



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Public Audit Committee

Thursday 9 September 2021

Session 6



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PUBLIC AUDIT COMMITTEE

3rd Meeting 2021, Session 6

CONVENER

*Richard Leonard (Central Scotland) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP)

*Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)

*Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Stephen Boyle (Auditor General for Scotland)

Antony Clark (Audit Scotland)

Zoe McGuire (Audit Scotland)

Tricia Meldrum (Audit Scotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Lynn Russell

LOCATION

The James Clerk Maxwell Room (CR4)

Scottish Parliament

Public Audit Committee

Thursday 9 September 2021

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:00]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Richard Leonard): Good morning. I welcome everybody to the third meeting of the Public Audit Committee in this session of Parliament. I begin by reminding everybody about Parliament's rules on social distancing and also the requirement to wear face masks if you are moving around the room or entering or leaving the room.

Agenda item 1 is a decision on whether to take items 3 and 4 in private. Do members agree to take those items in private?

Members indicated agreement.

Section 23 Report

“Improving outcomes for young people through school education”

The Convener: The main purpose of this morning's session is to look at the section 23 report that was brought out in March this year jointly by the Auditor General for Scotland and the Accounts Commission, which looked at improving outcomes for young people through school education.

I am delighted once again to welcome the Auditor General, who is here with us in person this morning. There are also three of his colleagues who worked on the report joining us via videolink: Antony Clark, interim director of performance audit and best value; Tricia Meldrum, senior audit manager; and Zoe McGuire, senior auditor in performance audit and best value. Welcome to all four of you. We have quite a number of questions to put this morning but, before we do that, Auditor General, could you give us a brief introductory statement?

Stephen Boyle (Auditor General for Scotland): Thank you, convener. Good morning, members. Today I bring to the committee a report on improving outcomes through school education. The report reflects the findings of our work up to the start of the pandemic in March 2020, which we supplemented with additional audit work last year to report on the impact of Covid-19 on school education. Our report was published in March 2021 and our findings predate both the publication of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's review of curriculum for excellence in June this year and the Scottish Government's response to its findings. In presenting the report, I wish to acknowledge the commitment and efforts of those working in education during this most challenging time, as well as those of our children and young people, and their parents and carers.

Important as it is, Scotland's exam system is about more than exam results. Education policy and the curriculum reflect the importance of different pathways and wider outcomes, such as improving health and wellbeing. Children and young people have access to more opportunities and increasingly achieve more of the wider awards and qualifications available to them than they did in 2014, when we last reported on this topic.

The Scottish Government's two priorities for school education are to raise attainment for all and to close the poverty-related attainment gap. Nationally, exam performance and other attainment measures have improved since 2013-14, but the rate of improvement up to 2018-19 has

been inconsistent across different measures. There is wide variation in performance across the country, with evidence of worsening performance on some measures in some councils. We recognise the complexity of closing the poverty-related attainment gap, but the gap remains wide and progress towards closing it falls short of the Scottish Government's aims. Improvement needs to happen faster and more consistently across Scotland to address the inequalities that existed before Covid-19 and have increased as a result. There is a lack of data to address some wider measures of outcomes that are priorities, such as wellbeing.

Between 2013-14 and 2018-19, funding for school education increased more than funding for other council services. Most of the real-terms increases in council education spending came from the attainment Scotland fund. The Scottish Government has now committed to spend a further £1 billion in this parliamentary session on closing the poverty-related attainment gap. Children and young people's learning, wellbeing and economic circumstances have been adversely affected by Covid-19, with those living in the most challenging circumstances hit hardest. Regardless of the nature of the structural changes in education that come from the Government's responses to the OECD review, it should focus on building co-ordination and good collaboration that help deliver a rapid improvement in outcomes across the country.

As always, my colleagues and I will be delighted to answer the committee's questions this morning. Thank you.

The Convener: Thank you very much indeed. This week, you made an important statement in a blog reflecting on 10 years since the Christie commission report was produced. If you do not mind me quoting you, because I think that it is important that this is on the record, I note that you warned that the country "remains riven by inequalities", but you also said that it remains the case that there is

"a major implementation gap between policy ambitions and delivery on the ground."

