Douglas Ross): Good morning, and welcome to the 11th meeting of the Education, Children and Young People Committee in 2026. This morning, we will be taking evidence on community sporting initiatives for children and young people. As the discussion will focus on—although not exclusively cover—football, I remind members of my entry in the register of members' interests. I am a match official, officiating matches for the Scottish Football Association.

I welcome this morning Debbi McCulloch, chief executive officer of Spartans Community Foundation, and Mark Williams, chief operating officer of the Denis Law Legacy Trust. Thank you both for joining us. The committee is keen to hear about your organisations, what they are currently doing, how that has developed over the past few years and your plans for the future. That is quite wide-ranging, so can you first tell us a bit about where your organisations are at the moment, what they are doing in communities and how you see that going in the next few months and years? We will start with you, Mr Williams.

Mark Williams (Denis Law Legacy Trust): Thank you for inviting me to the committee. I am from the Denis Law Legacy Trust, which is a small children's charity that is based in Aberdeen. We specialise in working in areas of disadvantage across the city, mostly in areas that are in the top 20 per cent of the Scottish index of multiple deprivation.

We have three main programmes. I have lots of bits of paper in front of me, but do not worry—I will not read them all; they are just notes to keep me on track. Our main programme is streetsport, which has been running in partnership with Robert Gordon University since 2006, so it is long-established. It has gone from engaging with 3,000 young people a year to engaging with more 30,000 last year. It has quite a large impact given both our organisation's size and the number of young people that we work with in the city through that one programme.

We primarily work with the emergency services, Police Scotland and the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service to target areas of youth annoyance. We have had a huge impact on reducing that issue where the streetsport programme operates—by as much as 80 per cent in some of the city's hardest-hit areas. There is an area in Aberdeen called Torry. Back in 2019, it was number 1 in the city for youth annoyance, accounting for just under 400 calls a year to the police and the fire service. We introduced a Cruyff court in that area, and I am happy to report—we looked at the numbers just last week—that the number of calls has reduced by 80 per cent in that area, and Torry is now 13th in the city for youth annoyance. That is a good example of one of our programmes with Cruyff courts that we deliver in disadvantaged communities that have short, medium and long-term outcomes for the community.

The other programme that we run is Club 10—Denis Law's number was 10. It is based at HMP Grampian and supports families who are affected by imprisonment. We read a horrible statistic on the Barnardo's website about nine years ago indicating, basically, that if my son sat next to a kid in school whose father or mother was in jail, that kid was three times more likely to go to jail than my son, for no other reason than family connection. We did not think that that was fair, so we wanted to do something about it. We engaged with the prison, and now we deliver family visits there. Because of that programme, those young people now have a solid, good mentor. The young people also come to our streetsport sessions in their community in the city, and they are engaged in volunteering and in our employability programmes and our youth forum. They have much better outcomes, so we are seeing a great impact from that programme.

Our last programme is Denis Law's academy, which is our employability strand. It connects a few other programmes that are around, as well; for example, we use football, but we use multisport as well. The power of sport is huge, not just for mental and physical wellbeing, but in everything else, as I am sure that everyone around this table is well aware. The programme is about connecting to the next steps. A lot of young people drop out of school just because they can. They hit 16 and they want to get away because the curriculum is not working for them. Where do they go? Sometimes they do not go on to positive outcomes. Denis Law's academy is about working with them to build up their aspirations and motivation to want to do something. The big issue that we sometimes face is that young men cannot be arsed—excuse my language. "I don't want to do that," they say, or "I will be doing this, because my dad does this," or whatever it is. We need to inspire them, and that is what the programme does. It makes them open-minded about moving to the next steps.

There are many other things that I could say about the charity; I can provide information after the meeting, if you wish, but that is a snippet. Sorry—once I get going, I get on a soapbox.

The Convener: That is excellent. That is the type of information that we want, so we are grateful for that evidence. Ms McCulloch, we come to you.

Debbi McCulloch (Spartans Community Foundation): Thank you for inviting me along this morning. I have worked at the Spartans Community Foundation since 2009. We opened our doors in north Edinburgh in December 2008.

The foundation is the heart of the football club. Operating as a social enterprise, we run the facility that the football club hires. We reinvest our profits back into our social impact programmes, specifically targeting the community of north Edinburgh. We deliver on four key thematic areas across those programmes—youth work, education, physical health and wellbeing, and community engagement—and we deliver about 35 or 36 programmes per week across the community, either on site or in local schools.

10:15

I am speaking about young people because, when we first opened our doors, we very much focused on the young people of north Edinburgh. That reach has expanded dramatically since Covid: until recently, our youngest participant was three years old and our oldest participant was 103. Our programmes have expanded because the need has got greater: we are working in an area where we know that 30 per cent of children are living in relative poverty. Deprivation is a real issue in north Edinburgh and we are there to ask one simple question, which is “How can we help?” How can we use the power of sport, football and people to build relationships and trust with individuals in the community and to help them to go from having a survival attitude into a thriving environment?

Regarding our education programmes, we run two alternative schools on site. We have a senior alternative school for 24 pupils who come from schools across Edinburgh, making it the only programme that we deliver that is actually city-wide. That is not like a mainstream school: it is there to complement mainstream but is a very different model; we take young people out of traditional mainstream education and give them a different environment where they can try to learn and thrive. Our junior alternative school is for 12 pupils across three local primary schools in north Edinburgh. They come to us for one day a week and that takes them out of the classroom and into an environment where learning can be led by the young person and is not forced on them. We do simple things like having therapy dogs, because young people want to read to those dogs. That school is a learning opportunity in a different environment that will engage them in a manner that is different to mainstream education.

The need grows ever greater. I can tell you that we had about eight places for our senior alternative school last year and got 17 referrals from across the city. The need is greater than the demand and we are trying to do more, but we have a maximum capacity.

Last year, we opened a new £1.4 million education and youth work space on site, in the corner of the stadium pitch. It was designed by young people who come to our junior and senior alternative schools and includes a large youth work space. It has a large kitchen because we know that food poverty a real issue, so all our youth work programmes provide hot food and also because we know that real relationships can develop in the kitchen. We also have two sensory rooms, one that is a calming, de-escalation room and another with a more educational element. That new space has been a game changer for us and our youth work attendance has increased by 25 per cent in the past year. It has given the young people their own space and their own home, which is really important in ensuring that communities actually feel part of something and have somewhere to go to get help.

As you are aware, our extra time programme has been funded by the Scottish Government for the past three years and will go into a fourth phase. We have worked with more than 300 families in the past three years and the biggest game changer is that that programme has allowed us to focus on a whole-family approach. We recognised that when wee Mark was coming to our Footea club on a Friday night or our science, engineering, technology and mathematics club on a Monday, we were only skimming the surface of the problem and were not actually getting to the root cause. That root cause was at home, and could be poor housing, unemployment or addiction, so we need to look at how we can help mum and dad, gran and grandpa, aunt and uncle. That programme has allowed us to provide a holistic approach and get around families to give them a better chance and better opportunities in life.

We are about to launch a new three-year strategy that has been based on extensive external consultation with the community. We are not here to drive that—the community is. Where can we best use our people and skills to make sure that people have better lives? As part of that, we have also done an internal consultation with our own staff.

Our focus for the future will be on the transition between primary school and secondary school, as

we know that that is a huge issue in our community. There are children who are not going to primary school so how will they go to secondary school and how can we support them better with that transition by having a Spartans hub based in the local high school that can give them alternative ways of learning and build relationships that make them feel comfortable at a fairly daunting stage in their lives?

We will also do more on mental health and increase our support for science, technology, engineering and maths because we see that as a good way of engaging with primary school pupils and helping them to enjoy learning because it is interactive and fun.

That is me; I am sorry if I went on too long.

The Convener: Please do not apologise. It is very inspiring to hear what you both are speaking about. My next question is on what you are doing in your localities. What is the picture across Scotland? Where you do not have bases, are similar clubs doing similar things to a greater or lesser degree? Denis Law is very much associated with the north and the north-east of Scotland. What is happening elsewhere and are the opportunities that the young people you work with are getting, available to all?

Mark Williams: It obviously very different for us because we are not part of the SFA or have a football club connection. Obviously Denis Law has a huge connection there but we are not associated with the clubs, for example. We work closely with Aberdeen and Cove Rangers but not in the work kind of way. However we are part of quite similar networks.

There are a couple of United Kingdom-wide networks and StreetGames is probably one of the biggest. We are one of the only Scottish members. Its work is similar to ours. That is quite useful because we can compare the work that we are doing to what is happening down south. A good example is that their programmes that work with disadvantaged children currently have an average of around 20 per cent female participation, and ours is 40 per cent. So, we know that we are doing something different up in the north-east that is completely separate to what is happening down south and it is working very well.

We are very much youth delivered. We have our youth forum, which directs what we do. Every single programme that we do is created by ourselves and the young people. We do not take something off the shelf from another organisation, for example, and try to implement it because it probably will not work in our city. We have learned that through our employability programmes. We might think that a six-week programme sounds great, but it will work for only one or two people, not for 10, and there will be dropout. If we can create our own programme using young people, we will have a different impact. Our numbers have been so good because we involve young people throughout and it is tailored exactly the way they want it.