With reference to this morning's inquiry, you said that

"progress on closing the poverty-related attainment gap between the most and least deprived school pupils had been limited."

That is a very powerful statement of how you see things. Could you reflect on that and perhaps outline for us what you think needs to change so that that huge implementation gap that you spoke about can be closed?

Stephen Boyle: I will start, but I will perhaps invite Antony Clark to come in with some of the

wider reflections on what we want to do across our work in its entirety.

I took the opportunity in a blog this week to reflect on some of the progress that Scotland has made 10 years on from the Christie commission and its drive to deliver improved outcomes for Scotland, focusing on preventative spend and better collaboration across our public services. The blog refers to the inequalities that exist across the country and draws on aspects of the report and findings that are before the committee today. In particular, a number of themes in that blog reflect on why Christie has not delivered its stated ambitions, and it hypothesises that aspects of that may be due to the austerity that the country faced after the financial crisis, as well as the lack of incentives for leaders; the blog broadens that out to look at how, in many ways, performing to what we are being asked to measure against inhibits the delivery of change and progress.

We also talk about the lack of robust data and milestones. That is not a new theme for Audit Scotland. Our 2018 report on planning for outcomes emphasised the importance of policy implementation setting clear milestones and having the right data so that scrutineers—those charged with delivering the implementation of policy—can track, monitor, tweak and adjust in order to make progress. One of our key findings in today's report is that there is a lack of robust data to measure against the broader aspects of the Scottish education system. There is plenty of data and perhaps—as we suggest in the report—an overt focus on attainment levels within schools in respect of exam results but not that broader sense that school is about more than just exam results.

We saw today's report and also the blog as assisting in that conversation about refocusing what we need to do as a country to ultimately achieve better outcomes, tackle inequality and broaden opportunity.

I hope that that is a reasonable reflection, convener, but I am sure that Antony Clark will have a few words to say to supplement mine.

Antony Clark (Audit Scotland): Good morning, convener and committee. I broadly agree with what the Auditor General is saying. It seems to us that the Scottish Government and councils now need to focus on addressing the impact of Covid-19 on disadvantaged groups. As the Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities have started to plan for education recovery, it is very clear that they have been very committed to addressing inequality at the heart of what they are doing. That will be difficult, though, and it will require a concerted effort across a number of fronts.

First, there is the role of education authorities in providing leadership, scrutiny and challenge. The Auditor General has already mentioned that. There is an important role for the regional improvement collaboratives to work with education authorities and schools to gather data, use data and understand what is making a difference in improving outcomes. The Scottish Government also has an important leadership role.

This is something that will involve effort by everybody over an extended period of time. As the report makes clear, addressing inequalities and closing the attainment gap are not something that can happen quickly, but if people do the things that we suggest in our report, we could hope to see steady progress over time that will address this long-standing challenge.

The Convener: One of the things that is mentioned in the report, which I think Mr Boyle referred to, is data. Paragraph 25 of the report puts it very starkly when it says:

“The Scottish Government’s national aim is to improve outcomes for all, but it has not set out by how much or by when.”

From an auditing perspective, that sounds like quite a major flaw, doesn’t it?

Stephen Boyle: Indeed, that is one of the main conclusions and recommendations that we make in the report—that, in order to deliver across the aims of curriculum for excellence and the national improvement framework, there has to be a consistent application of robust data, for all the reasons that we set out in the report, which I have touched on this morning. To have effective milestones that allow policy makers to assess and monitor progress and take any remedial action, as necessary, is a key part. It has to be built on robust data across not just one but all four aspects of the intentions of the curriculum.

The Convener: We will return to some of these themes during the course of this morning’s session. As you stated at the beginning, the report takes us up to January 2021 and, obviously, quite a lot has happened since that time. Have you been able to gather any more information about where things are now? Have you been able to understand whether some of the actions that were recommended in your report, for example, have been followed up at a central and local government level?

Stephen Boyle: I will start and then I will invite Tricia Meldrum to say a little bit more about the updated data. First—to caveat my introductory remarks—the Scottish education system is not just about exams but, in light of the disruption that has been caused by Covid, we have now had two years of data gaps, based on the comparable arrangements that existed with Scottish

Qualifications Authority assessments. We have, as many others have done, tracked the implications of the teacher assessment-led aspect of data. Tricia Meldrum can say a bit more about that.