Denis Law's academy currently has a 100 per cent record of young people who have dropped out of school either staying longer at school, moving into college or further or higher education or moving into apprenticeships or work. That is unheard of in other organisations like ours that are part of the network down south, but that is because the programmes are done on behalf of the young people. Everyone's journey is different. One set programme does not work for every child in the same way as the school curriculum does not work for every child. We have to tailor it because every positive destination, whatever it might be, is different for young people.

It is hard because funding is tight. We cannot just throw money at more staff to do more people. We have to be savvy and make it stretch. It is key that it is done that way. What is the point in hiring more hands and more staff just to water down what we are doing?

Numbers are important, however. Earlier, I mentioned the 30,000 young people that we engaged with last year. My answer to my team after that was, "So what?" What does 30,000 actually mean? What is the difference in those 30,000 people? That is the thing that we should be tailoring programmes to. We have some great funders who give us a nice cheque and then they disappear and come back a year later and ask what we spent it on and how many people we engaged with. I do not like that. I want connection with a funder. I want them to know the difference that they are making.

We are talking about future plans and how the Denis Law Legacy Trust is going to be. We are going to be much more story-based. Little things can have a ripple effect and that is how we shape ourselves and how we fit in that way.

Debbi McCulloch: Numerous clubs across Scotland are doing fantastic work through their foundations in similar areas as us—Falkirk, Hibs, Hearts, Morton, to name a few.

First, our biggest point of difference is that the foundation at Spartans runs the facility as a social enterprise. The football club is our biggest customer, alongside the youth section. In a lot of other clubs, the relationships between the foundations and the football clubs are not as strong, which presents challenges internally and probably inhibits the ability of foundations to invest in their local communities. However, our sustainable social enterprise funding model, with

fundraising and grants and a football club that trusts us to run the facility, allows us to have a strong significance.

As much as great work is being delivered and everybody is there for the right reasons and really pushing hard for change across the country, specifically around child poverty, certain barriers exist, which we are very fortunate not to face. Back in 2006 when the project started, our chairman Craig Graham had the creativity to say that we would do something different and trust the charity to run a football facility, from which the football club would not profit—it would have to be financially sustainable in other ways. I do not believe that that model is replicated anywhere else across the country. It is unique but it works very well.

Secondly, I would mention that facility. We are doing a great job at putting down more astroturf and giving grass-roots teams more facilities but it is having that social home and creating a social village through the power of sport that is more impactful than anything that I have witnessed in my entire life. That is how we try to run Spartans as a social village.

Many people over the years have asked us why we do not have a receptionist at our main door. Well, we do not have a receptionist because we do not want people to have to sign in. We simply want people to be able to walk in, sit down, have a cup of tea and a conversation with one of our many wonderful staff. The ability to do things in an alternative way is extremely powerful. Those two specific examples of how we operate shows how extremely open, non-judgmental, accessible and inclusive we are, which means that people feel part of something.

The Convener: That gives us a good start and takes us in the direction that a lot of fellow committee members' questions will follow.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): Good morning. Thank you very much for taking the time to come along. As the Aberdeen Donside MSP, I absolutely know the benefits that the Denis Law Legacy Trust gives across Aberdeen and I wish that there could be that effect in other cities, too.

I am not so much aware of the work that you do, Debbi. As the person in the committee who is probably the least interested in football—apart from having a daughter who plays—I would like to ask how football-based community programmes benefit young folk and their families. What outcomes would you like to see? I will come to you first, Debbi.

Debbi McCulloch: Last year, we asked young people who access our youth work programmes whether they felt that they had a trusted adult at Spartans, and 94 per cent of them said yes. Having that trusted adult is really important. Having people there who are not part of mainstream education, for example, allows better relationships to be nurtured and developed. For us, it has always been about those relationships.

A lot of our systems and processes for young people and families are very transactional, so it is about how you build a relationship around trust that can then support those young people or the families to be able to enhance their chances of having a better life.

It is also about increased employment opportunities for people in the local community—

Jackie Dunbar: Do you mean in Spartans or outwith it?

Debbi McCulloch: With regard to the employment opportunities?

Jackie Dunbar: Yes.

Debbi McCulloch: Definitely in Spartans. We have employment and volunteering opportunities, and young people who have started with us at nine years old are now near enough 25 and in full-time employment with us, because of that journey and that trust.

For families, it is a place where they can come and be heard. A lot of the time, people listen to respond, but we try to listen to understand the complexities surrounding their lives and how we can unpick those quickly, in a dignified way.

We are good at making sure that we plan ahead, but we can also be reactive and adaptive, as we proved during the Covid lockdown, when we transformed our site into a food distribution hub. We distributed about 700 packed lunches per day to children who would normally have got free school meals, as well as weekly family support packs. Our ability to remove red tape and bureaucracy is hugely impactful for families. That support mechanism is really important, especially for young people.

At our senior alternative school, we do not use titles such as "Ms McCulloch"; we use "Debbi", "Emma" or "Diane". Using an informal approach that is based on relationships allows us to engage with the young people. Last year, the majority of leavers from our alternative school left with a higher level of qualification than they would ever have obtained in mainstream education, whether that was national 4 literacy or national 5 numeracy. I think that it gives people a chance. It is a place where they can feel safe and that lets them feel as though they belong to something that can give them hope.

Jackie Dunbar: I put the same question to Mark.

Mark Williams: Ours is a different model, but it has similar outcomes. Sport and creative activity are our main hook—they are the gateway to engagement. What some people call trusted adults we call good adults. A key theme is having the right people in the right place doing the right thing with the right kids.

We see the benefits. The easier ones are improved physical and mental wellbeing, in which we see huge differences. We use a tool called the SHANARRI—safe, healthy, achieving, nurtured, active, respected, responsible and included—wheel. Not everyone is familiar with it, but I am sure that committee members probably are. It measures mental wellbeing in young people. I will try to break down how it does that.

Imagine a pizza cut up into slices, with each slice a letter on the SHANARRI wheel: "S", "H", "A" and so on. We ask our young people to complete three wheels: one for how they feel at school; one for how they feel at home; and one for how they feel on our programmes. On average, our programmes finish above both school and home, in particular with regard to how safe the young people feel. They even feel that they achieved more at our programmes than they did at school. They feel respected and included, which are massive drivers. I mentioned the numbers that show how much antisocial behaviour has reduced. That is fantastic, and it is great for the community, but our programmes make young people mentally and physically stronger. That is the effect that they have.

The provision of safe and trusted environments is key. Every young person should feel safe in their environment, whether at home, in school or in the community. That is an area in which we do a lot of work. We have introduced Cruyff courts. They belong to the community—they are not ours or the council's. The provision of such facilities makes a big difference. We have three in the city at the moment. They enable young people of all different ages and all different stages to achieve different outcomes.

We are working with Robert Gordon University, which has provided a research fellow for three years to measure the impact of a free-to-access sport facility in a disadvantaged community. The outcomes are already proving what we say in the reports and the evidence.

Our work helps to strengthen relationships at home. If the kids achieve and are able to move on to more positive destinations, that leads to a happier home life. There is less stress, less pressure, less push and fewer arguments, and there is more rounded family cohesion.

Our work helps to divert young people from antisocial behaviour. As I touched on earlier, we know that, when we operate, there is less antisocial behaviour in the community.

There is also the issue of pathways and aspirations. "What next?" and "Where do we go from here?" are key questions for young people. They can start to think about what they want and how we can help. That is what our programmes do for families and young people.

Jackie Dunbar: Your volunteers are absolutely key to everything that you do. How many of your volunteers attended your sessions as bairns and have come back?

Mark Williams: I love that question. Volunteers are the spine of our organisation, as they are with most voluntary organisations. They are massively important. We spent a lot of time developing a volunteer vision strategy. We have a pathway. It goes from participant to volunteer, then into one of our higher programmes—for example, the academy that I mentioned before—then into work with us or another organisation, or into further education. Currently, we have just under 100 operational volunteers, as I call them, who deliver the activity at our sessions; we have support volunteers, who are our fundraisers; and we have trustees, too. I think that about 60 per cent of our young people who have been participants stay with us and volunteer in order to give back to the community.

There are certain names that I can think of that, if you had said them in a certain community, people would have gone, "Oh, he's bad news." Now, feelings about those people are changing and instead you hear, "That's so-and-so's big brother. He volunteers; he's cool; he's good," and they want to be like them. That is where the pathway comes in.

I keep mentioning the example of Torry, but it is the one that sticks in my head. Just last week, we had 17 young volunteers at one session; all of them used to be participants and they are now giving back to the community. Can you imagine how much it would cost to have 17 members of staff? We just could not afford it—simple as that. However, we are investing in volunteers and giving them that pathway and support all the way through. It is a huge percentage of what we do.

Jackie Dunbar: I will be honest—I did not expect the figure to be 60 per cent. That is a large number. I often see on your Facebook page pictures of certificates being handed out for volunteer hours.