More widely, with regard to the responses from the Government, Education Scotland and local authorities—we make recommendations to all three parties in the report—as you would expect, we clear the report and we make recommendations and we will continue to follow up on this through our work in future to assess progress. As you also mention, however, given that there is potentially such significant change to the Scottish education system pending, we will want to take stock of our recommendations, which we think will meet the test of time, and review who will be best placed to implement those recommendations. We will do that and report back to the committee as necessary. Tricia Meldrum can say a little bit more about what we have seen of the more recent data since we published.

Tricia Meldrum (Audit Scotland): Good morning. In terms of updated data, there have been two sets of assessments since we published and two lots of results that came out in August. We have seen a quite different picture from what we reported. The method of assessment has been different, in that it has been largely based on teacher assessment and some of the testing that went on this year to inform the teacher assessment. We see quite a different picture from the data. There have been quite large improvements in relation to the pass rate compared to previous years and also the narrowing of the attainment gap, but it is difficult to compare what has happened in the past two years with what happened previously.

09:15

One of the other key measures in the national improvement framework and one of the key outcomes that the Scottish Government is seeking to address relates to participation and the status of 16 to 19-year-olds—are they in education, further higher education or work training and so on? Again, participation rates have improved over the past couple of years and we have seen a reduction in the number of people whose destination is unknown, which is a good thing. Previously, there were a number of 16 to 19-year-olds whose destination the data was not able to track. That number has reduced and we are seeing that more young people have a positive destination, so there a few things to note in the data. We are continuing to talk to the Scottish Government about wider progress against our recommendations, but that is a bit of an update on where the data is sitting.

The Convener: Thank you. Before I widen the questioning, there is one other thing that I want to come back to, which again was mentioned in your opening statement—the OECD report that came out in June this year, just a couple of months after your own report was produced. In the briefing note for today’s committee meeting, you say that there are some common themes between the conclusions you arrived at and the conclusions and recommendations that were made by the OECD. It would be useful for us to hear from you what those common themes are and whether there are clear recommendations that come from those common themes that would do what the report says we need to do. I think that we are all agreed on the need to improve outcomes for young people in a broader sense through school education.

Stephen Boyle: Thank you, convener. Our assessment of the comparability of our own report with that of the OECD is that there are consistencies and synergies between the two reports. I would point to the theme that we have explored a little bit already this morning around the quality of data that exists across all the pillars of the Scottish education system and the need for that to improve. We have touched on the fact that the exams system—I will come back to that in a moment—is very data led, but that is not replicated in relation to the other aims of Scottish education. We see that in both reports.

The OECD report also talked about the wider aims of curriculum for excellence being embedded in the broad general education element of the curriculum but then not being reflected in the senior phase. We see that view coming through in the more recent, updated OECD report, too. That is the consistent thread through that report and our earlier reporting on planning for outcomes and the need for improved planning data to deliver outcomes most effectively.

As others do, we await the full confirmation of the Government’s plans and what those mean for the structure of the Scottish education system. I refer back to the comment I made in my introductory remarks, that, regardless of the structure that is implemented in the Scottish education system, it must not lose sight of the overall objective of delivering better outcomes for Scotland’s children and young people, particularly as we have seen how badly affected our most deprived communities have been over the course of the pandemic.

The Convener: I will open the questioning to the whole committee now, starting with Willie Coffey.

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): Thank you very much, convener, and good morning again, Auditor General. Could you tell us

a little bit more about the response to Covid and the part that remote learning and digital technology played in that? Your message is very complimentary in recognising that there was a strong foundation there already, but could you give us your perspective on how well that worked?

Stephen Boyle: Good morning, Mr Coffey. I am happy to do that, and I will again invite colleagues to supplement my response. Zoe McGuire is probably best placed to talk about the nature of the leadership arrangements in the Covid response.

One of the findings in our report is that the Scottish education system worked well and collaboratively both before the pandemic and in the response by the education system during the course of the pandemic in the extremely challenging circumstances that we all lived through and experienced in many different sectors. We refer to the work of the Covid-19 education recovery group, the representation from many different parties within that group and the 10 workstreams that were placed in it. We also refer to the allocation of resources to public bodies to enable them to take steps to ensure that—as many of us recall—online learning was made available to Scotland’s children and young people and that the allocation of 50,000 devices took place by December last year, many months after the pandemic started.