Debbi, I will ask you the same questions—I am not leaving you out—but Mark, can you tell us how many hours on average your volunteers give back?

Mark Williams: I think that, last year, it was just under 5,000, which is a huge number. We do employ a volunteer officer, because, when it comes to volunteers, what we call the four Rs—recruitment, retention, reward and recognition—are important. You have to give them support. Every single member of my staff is drilled to say thank you, because these young people are giving their own time, and that sort of thing makes them feel special. They do not get that very often in the communities in which we work. They are seen as someone who is doing good, and it gives them a really strong "head up, chest out" feeling. That sort of thing—especially their being seen in a positive light—does not happen very often.

Jackie Dunbar: Okay, thank you. Debbi, do you want to comment?

Debbi McCulloch: Last year, our organisation was awarded the King's award for voluntary services. The majority of our volunteers are involved in the football club side of things, and mainly the youth section, so they are mostly parents. The chances of getting on a pathway into jobs within the organisation are quite low, because it is all based on voluntary participation, and there are not many opportunities for employment on the football club side.

On the foundation side, as I have mentioned, a lot of young people will start by coming to one of our youth work groups, or even our alternative school, and then they will go on a pathway of volunteering into an employment opportunity. A couple of people who have done that come to mind. Naomi Hume, our assistant operations manager, has been part of the project since we opened our doors; she has lived in Pilton all her life, and she used to come to our street football in a safe place initiative. As part of that free initiative, we open our community pitch every single day after school to local young people, who can come down, link with our youth workers and kick a ball about.

Naomi progressed right the way through from being a participant to being a volunteer and then into a full-time role. It is an important role, too, especially on a match day, and comes with a huge level of responsibility. I often ask her, "Do you have any ambition to leave Spartans?" After Covid, she was given an opportunity to go work at Walter Scott, with whom we were working directly to provide packed lunches, and she turned it down, because, ultimately, Spartans is her home and her family. It has been a safe space for her since she was a young girl.

We need to recognise that we have a duty of care to those young people, and we need to be able to provide them with opportunities in their local community. We also need to use their life experiences to improve our own programmes and delivery and inform the decisions that we make. About 14 years ago, I made a very conscious decision to move to and live in Pilton, because I felt that, if I was going to represent the community, I wanted to be part of it, and not just for the hours that I worked, but full time. Doing that sort of thing gives you much greater insight not just into what needs to be learned, but into what you can do better. Volunteers are at the heart of everything that we do.

Can I give you a number for how many have progressed? No, but I will find that out and come back to you.

Jackie Dunbar: I believe in bigging up successes. That is why I was asking.

Debbi McCulloch: More than 150 girls and 400 boys play at the club on a regular basis. Those teams would not go ahead, and that level of physical activity, social engagement and opportunity would not be available, without the volunteers. That includes coaches, match officials and parents being club secretaries or first aiders. They are integral to the success of everything that we do.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I visited the Community Trade Hub in Leven recently. Debbi, you were talking about the way that you treat young people and the relationship that you have with them—using first names—and about how they feel much more welcomed and appreciated as a result. That is exactly the same model as is used at the hub, where young people spend time fixing lawnmowers, go-karts and so on. It is a similar model, anyway. The young people at the hub talk warmly about the people they work with there, and they contrast that with school, strikingly.

I have two questions. First, I presume that those who come to the alternative school still go to school as well. What impact has going to the alternative school had on their attendance at school? It was noticeable from what I saw at the hub in Leven how school attendance levels had shot up after young people had engaged with the hub.

Secondly, the Community Trade Hub spends a lot of time getting pockets of money from different places to make the whole thing work. You seem to have a different model. The hub gets some pupil equity funding, but it does not have a solid, reliable source of funding to provide confidence about its ability to continue for years ahead.

What is your relationship, both of you, with your local authorities? Could be improved, so as to tap into that different model of teaching?

Debbi McCulloch: The alternative school model is for children who will not really be attending school outwith that. They have the opportunity to come to Spartans for two and a half days a week. The funding is dependent on the school's budget. Some children might come for one day, some for two and some for two and a half days. It is recognised that mainstream education is just not going to be a fit for them, and that is okay. What can we do to ensure that they leave us to go to a positive destination? That is really important.

As I think I mentioned earlier, in 2025 all leavers left with a national 4 qualification in maths and English. Some achieved national 5 numeracy, and most gained national 5 literacy. All leavers progressed to a positive destination—including college, employment and our Gordon Strachan personal development course, which we run in partnership with Edinburgh College. For us, it has always been about creating a pathway all the way from pre-school to further education, so that everybody has the opportunity to take that step.

Improving attendance at mainstream education is not really important to us, because we know that the children are probably so far disengaged that that will not be achievable. Last year, however, we had a leaver who returned to high school to join at secondary 5, because they felt ready to go back into that mainstream education environment, based on their two years with us. Success comes in different formats.

Remind me about the second part of your question, please.

Willie Rennie: The second point was about funding. The Community Trade Hub seems to be able to scrape together different pockets of money, mostly pupil equity funding, but depending on a direct relationship with each school. As a whole, there does not seem to be a block grant to support the base work that the hub does, which does not provide confidence. Are you getting pupil equity funding?

Debbi McCulloch: Yes: it will be PEF, as well as strategic equity funding—SEF. It is very much up to the schools how they distribute that.

Our senior alternative school costs roughly £200,000 a year to run and our junior alternative school costs £40,000. There is a three-part funding model for the senior school: schools fund part of the scholarship for the young person, there is a council grant and there is funding that we provide ourselves. That is not split into thirds, because the cost for us is about £80,000 of that £200,000, but we are very committed because we understand the impact that the school has for those young people. We are lucky that the junior alternative school is fully funded by a funder that we have a very good relationship with.

10:45

Would we like to duplicate the alternative school model throughout the city? Absolutely. Are we willing to share our intellectual property and to explain what has gone well and what has not? Yes, 100 per cent, because we are not precious about that at all.

As you say, a lot of organisations are funded from hand to mouth. The key thing for us is having the other two elements of our funding profile. One is to have a social enterprise. I understand that a lot of third sector organisations would not find it attractive to make money, but I think we need to change that mindset and make as much money as we possibly can, because the more we make, the greater significance we can have. We are lucky to have key individuals within our organisation who run a fundraising dinner for the charity every year, with this year's profit on the night being about £230,000.

Mark Williams: Your first question was about increased attendance. We wanted that to happen, which was why we introduced Denis Law's academy. We wanted young people to feel better about being at school so that they would stay in school for longer and teachers have reported that participants have come back to school more motivated and more interested in what is happening there and they at least want to finish fourth year and perhaps want to go on into fifth year. It is early doors, but we are seeing that happening.

I can break your second question into two parts by talking about what works well and also about the barriers.

I will begin with what we feel works well. Collaboration is key and every charity needs to work in partnership, but that does not mean that it always works out nicely when partners come together and there are a few instances where we have to realign. Multi-agency collaboration is key, but, although I do not want to say that it is competitive, lots of charities are doing work in schools. If another one parachutes in, it is important not to replicate or duplicate but to do things differently and to look at where the gaps are or at what is not working currently.

That is where we have done something different because we actually take the kids out of school. They do not want to be at school, so we take them out for an hour or two in the afternoon to work with them. That is where our programme is different to the work of other organisations that are currently delivering.

You have to make sure that you work with the right young people, not those who just do not want to go to maths today but the ones who are potentially on the brink of expulsion and really do need care now—that is who we work with. It is very important that we work with the right kids. It is also important to have shared values: you should never work with a partner, a local authority or whoever, if they do not share your values.

The barrier to working with local authorities comes from their short-term funding cycles. It can also be very competitive, because a number of other charities are looking to get into schools. They want to tap into those pots of money, but they are little pots and they cannot go everywhere. I am keen that we do not deliver a half-arsed programme. We will do it the way we want to do it because we know what works with young people and we will do it the way that we have said will work for them. We need to deliver. We cannot water it down, otherwise it will start to not work.

That is one barrier and another is capacity pressures, not just for us but for schools. They are stretched, the local authority is stretched and the police are stretched, so we have to try to do what we can.

Those are the barriers and that is what works well.

Willie Rennie: Do you both feel that your operations are properly evaluated by the local authorities and that that is accepted by their leadership as being properly validated so that the doors to funding will open, or are you constantly fighting at every step to try to persuade them? How does that work? How do they know which systems work and which do not?

Mark Williams: We are constantly fighting. The start of April comes round every year and we start again at zero. We are constantly looking for money, which is constantly competitive and we are constantly told by the local authority that there is not as much money as there was the year before, so we are trying to backfill straight away, before things even start. That is the nature of the beast: it is quite bad, but it is what the third sector is used to.

Willie Rennie: I am interested in your different model of engaging. There are a lot of issues: for some young people, their attendance at school is terrible; on occasions, there are 15-minute timetables, which are tokenistic. Along with the Community Trade Hub in Leven, you seem to have alighted on a different model in which there is mutual respect—and, as a result, you get engagement through the world of sport. In Fife, it is through the world of messing about with motorbikes and lawnmowers. It is hands on—they do construction stuff as well. I see that it is a different model and I wonder how that can get filtered into the system so that everybody across the country knows that it works. You are having to fight all the time.

Mark Williams: We have to start somewhere. It is difficult; there will always be a model that has been done before but that does not mean that it will work all the time. You mentioned motorbikes—every kid is different and has a different hook. It is important to find out what those hooks are and to involve that in what we do, otherwise it will not work and the kids will filter away.

From our point of view up in Aberdeen, the local authority is coming around. We have been established for a wee while: we have good numbers, storytelling and impact. That is starting to be heard and we are starting to get more support—the authority knows that our model works and trusts us to get on with it.

On the reporting side, when we get money, everyone wants to know what we spent it on and what the impact was. That is great. However, I will be honest that, sometimes, it is ridiculous. It is way over the top. I will give you one example: we got money from a department in the council for an employability programme. In return, it wanted one of its members of staff to meet the kids on our programme one to one—individually—and grill them for an hour on questions. They wanted the kids to bring their passport with them. If you are working with disadvantaged kids, you are not getting that kid anywhere near that meeting. That is a barrier. The council asked how it was going to measure the impact and I said that we could not do that. We are not Children in Need—I am not going to send a kid in so that someone can grill them and hear their sob story or about their parents' background. That is not happening.

We have to be gatekeepers. We have to protect the kids. We are trying to motivate and inspire them, not—

Willie Rennie: Did the council accept that?

Mark Williams: I gave the money back.

Willie Rennie: Really?

Mark Williams: I did not want the kids to go through that. It was not fair. We have got to look after those kids.

Willie Rennie: How much was it?

Mark Williams: It was £10,000. I am not going to have those kids built up and then be told, "Oh yeah, you're doing really badly, aren't you? It's so bad—your life's so terrible." I am not having it. It is as simple as that. We have got to be strong for those young people, because who else will be? These are the disadvantaged kids in our city and

in Scotland. We have got to protect them from reporting that is way over the top.

That is what I think. I told you that I would get on my soapbox at some point.

Willie Rennie: I can tell that you care deeply about it.

The Convener: Can I just check—when was that? Was that recent?

Mark Williams: It was 18 months ago.

The Convener: Did the council take on that feedback? Does it understand that you did not accept crucial funding because of the barriers that it put in place, and has anything changed as a result?

Mark Williams: Yes. We applied for the funding this year and got it. We accepted it because our staff now provide the evidence of impact. The council has seen the difference that our work can make, so it is starting to believe that what we do works and that, basically, it should trust us to do the job. We will provide the reporting and it will be much better than what the council would have got—and we will not ask for passports.

The Convener: Good.

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): Mark Williams, I had the pleasure of visiting the university—I am sure that it was with you—and seeing the benefit of that. Debbi McCulloch, I remember speaking to Dougie Samuel about this issue 10 or 15 years ago and about his dream. We have heard about a lot in relation to that, which is fantastic to see—and, obviously, he is still involved.

You have talked about the inreach—people coming to you. What is the outreach—going out to the community? Not everybody finds it easy to walk through your doors. I am interested in your outreach. Do you think that you are still missing people or that there are still people who are not coming through your doors? What do you need to do to reach the most difficult-to-reach people?

Debbi McCulloch: That can still happen. However, we try our best to make sure that it does not happen and that we are as inclusive and accessible as possible.

We have youth workers and education officers based full time in their local primary schools. Schools are the heartbeat of any community, so we have a good sense of what is going on, who needs our support and what help we can provide. On the back of Covid, we have been conscious about extending our reach to the older generation—through walking football, sporting memories, menopause goals or whatever else that might be.

We have invested considerably in that kind of community engagement. North Edinburgh is fantastic in terms of having place-based networks and enabling collaboration—it is one of the best areas in the city in that regard. There is a network called the north Edinburgh response and recovery group—R2—which is made up of more than 30 third sector organisations. It enables people in those bodies to get to know each other and to signpost individuals to places where they can be helped directly, which they might not otherwise know of. We also have a collaboration called north Edinburgh support services—NESSie—which involves three other third sector organisations: Fresh Start, Move On and North Edinburgh Arts. That allows us to be well embedded in the local community and enables people to access support. There is a no-wrong-door approach and there is no time limit for that support. There is very little red tape, because there are no outcomes associated with the collaboration. Our involvement in NESSie enables us to be as prominent in the local community as we possibly can be. If someone comes to Spartans needing help or support, or if we go to them, we can either help them directly or we will know someone who can help them, and we are able to provide that link through our relationships with people. We have to have relationships with other organisations that are just as strong, so that trust is there to ensure that that person is going to get the level of support that I would expect them to receive.

Mark Williams: I will not repeat what Debbie said, but the point is that the main barriers to young people participating in anything are cost, travel and feeling unwelcome. In order to be more inclusive, we have to address those issues. Therefore, all our programmes are completely free of charge—I do not believe that young people should pay to be with their friends, enjoy themselves and be social—and everything that we do happens in the community. I appreciate that there are bus passes and so on, but I think that we should just go to where the young people are, thereby removing that barrier. Further, on the need for them to feel welcome, it is important that all our work programmes and sessions are culturally, socially and personally relevant and enable people to feel safe and welcome in their own community.

Paul McLennan: The work that you are doing is absolutely incredible, but, on the broader outreach, is there anything that you still need from a local authority, other partners or the Scottish Government in order to go a little bit further?

Mark Williams: There is an issue about the safety ratio. We have sessions in Lochside, which is in the south of the city, and in Northfield, which is in the north of the city, that each attract more than 100 kids on a Friday night. I try to operate on

a ratio of 12 kids to one adult, which means that every kid is spoken to at some point. If that ratio is any lower, there will be kids who have turned up and not said hello to you and who you will not have got to know. However, I cannot get more staff. We try to treat the volunteers well to help them to do the work, but it would be helpful if, for example, the local authority's youth work teams could come to our session to help improve the ratio and ensure that every kid is spoken to for a good 10 or 15 minutes about their life and what is going on that week. We could do with help to increase the number of good adults at those sessions.

Debbi McCulloch: Over the past three years, I have learned a lot through the NESSie collaboration. We have had funders who have been extremely brave. Two years ago, one funder gave us £5,000 to distribute to local families in north Edinburgh who were in crisis. One thousand pounds of that £5,000 was given to us in cash, and the funder said that they were happy for us to just give that out. My finance manager was not very happy about that, because he was thinking about an audit trail, but we managed to get around that. For me, the issue is about helping families to get out of crisis. However, once they are out of crisis, how do we then enable them to thrive? That is the part that we miss when we say, "We've got you out of crisis. Good job. Right, okay, on you go," because the next step is even harder than getting out of crisis.

Going back to the cash that I mentioned, we were working with a family whose son was at the Edinburgh royal infirmary receiving treatment for cancer. His mum was really struggling to afford a taxi and the food at the hospital, which she had to buy because she was there every day for the treatment. We gave her £200 in cash and we did not ask for any receipts—we just based it on trust. We said that it was a short-term solution to help provide for her, so that we could look at a longer-term solution and how we could ease the stress that she was under in addition to her son being extremely unwell and poorly. The relief that that gave her was massive, but so was the trust element.

My ask is for less stipulation around funding and that organisations are trusted to spend it—but, more importantly, to spend it well, because we know the people who are in need. We know that there will be mistakes and failings, but we can learn from those, because, ultimately, most people will come back around. That would be my only ask.

11:00

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): Good morning. I will follow up on Debbi's example. The level of need in our communities is vast and it would be great to be able to give cash to everybody in that situation. What level of demand is there for that kind of support in the communities that you work in? Are you turning people away who you would like to support in the way that you were able to support that family?

Debbi McCulloch: We are quite fortunate in north Edinburgh, because there is a large number of good third sector organisations and support available. The funder increased that pot of money from £5,000 to £20,000 this year. We could distribute that with a click of our fingers, but we try to spread it over time, because we have hotspots, especially around Christmas, for example, when families are in desperate need. We are helping the situation, but Edinburgh hides its poverty very well. I can probably say that because I am from Glasgow, but it is still a real issue. Poverty is also inherited and part of a cycle in a family. How do we break that cycle? How do we ensure that people have the opportunities that maybe their mum and dad did not have?

It is not just about providing support to children who are struggling with education, because there are a lot of high flyers out there who are doing very well in education but have similar challenges at home. We have to recognise that, and we do that by providing an intern programme with our education officers. Every year, we select four students from Craigroyston high school and we pay them as part of their internship, whereby we take them out of school for one day a week to work alongside our education officers.

The problems are still desperate, however. The cost of living and food poverty have been slightly brushed under the carpet. We still have children who come to our youth clubs who are evidently hungry. During the summer, we even had kids who were in residentials with us overnight not going home before the morning club because they knew that they were going to get a hot meal and that, if they went home, that was not going to happen. Evidently, there is still huge need, and we will do our best to continue to try to meet that need. We are very fortunate in having the network that we have around us in north Edinburgh.