It is also fair to recognise that, although inevitably there would have been a degree of digital exclusion for some of Scotland’s children and young people and hardship would have been experienced, the provision was a complex process in a competitive market. Businesses and people switching to home working overnight and organisations across the country all trying to access a limited supply of digital devices and education providers trying to do likewise led to difficult circumstances. Overall, though, we think that the system worked well in very challenging circumstances. That would be my assessment, Mr Coffey. However, Zoe McGuire can give you a bit more detail over and above what we say in the report.

Zoe McGuire (Audit Scotland): I agree that the setting up of the Covid-19 education recovery group relatively quickly was a very good thing. It acted as an advisory group and helped to pull together specific things around specific workstreams, such as workforce and those with more complex learning needs. It really helped to pull things together and provide very good advice to the system. We saw that happen quickly, and a youth panel was put in a little bit later—I think around October last year. As the Auditor General said, the distribution of remote devices happened relatively quickly under some difficult

circumstances, but it was very much targeted to those who initially needed them because of issues of deprivation and so on. I hope that that is helpful.

Willie Coffey: Yes, it is. Did you pick up any disproportionate impact on young people who are learning from home on a device? The device is one thing—it is handy to have a device—but the connection speed from your house is another thing entirely. We have all had various experiences of that, even in Parliament. Did you pick up on any issues there that we might want to learn a few lessons from should something like this happen again?

Stephen Boyle: That is a very important point, Mr Coffey. Our ability to work and learn from home is, of course, based on our home circumstances, which are unique to ourselves. One factor is the availability of a device to allow us to access learning. Another aspect will be the ability of the school, in this context, to provide lessons, to set work and so forth. Then, back in the home environment, there are the issues of whether the household has broadband, whether there is a space to work in and whether there is parental care and support for learning, which are all factors.

As we mention in the report, we conducted some focus groups—the team can say a little more about that in a moment. We also drew on survey results that reflected young people's experiences of home learning. It is safe to say that young people, and some groups in particular, found that challenging. In the report, we refer to girls finding it harder than boys. It being a very challenging and fluid environment, because of all the uncertainty, contributed to the very difficult context.

I ask Zoe McGuire to say a little bit more about the survey, our own focus groups with the children and how the young people whom we spoke to conveyed their experiences.

Zoe McGuire: The connectivity point that you have picked up on is very interesting. That was definitely an issue. It is not just about the device; it is about having the connectivity. Also, to be honest, it is about having the space within your home to be able to do the work, because circumstances around their family and home situation might make it difficult for young people. We heard about the importance of having a desk to work at or a space when there are other people in the home and distractions.

Through some of the survey results and through talking to children and young people, we found that there was a lot of anxiety around not knowing quite what was going to happen about exams. We heard a fair bit about that anxiety, although, to counter that, it was not a blanket situation for all children and young people. We heard that some

young people had thrived and quite enjoyed that environment and being able to spend a bit more time with their families, but that very much depended on their having the right things in place. It also very much depended on the school and how comfortable the teacher felt about doing digital learning, which was a very new thing for teachers. The experiences of children and young people varied.

Willie Coffey: Lastly, on that point, do you think we will keep any element of remote learning as we go forward, or will we go back to normal and have everybody in school? Will we lose the advantages that remote learning gave us when we go back?

Stephen Boyle: We touch on that in the report, recognising the differences between the first and second lockdowns and the additional role that Education Scotland undertook in co-ordinating the response across education providers in Scotland. We also make a recommendation in the report. We are conscious of our remit and that it will be for education providers, the Scottish Government and Education Scotland to assess how they want education to be provided in Scotland. Nonetheless, we acknowledge that, if we can harness any of the benefits we have seen over the past 18 months, to be better prepared for any future lockdowns or, indeed, to harness any of the positive experiences that Zoe McGuire has referred to, we should, of course, capture those in any arrangements.

Willie Coffey: Thank you very much for that.

The Convener: I think that Antony Clark wants to come in with a few points on the same area.