I feel as though we are turning a corner slightly. Going back to Willie Rennie's point about local authorities, I feel that, because of its recent changes of leadership and so on, City of Edinburgh Council is looking to do things in an alternative way, specifically around collaboration and wanting to hear what our learning is. We have never been ones to bat the council over the head and say that it needs to give us this, this and this. We are here and we are at the coalface. We know what the challenges are. How can we be creative with our skills and knowledge to have a community that is built more around community wealth? That could be a positive step in the right direction,

especially for a community such as north Edinburgh.

Ross Greer: Parliament has just passed a bill on community wealth building.

Debbi McCulloch: Yes. I am very aware of that.

Ross Greer: I hope that that will contribute.

In response to Willie Rennie's interest, you mentioned that there has been a shift in attitude from the council. Is it fair to say that, in the past, it perhaps felt as though there was a really strong network of third sector and private sector organisations doing a lot of that community solidarity work and then, separate from that, there was the council, with artificial barriers in between, but that is maybe easing now?

I am particularly interested in how easy you find it to engage with the likes of social work, for example, because I imagine that a lot of the families that you are engaging with will have social workers. Do you find that interface to be a collaborative one, or is that the kind of space in which these barriers are created? It may not be exactly the same, but is it roughly equivalent to the example that Mark Williams gave of funding conditions that make it impossible to then work with them?

Debbi McCulloch: I would say that it is a collaborative process, but it is also lengthy and it does not move quickly enough for us to be able to support the young people at that moment in time.

Our education manager, Emma Easton, who oversees our senior alternate school, has a lot of links with social work, with schools and with child and adolescent mental health services. However, it is hugely challenging to get any progress and to get answers, whether that is around additional support needs or people being diagnosed properly. Across the five local primary schools that we work with, about 45 per cent of the children on the total school roll have additional support needs, so we are facing a tsunami when it comes to that.

You asked about our relationship with the local authority. Covid was a game changer for us, because the third sector stepped up and that really changed the perspective of a lot of people, not just within local authorities but across the board. When public authorities were, all of a sudden, closing community spaces and facilities that had been there to support the local community, in a time that was difficult for everyone, the third sector remained open. We showed how quickly we were able to pivot and adapt to a situation that none of us had ever dealt with. I remember standing in the Bestway cash-and-carry with Dougie Samuel, our chief executive officer at the time. We were trying to buy about £1,000-worth of goods for a local pantry, just to be able to keep the pantry open and ensure that the local community had some access to it. I was thinking, "What are we doing here?" However, the point is that we were there, and we were able to do it. If any successes came out of Covid—I am not sure that any did—that was one successful thing in that the third sector was recognised as a sector that the local authority and the Scottish Government could engage with and use to try to effect positive systemic change.

Ross Greer: Is that a two-way relationship now? When you have families coming to you who need additional support, you will try to engage with the council, whether it is with the social work department or another part of the council. Is the opposite also happening? Are you getting social work, education or whatever other department of the council it might be coming to you about a young person or a family and saying, "We think that you would be able to support them. Do you have the capacity to do that?" Are you getting that proactive outreach from them?

Debbi McCulloch: Yes. Again—I know that I keep harping on about it—it is based on the relationships. It is about who you know, not what you know, really. A much more transparent process is happening whereby you can pick up the phone and have honest conversations and work together collaboratively to try to achieve what you want to achieve for the young person or the family.

A lot of that has come from Paul Lawrence, who is the CEO at the City of Edinburgh Council. He was previously the director of place at the council and worked closely with the NESSie collaboration. We shared with Paul the housing conditions in north Edinburgh specifically and the challenges and the tragedy that exist in that local community, but we also presented positive solutions. It is really important not to just shove challenges in people's faces. We were coming to him and saying, "If you gave NESSie a housing officer, that housing officer could then speak directly to the families and then directly to the repair teams," so that the connection that we are talking about could come together much more collaboratively and we could get the repairs done much more quickly, instead of having mould being painted over three times in five years.

Ross Greer: Thanks very much. I am conscious of the time, so I will come to you, Mark. I want to ask about the example that you gave at the start, about Torry and the impact that your work has had there. I am interested in how such work comes about. Did the trust take a unilateral decision? Did the council approach you? Do you have a direct relationship with the emergency services—the fire service and the police—or did the council facilitate a relationship between you and the emergency services? Who instigates that kind of work and what partnerships come about as a result of it?

Mark Williams: Without a shadow of a doubt, it takes time to build the right relationship with the right people. The success of the Torry work probably stems from work that was done in a different community years previously. When the Cruyff court Denis Law was built in George Street, right in the heart of the city, we had to have a real tough conversation with the local authority, first, to get permission to build it and, secondly, to get it to contribute to the funding to build it. It was a long, hard conversation, but its impact was that the second conversation was easier, because the local authority had already seen that it would work.

We identified the Torry area after working with the emergency services—Torry was the number 1 hotspot in the city for youth annoyance by quite a long way. We then went through the process with the council to build the Cruyff court and start our work. As I mentioned earlier—I do not want to go over it again, because of time—the project has been hugely successful. That comes from the young people.

Let us take football, for example. Torry did not have a boys football team, because nobody wanted to work with the boys from Torry—they were too hard work. One of our staff members volunteered and created a football club called Dee United, involving the boys who were causing trouble. They were called the Finnan shops boys, but I will not go into that—you can imagine what they were up to. He took them on and they came down to the Cruyff court every night, because they wanted to play and enjoy football. He got into the streetsport sessions, worked closely with the boys and created an under-17 team.

That has transformed the area. Kids, especially the ones we work with, cannot afford direct debits to join football clubs nowadays, so that football team is completely free of charge. The treasurer was one of the players, as was the fixture secretary. We tried to give them support. They had a great season and they are now an amateur football team that is made up of participants from Torry and uses the Cruyff court and the grass pitch next to it. A new safe space project is being introduced there, too.

Moreover, we have become a Scottish Qualifications Authority accredited centre. We will start delivering employability modules, so that we can take the college courses and modules into the community to work with the kids who need those the most to get them going. The project has really snowballed.

It is about listening to young people about what they want and how they want it to be delivered. That is key. It is also key to have the right relationship with them. We are not an authority; we do not tell them what to do but ask them what they want to do—that is the difference.

Ross Greer: Did the council originally facilitate the relationship between you and the emergency services—particularly the police, I imagine, on a more on-going basis—or do you have a direct relationship with community officers?

Mark Williams: It was a direct relationship—they sat on our steering group. They were asked to be there in order to provide stats so that we were not simply throwing a dart at a map of Aberdeen but knew where to operate. They have system of tasking and operational resource management incident reports that show us exactly where the hotspot is—for example, that part of the community, at that time, on that night. That was where we delivered our mobile arena and started work.

Ross Greer: It sounds as if you are doing a huge amount of work at your own direction. You know your communities, what they need and how to facilitate that. Alongside that, are you getting approaches from the council about particular parts of the city in which it wants you to work, and does it refer particular families or individual young people on to you? Is it trusting enough and quite happy to know that you know what you are doing and who you need to work with, and that you will do so to the extent that capacity allows?

Mark Williams: It is probably a balance. We have built a relationship with the council. It has been very good to us over the years and has started to trust us more to get on with it. It is very stretched. You mentioned the time that it takes to do something in a local authority—it can sometimes be quite long—but we are fortunate that we have a relationship in which it trusts us and comes with us.

We are now involved in a lot of the local outcome improvement plans, because the council can see that the work that we are doing is contributing to them—it sees us as a key player in those plans. We sit on several LOIP groups in Aberdeen City Council, contributing our numbers to help. That is where we hear a bit more from the council about what is needed and what the wider community wants. Obviously, we are a children's charity—we are very much focused on the young people in the community—but in those groups we can hear back about the impact of a Cruyff court on, and the difference that it makes to, the older members of the community. They say that their communities feel safer and healthier, which is brilliant to hear. We did not know that, because we were listening only to young people.

We get that feedback from the local authority, which is good. We have a very good relationship

with it, and it is getting stronger as we go on. The council trusts our work and is there if we need it.

The Convener: In response to some of the evidence that we have heard, I bring in Jackie Dunbar.

Jackie Dunbar: For transparency, I should probably put my entry in the register of members' interests on record, convener. I was a councillor at the time that the George Street Cruyff court went through council and was agreed.

The Convener: Thank you. We go to Paul O'Kane.

11:15

Paul O'Kane (West Scotland) (Lab): Good morning. I want to follow up on some of the themes that colleagues have raised, and especially Willie Rennie's point about the need for people to have a wider understanding of the benefits of the work that you do and the need to communicate that across Scotland, because we know that there are similar projects in every part of the country.

In my area, I do a lot of work with Mark Breslin, who runs Barrhead Amateur Boxing Club. He is also a senior lecturer in the school of education at the University of Glasgow. Mark has done an academic study on activity in the area, which you might be familiar with, which is entitled, "Beyond the classroom: strengthening pupil engagement, attendance and belonging through alternative education and community partnerships". Many of the themes that you are talking about can be recognised in his paper. It is good to see that there is robust academic evidence for the impact that such work has.

I do not know whether you have engaged with that research. Debbi is nodding, which is a good sign. Do you feel that such research is helpful in enabling the committee and its successor to understand how we can do better when it comes to funding and supporting such work on a national level?

Debbi McCulloch: Absolutely. In 2019, alongside Ayr United football academy, we were the subject of a social return on investment report by the Union of European Football Associations and the Scottish Football Association. That was hugely beneficial in enabling us to understand our impact, because it is sometimes hard to quantify that. Nowadays, many funders are less focused on the numbers and more focused on how we make people feel and how we change their lives. That report found that, for every £1 that we invested, the social return on investment was £6. I would expect that figure to be much higher now.

We have recently invested in an insight and engagement manager, because we recognise that we need not only to measure things better, but to measure the things that matter the most—not necessarily to funders, but to people in the local community of north Edinburgh and to our organisation.

In addition, we have recently started a pilot research project with the University of Edinburgh. In simple terms, the aim of that project is to find out what our secret sauce is. If someone asks me about it, it is quite difficult to answer. The project is focusing specifically on our junior alternative school provision and the transition from primary 6 to primary 7. It is looking at issues such as how our junior alternative school provision works with children who are part of the programme and comparing that with children who are not part of the programme to look for potential differences. I would be happy to share the outcome of that work with the Scottish Government and the Parliament once we have the results. We hope to be able to extend the project but, as you are probably aware, academic research is very expensive.

Paul O'Kane: That is true, but it is extremely valuable in quantifying and qualifying what we are talking about. I should have mentioned that the piece of work to which I referred was co-produced by Jesse Mitchell, who is principal teacher in health and wellbeing at St Luke's high school in Barrhead.

We talk about alternatives to school, but those alternatives do not sit in isolation from school. You guys will work in tandem and in partnership with schools, which is encouraging.

Mark, do you have any reflections on that?

Mark Williams: Basically, data drives change. We take quite a structured and evidence-driven approach to collecting data. It is important that we diversify how we measure and what we measure. We have a number of monitoring tools. I mentioned the SHANARRI wheel. We have before and after police stats, and we measure gender splits, attendance and so on.

We also have longitudinal data, which is key. We have been going for 15 years, so I have numbers for the past 15 years, which show what we have done in different communities. I have information on volunteer hours and their postcodes, so I can tell you which community we have the most volunteers from. We also have information on which communities are disadvantaged, the ages of participants and so on, which we can showcase over the year.

Having a rubber-stamped university research project is key. As I mentioned earlier, we are very fortunate to have a research fellow for the next

three years, who will measure the short, medium and long-term outcomes of a Cruyff court in a disadvantaged community. That will be key for us. We want to create a model of impact. I put a lot behind Cruyff courts. They are not our invention, but they work extremely well in the communities that we work in.

I believe that investment in such facilities will save a fortune in the longer term. In the short term, we have improved physical and mental wellbeing; in the medium term, the community feels safer and there is less antisocial behaviour; but what about the longer term? When Cruyff court Denis Law opened back in 2017, the community was in the top 10 per cent on the Scottish index of multiple deprivation, and it is now moving into the top 15 per cent.

Those are the sorts of changes that the free-to-access facilities are making. However, I cannot prove that, because I am not an academic—as you will have very clearly seen. There are people who know what they are doing and who know exactly how to measure this sort of thing, and having the research fellow will be key for us. However, it costs a lot of money. Indeed, I can give you a number: a research fellow costs £130,000 a year, which is a lot of money for the third sector to gamble on, to be quite honest.

Paul O'Kane: That is a challenge. After all, you will want to spend every penny on delivery, because you know that it works, but you have to be able to evidence that, too. It is a bit of chicken-and-egg thing.

We have heard examples this morning from the east and the north-east of the country; Willie Rennie has talked about Fife; and I have talked about the west coast. This is happening in every corner of the country, and it is crucial that we pull all that evidence together so that we can take more of a national approach. That is my view.

Coming back to the academic partnership that you mentioned, Mark, I am interested in hearing about your work with RGU, with which you are closely aligned and associated. How much has the university been an anchor and support for you not only in resource terms but in helping you establish that evidence base?

Mark Williams: RGU is our key partner. The streetsport programme was actually started by Robert Gordon University back in 2006, and the Denis Law Legacy Trust absorbed it in 2012 when we started to introduce our own programmes. The partnership between the two has always been there; indeed, we are based on its campus.

As a model for the third sector, it is fantastic. We have no rent, and no gas or electric bills. I would hate to use the phrase "conveyor belt", but we have students coming in consistently. As fourth years leave, first years arrive, and we are tapping into those volunteering opportunities. Those numbers help, too, and we have human resources, finance and other departments giving us massive in-kind support.

Money-wise, the Denis Law Legacy Trust's overall running costs for the entire year are just over £400,000 for everything I have mentioned today, but a large part of it is in-kind support. The university has played a massive part in that respect. It has had a huge belief in our programming from day 1—indeed, it is funding the research fellow. It believes in what we do. The key thing is to work with like-minded partners, and the university is very much of like mind with the Denis Law Legacy Trust.

Paul O'Kane: Debbi, you mentioned the University of Edinburgh. Are you in the early days of that partnership? Has it been established for quite a while?

Debbi McCulloch: Yes, it has been established for a number of years. The football club was founded by Edinburgh university students, so there is obviously a long history there.

Our pilot research project was supposed to start last year. There were challenges in that respect; specifically, the research assistants were only going to be given a day a week, and then they were offered placements of three or four days a week. However, we now have someone in place who has a youth work background, which is ideal for this type of pilot, and I hope that we will have findings by the end of this year.

As I said, we would like to do a much broader research project to capture the wider social impact that we are making on a daily basis across all our key thematic areas. Ultimately, though, as Mark Williams has said, finding the money that is needed for that could be a slight challenge.

Paul O'Kane: That was useful. Again, it will be for our successor committee to reflect on that issue and take it forward.

Convener, I am happy to share the academic paper that I referenced with the clerks so that it can be shared with other committee members. Given that it was co-produced by a principal teacher of St Luke's high school, I should declare that I am a former pupil of the school.

The Convener: Thank you very much.

I call John Mason.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): I was going to ask about funding, but we have covered that, so I will try something else.

You have both totally convinced us that you are having a huge impact on young people's academic improvement, family issues, youth disorder and many other things, but what about physical activity? I note that only 17 per cent of adolescents are getting the physical activity that they should be getting. Are you emphasising that sort of thing, given that we are, after all, talking about sports clubs?

Mark Williams: It is a tough one to measure, as our work is based in the evening or sometimes at the weekend. We know how many young people we are getting, and we know how often a young person will come, because we get to know them. We have evidence that, although families have been moved from Torry up to Bridge of Don as a result of the issues with reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete in the city, kids are still travelling back on buses to our streetsport sessions, because they can access that activity for free. We have a youth forum called granite city speaks, where young people feel welcome and safe, and that has an effect on their activity rates.

To rewind to a time when we were all younger, we had guides, cubs and scouts, and we would go out with family—we would go down to the park to play. There is a trend among kids now where they do not feel that welcome, because they cannot afford things: they cannot afford to go to the leisure centre for a badminton match or whatever. As we are seeing, they now automatically absorb into places such as shopping centres or McDonald's. Why? Because there is lighting and warmth, and there might be free wi-fi. That is why they are going to those places, and they are suddenly not going to parks, which are not as busy as they used to be, and neither are other places where young people traditionally went. From my point of view, it is quite alarming to know where they feel that they can be safe and welcome, rather than being more physically active and enjoying that.

We offer facilities, however, and the Cruyff courts are essentially an answer, with our streetsport programme running in the community every single night. Young people can now access a free facility in their community every night. We cannot track that, as it is hard to have someone there with a clipboard 24/7, but we hope that our research can indicate how often the courts are being used and how that compares with a community that does not have a free-to-access community court.

I am not sure. We are very interested to know those numbers, as we believe that we are making a difference. It is just hard to prove it.

John Mason: I suppose that you must get a feel for how fit and active the young people are just by looking at them, and for whether that is getting worse over the years. The military say that the young people coming to them are less active than they were.

Mark Williams: Yes.

John Mason: Ms McCulloch, you work with schools. Do they ever talk to you about concerns over physical activity or the lack of it?

Debbi McCulloch: Absolutely, especially at primary school, where there is not a specific element delivered weekly by a physical education teacher. It might come down to the teacher being able to deliver that physical element despite not having any experience in doing so.

We try to provide as much physical activity as we can, alongside our programmes, whether that involves football or other sports. The activities do not necessarily have to involve football; they are young people driven, ultimately.

We want to get girls more active and involved in sport. Sometimes, that has to be through dancing or gymnastics, or even arts and crafts. It is a matter of trying to engage with them, with the idea that physical activity is good for them. It can be a positive thing, not only for their health but for their social skills. That is important for young people's integration. We have a very diverse community in north Edinburgh. I think that 37 different languages are spoken at Craigroyston high school, and that social element can be a challenge.

To go back to an earlier point, what can we do more of for the older generation? We asked ourselves that question when we were writing our new strategy. Until 2023, we were called the Spartans Community Football Academy, and people just associated us with being a football venue and an elite performance centre. We changed our name to the Spartans Community Foundation to give ourselves a greater level of identity, branding and understanding. That has helped with the older generation. Participation in our walking football sessions has doubled, and our para football group now has more than 150 players, with a variety of disabilities and additional support needs. That audience is starting to come to us, and we are going to them as well. We were doing that before, but people were perhaps not as keen.

That goes back to my earlier point about having a venue that is seen not just as a football ground but as a social village that can accommodate people of all ages. The next step for us is about how we can integrate the young and the old, which we know can be hugely impactful, especially for the older generation but for the younger generation, too. There is more work to be done in that area, but we are taking positive steps to support that.

John Mason: That sounds good. A lot of young people—perhaps especially boys—are attracted to come to you because Spartans is very football orientated. Perhaps this is an unfair question to ask, but not every young person is into football—I was certainly not into playing football when I was younger, nor rugby, which was the alternative at the school that I went to. Do you have any awareness of other groups, such as athletics clubs? Are they also doing the kinds of things that you are doing, or is football in a privileged position, in a sense, as it is so high profile and you attract more funding through it?

11:30

Debbi McCulloch: I am not entirely sure of the answer to your question. Based on my experience in the past 17 years, I disagree slightly that football is attractive to funding. Football has had to work extremely hard. Specifically, the foundations and trusts that are linked to clubs have had to prove that they are more than football clubs and that they are here for the right reasons.

At Spartans, our moral compass and why we are here have always been clear. We are here for good—that is it. Whether it involves football, different sports or no sport whatsoever, there is something that we can help you with and we can ultimately give you a role or opportunity.

I feel that football is proving itself and going above and beyond through the extra time programme investment and the delivery of after-school and holiday clubs, parent groups and support. Football can be that hook. However, ultimately, it is based on the people and on the relationship in our extra time programme. There were four full-time positions when we put the new team together, and we were very clear that at least 50 per cent of that team had to be from the local area, because that connection is vital.

Obviously, we have a bit of a wave to ride with the successful qualification for the world cup, which I hope will get more boys and girls to play football or any sport and bring us greater success and recognition. However, the funding landscape for football trusts is still hugely challenging, as it is for organisations across different sports and the third sector.

Mark Williams: We are slightly different, because we are not part of a national governing body. Obviously, you have the SFA and the Scottish Rugby Union, which are umbrella organisations that can filter money down directly to clubs. We do not have that option. For an organisation that delivers not only football but rugby, tennis and so on—you name it—it is really hard to get funding. We have to find it in little pots from different trusts and foundations rather than rely on a governing body for support. Although I am aware that the governing bodies do not fully fund many things, some funding does come down. There are not many organisations such as ours, especially up in the north-east, but there are some, and a lot of them do not have access to such funding, even though we are doing work that is just as impactful, as I hope that you have heard.

John Mason: If a young person was not into football or rugby but, say, wanted to run—I used to do cross-country running—swim or do curling or something, could they come to you or would they go to other groups?

Mark Williams: They would probably come to us first, because we are a multisport organisation. Kids come with their friends, which is how they normally find out. We ask them what they want to do that night, and one of our things is that our vans are full of sports kit. If the equipment is not there, it will be there the next week—if a kid asks for it and we do not have it, we will ensure that it is there the next week. For every kid, the hook is different. It is not always about sports; it could be about creative activity such as tie-dying or something else as simple as that.

We have a group of six young girls from Lochside academy who call themselves the queens. I will be honest with you, they are into underage drinking and it is really hard to engage with them. They are a tough group, with antisocial behaviour. Amy, one of my staff, is fantastic with them; she has a connection and good adult relationship with them. She asked them what they wanted to do, and they said that they wanted to leave school but would not go to college because it was not for them. Amy managed to get them into college. She took them there on a visit to create tote bags—they designed, sewed and created their own tote bags there—and suddenly, they wanted to go to college.

We have had the same thing with boys and birdboxes. Boys who previously had had no interest in going to college built birdboxes in the college's joinery department and now they all want to go to college. It works. The hook is different for everybody—yours was cross-country running, someone else's will be football and someone else's will be birdboxes. Do you see what I mean? Everybody is different and one of our strengths is perhaps that we can offer so much more, because we are not affiliated to one governing body.

To go back to what you said about how to increase activity levels, prevention is much better than healing. It is about where the touch points are in a young person's life in which you can introduce physical activity without their even realising it. We have put in place something called schoolyard 14 with a couple of primary schools in Aberdeen.

Picture your own old-fashioned primary school—it was probably just a grey tarmac area.

John Mason: Yes, probably.

Mark Williams: We introduced something as simple as painting some lines. If you create a six-lane running track in a primary school, the kids run up and down it for a whole 10 minutes, just because they can—that is what kids do. Suddenly, you have introduced physical activity in their day for 10 or 15 minutes without their having to do anything, and it does not even cost much. That is just one example of how we have tried to increase physical activity levels.

Sorry—I am digressing slightly.

John Mason: That is fine—it is interesting.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): Good morning, and thank you for joining us. I will do as Jackie Dunbar just did, but speak as an Edinburgh MSP to place on the record the amazing work that Spartans does across north Edinburgh. During the pandemic, most of us were blown away by how the community used you as a hub and how that transformed a lot of outcomes. I am full of praise for everything that goes on.

I have a couple of questions about capacity building that link to what I just said. I know from speaking to other youth work organisations that they are concerned that there is often a lack of facilities. Debbi, you are lucky to have Ainslie park as a base for people to come to, because they know where you are, but other groups do not have such facilities. What could change? I often get complaints from different parts of Edinburgh about lack of access to the school estate. Mark, you spoke about how the overheads involved in running a facility can mean that you may not be able to move forward. You are in both a lucky position but, based on your experience, is there more that we could do with the school estate or other community-owned public spaces to facilitate more work?

Debbi McCulloch: It would be good to make the school estate more accessible. Mark and I were talking about that before we came in. One of the best things that Spartans has done since we opened our doors in 2008 is to offer street football in a safe place. We open our doors after school every single day and on Friday, which is a half day, there can be 100 to 150 kids there. A lot of people told us, "It's going to get vandalised. The astro's going to get set on fire," but we have never had any issues because it is the kids' space, so they respect it and their parents respect it. It has always been a protected space.

I think there is a barrier of trust about opening up the school estate, and there are resourcing costs associated with that. We also need investment in and development of community spaces such as neighbourhood centres. North Edinburgh has some fantastic neighbourhood centres, but they survive from hand to mouth—the cost of overheads and repairs is one huge issue and staffing is another. We are thinking about how we can collaborate with other organisations to try to take that burden away. It would be good if they had a social enterprise element, similar to the one we have at Spartans. You sometimes have to rob Peter to pay Paul, but that is okay because, ultimately, Paul is going to be better off and will have access to a lot more services.

There are several neighbourhood centres, including West Pilton and the Muirhouse Millennium centre, that need investment in their infrastructure and the quality of their facilities. People often say to me, "You must have loads of money at Spartans because you spent £1.4 million on a new education and youth work space." We do not have lots of money—we raised that money and got grants and funding. The most important part was making sure that young people felt they deserved to be part of that facility. We could easily have put new structures round the existing building and invested a little bit internally, but that would not have had the same impact. Children are used to walking into facilities—whether that is their home, their school or a community space—that are not fit for purpose. There must be further investment to allow collaboration to happen so that more groups can work together to provide a bigger impact.

Mark Williams: I can wind back the years to think about how our programme grew as we got more and more kids. We had a mobile arena that we used to use in communities, but it could hold only 30 or 40 kids at most, so when we started getting 60, 80 or 100 kids we had to look for alternative options.

Astro pitches were the first easy solution, but janitors finish work at 5 o'clock, and they have the keys. It was not possible to open up or lock up, so we could not use those pitches after that time—it was as simple as that. We were thinking, "How can we do this?" and that is where the idea of the Cruyff courts came from.

Kids will climb fences or barriers. They will find a way, they will cut a hole, and they will cause more damage. That is where antisocial behaviour can stem from. Just get rid of them. Why do we need a big fence round an astro pitch? Most of them are not being hired out, and they are dead at night, because there is no janitor to turn on floodlights or anything like that.

Investment in trusting the community would be useful. That is our point of view. We have been fortunate in the partnership work that we have

done to get the Cruyff courts, and we are seeing the benefits of that. The pitch does not have to be a Cruyff court; it could be a school astro pitch, but without the big fences. The floodlights could be operated by sensors, or they might go off every 30 minutes and someone can press a button and turn them back on again. That would be a cost-effective way to deliver something that we have created—such as the Torry example—in multiple communities in Aberdeen City alone.

Miles Briggs: What work is going on to scope some of that—or is it not happening? You have your own organisations. I know from speaking to parents who are seeking to sustain brownies and scouts, and they are doing that because they want their kids to be part of such activities. Their kids will go through with things but will then leave, and no one else is coming to pick up those opportunities. A lot of it often comes down to not being able to access a facility. How do we work to guarantee that free access? The council will tell me that it has to pay a janitor, which is £20 an hour, so it cannot just do that for free.

I know that North Edinburgh Arts has been doing a lot of work to let people into the fantastic new facility in that area. Going back to a point that you made, Debbi, when people see that investment, they really feel that it is for them, and things start to happen in the community.

There seems to be a loss of some opportunities, and I almost think that there needs to be better scoping. It is perhaps a matter of bringing in all the organisations involved to determine where everyone who needs the facilities can get access to them, rather than letting them fold.

Debbi McCulloch: Absolutely. It is about mapping out what is available and working together. There are other sites around Edinburgh. One example is Edinburgh South, which is facing barriers to planning permission. We are proof that our approach works and has a huge positive impact on society and the wider community. For me, it is about working together, listening, sharing our learning and seeing what is possible.

There might be someone who is willing to open up the school grounds, which would not cost the council that £20. If the barrier is money, let us look for solutions around that. If that is still the problem, how do we find the money? We know that the impact will be massive. We can think of how many kids are putting down jumpers and playing on the streets. I remember my days growing up as a child, playing kerby and kicking a ball about. We want to see more of that—kids being out, physically active and socialising with friends. We need to provide more safe environments where they can do that.

Mark Williams: I may need to fact-check my numbers, but I believe that it costs about £3,000 or £4,000 for a fire appliance to attend a false alarm. As I say, I do not know whether that number is right. Those incidents are normally caused, unfortunately, by young people who are bored and who make poor choices. What if physical activity and sports activities were subsidised and supported and were completely free for under-16s? The local authority could be supported to provide janitors with extra time to work—overtime or whatever it may be—so that a court could be open and people could access it for free. There would not need to be a booking system or anything like that.

I appreciate that a lot of finance people will say, "That's just stupid" or "That's not a great idea at all," but it works in other places. Scandinavia has a lot of places where kids do not pay to play, no matter what the activity may be—it is as simple as that. They have free-to-access sport centres. I believe that that is subsidised by charging £1 extra, or whatever, for the adults who attend the gym or other facility.

Could that work in Scotland? I do not know the answer to that. However, that is one concept that could actually help with physical activity levels and with reducing youth annoyance levels. Whether that involves helping the janitor to stay later to unlock the gate or whatever it may be, there are options out there. Partnership working is key.

We provide activities on the Cruyff courts, and I get a lot of other organisations to use them as well, as they are theirs, too—they are the community's, not ours and not the council's. They are for the young people. Other organisations can provide free activity, and they could use the facilities to save the need for hall hire, pitch hire or whatever.

Miles Briggs: So, it is about a presumption that people should have access, instead of having to jump over hurdles to get it.

11:45

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): Thank you both very much indeed, because you have left me with very little to ask. You have covered things very well, and I thank you for that.

The sportscotland strategy, "Sport for Life", was first published in 2019, although it seems longer ago in my head. Has that been a useful guide for you and your organisations? Does it need to take on board more of what you already do?

Mark Williams: It is a difficult situation. The national governing bodies are all affiliated with sportscotland. We are a third sector charity, so where do we fit in? It is good to see the strategy there, but when it comes to the funding streams that come from sportscotland, including the sport facilities fund, it is difficult for us to get that funding

because we do not have a facility, so to speak. The funds do not cover maintenance, so they do not help with the Cruyff courts, for example. The smaller grants are almost below being enough to do something, if that makes sense.

For an organisation that is not a national governing body or affiliated to one, it is quite difficult. Although we can see where we might tie in and help, I do not think that the strategy is for our type of organisation in general, even though we use sport for the power of good.

If there were to be a revamped or new strategy, it should focus more on the power of sport rather than on club sport and achievement. It needs to cover the wider benefits of sport.

Debbi McCulloch: We work closely with sportscotland and active schools in the local community. For the past four or five years, we have been part of a collaboration with Sport First. We are delivering a change-makers course, which is ultimately for young leaders of sports clubs and active schools co-ordinators. We focus on meeting community need. Sportscotland recognised that there was a gap in clubs, sporting organisations and national governing bodies around working out their moral compass and the why of their organisation, and the importance of those factors in bringing the community into their club. We work closely with sportscotland on delivering that programme. We are just about to deliver to a new cohort and we have the opportunity to deliver another year, and then potentially another two years after that.

Sportscotland has a greater interest now in understanding community need and the impact that sport can have. I hope that, by delivering the change-makers course and the changing lives course, we can filter down our experiences into more clubs across Scotland to make sure that they understand that they have a commitment to their community and making a social impact.

Bill Kidd: That is really interesting. I thought that the strategy would overarch everything that is going on in Scotland, but maybe there are elements that do not really filter into your area. The strategy could be looked at to make it more accessible.

Mark Williams: There are not many organisations like ours, and that is fine, but it is an area that is growing. More organisations like ours are starting to appear around the country, so it is an area that sportscotland could look at a bit more and incorporate into its support.

Bill Kidd: That has been useful from the point of view that, I hope, sportscotland will pick up on what is being looked for and also recognise what Debbi said about the good links that you have already established.

Debbi McCulloch: I definitely think that sportscotland's social conscience is there, and that it understands the power of sport and its benefits not only at a recreational or a developmental level but at a performance level. That is really important.

Bill Kidd: Thank you both very much indeed. That was useful.

The Convener: Thank you very much. That concludes the questions from committee members. I thank you both very much for attending today. As I said in my opening questions, I think that what you are doing is inspirational and outstanding. I hope that your appearance at committee today has amplified what you and other clubs and organisations are doing to help young people through sport. Thank you once again for attending today.

Mark Williams: Could I just add something?

The Convener: Of course.

Mark Williams: Do not worry, because I am not going to get on my soapbox, but I have a few more points to make. I appreciate that the Scottish Government and committee members here today are looking at how things happen across the country, especially in connection with funding. Do not worry, because this is not a big ask and I reiterate that it is from my point of view and not from the wider network that I represent.

When you are considering funding, it is important to ensure that there is multiyear funding for community prevention programmes. The long-term programmes that we run require long-term investment, because short-term funding cycles undermine the relationship-building work that we rely on. It takes time to get to know disadvantaged kids so it is important that we do not offer three, six, or 10-month programmes. Funding to support long-term work is really important to our sector and to the area that we work in.

We also need dedicated investment in after-school stuff—many organisations provide evening or weekend opportunities for young people—and we need support for community-led outdoor facilities. I said a few things earlier about how we would need help to expand and grow to do more for young people.

We need workforce investment in youth work and outreach roles. My team are called street-sport coaches, but they are not coaches; they are youth workers. We should recognise that youth workers are a key part of the power of sport and of what we do and that they build up relationships and support. How can we help more people into

the industry? There is no real formal qualification, so that is something that we are looking at. One of my side projects is to create a degree that will develop the workforce in that area, because there is no degree or anything like that.

We also need national recognition and support for children who are affected by imprisonment. Sport can be massively powerful for those young people and their families and can change their routes. The cost of someone being in jail adds up through the years. If we can get those young people in early and support them I hope their paths will change.

That was all I had to say.

The Convener: That is useful context to add at the end of what has been a very useful meeting. Thank you for that.

This will be the final meeting of the Education, Children and Young People Committee in this session of Parliament, so I will take a moment to thank a number of individuals who have facilitated our work since I became convener about 18 months ago and since the committee was formed following the 2021 Scottish election.

I begin by thanking our clerks. Pauline McIntyre, Clare Hawthorne, Gemma Cheek, Ali Walker, Chris Hynd and Jane Davidson in the clerking team do a power of work. I understand that I have not always made that work straightforward or easy at times, but they have been extremely professional in how they have supported the committee, which is very important to Parliament. A lot of the recognition that committee members have received for our work is down to the outstanding contribution of our clerking team and I speak as convener to recognise that on behalf of the whole committee.

I also thank committee members past and present for their input. We have not agreed at times, but I think that we have come together at important points to produce work that has been important here and to organisations and individuals outside Parliament.

Outside the clerking team, we have been ably supported by Tom Malone in the Parliament communications office and by Ned Sharratt and Lynne Currie who have produced our research papers. A lot of the material that we use to question our witnesses comes from the work of Ned and Lynne. I thank Leoncha Leavy and others in the participation and communities team, who have ensured that the work we do happens not only in this building and in this committee room but that we take Parliament to people up and down the country.

I also recognise our broadcasting team and staff from the official report. Our meetings sometimes go on for a bit longer than those of other committees because of the interest that members take in our business, and they have been a great addition to the work that we do.

Finally, I thank everyone who has engaged with the committee over this five-year session of Parliament. Our witnesses make the work that we do special and important and the fact that they have come in to Parliament as witnesses or have responded to our calls for evidence has made that the work that we produce all the better.

I thank everyone who has been involved in the committee for the past five years and I wish our successor committee all the very best in this important area of Scottish Politics.

For the final time, I formally close the meeting.

Meeting closed at 11:54.

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