Antony Clark: Thank you very much, convener. I want to approach it from a slightly different angle. I know that Mr Coffey is very interested in the technology support that children and families have in their home, but the committee might be interested in the other side of the coin, which is the technological support that is available from local authorities. In our audit work during the Covid-19 pandemic, we found that local authorities that had invested in information and communications technology over time were better prepared and better placed to pivot to different types of home-based learning and different types of online service delivery to their local citizens. The pandemic shone a spotlight on the importance of local authorities continuing to invest in ICT so that they can provide different types of support for people moving forward.

I leave open the question as to whether hybrid learning will be part of the learning offering in the future. However, if it is, local authorities will clearly need to have good technological kit in place to support that. I thought that it might be useful for you to hear that, Mr Coffey.

The Convener: Thank you, Mr Clark. I now turn to Sharon Dowey, who has a series of questions to ask.

Sharon Dowey (South Scotland) (Con): Good morning, Mr Boyle. In its key audit themes report, the session 5 committee expressed its concern that a number of the audit reports had revealed that data and outcomes in relation to key service provision were incomplete or absent. Can you tell us the extent to which having less consistent and robust data in the national improvement framework and wider outcomes has impacted your ability to measure the impact of the national improvement framework and whether it is delivering value for money?

09:30

Stephen Boyle: Good morning, Ms Dowey. I am delighted to start, and, again, I will invite Tricia Meldrum and Antony Clark to say a few words in addition.

One of the key findings in the report is that there is not a broad enough sweep of data to measure delivery against the four aims of the curriculum. We also think that it is more than just a question of data; we think that there is an element of tone and commentary around it that skews some of it. In the report, we refer to the feedback that we received from education practitioners that the overt tone and focus are on exam results being the measure that matters most in determining how well a school is performing. If there is a broad acceptance that school is about more than exams, that is not reflected in the data and the associated milestones that go along with it.

There is, absolutely, data on attainment and exam performance, but other aspects of the curriculum and the objectives—health and wellbeing, in particular—are not reflected sufficiently. That comes out as a key theme and judgment that we make in the report. There needs to be parity of quality data and milestones in order to demonstrate and evidence consistency across the core themes of the report.

As you say, Ms Dowey, that is not a new theme that neither your successor committee nor Audit Scotland has commented on. Our planning for outcomes report, the committee's legacy report and many of the reports that the committee considered in the previous parliamentary session have touched on the important point that there needs to be clear and robust data to measure the delivery of the rounded suite of outcomes that we want for education.

Sharon Dowey: You talk about having a "rounded suite". On that issue, there has been a lot of talk of "doing in" the exam results. What are

your thoughts on whether we should keep exams or get rid of them?

Stephen Boyle: That question is probably best commented on by education providers. I am clear on my remit and that of Audit Scotland, and we had best stick to what we know. It is perhaps best for the Government and education authorities to determine how the Scottish education curriculum is to be delivered in the future. In order to evidence and to measure how schools are performing, as well as the experience of children and young people in schools, the data needs to go beyond exams and into those wider sweeps. However, if you will forgive me, I would refer you to others on the specifics of whether we should or should not have exams.

Sharon Dowey: Would that affect your ability to judge attainment within schools? Would it have a large impact or a small impact?

Stephen Boyle: I am not sure that it necessarily would. If it is determined by a policy decision that attainment is to be measured through teacher assessments, school assessments or some vehicle other than exams, and if that is the basis on which Scottish education is determined, we would follow that data—as we have over the past couple of years—rather than determine what the policy should be, which is clearly outside our remit.

Sharon Dowey: Your report states that the Scottish Government, councils and their partners need to build on the work that is already being undertaken to agree clear priorities for education recovery and improved outcomes after Covid-19. Are you aware of any action that is being taken in relation to how those who are responsible will ensure that the national improvement framework outcomes will be measured, reported and acted on?

Stephen Boyle: Again, I will invite colleagues to come in to track the progress of what has happened since we reported. I will turn first to Antony Clark and then to Tricia Meldrum, if she wishes to add anything.

Antony Clark: This is all being picked up in the Scottish Government's response to the OECD report. It is clearly trying to make sure that there is better alignment between the national improvement framework and curriculum for excellence, both of which are designed to improve outcomes and address inequalities. The actions are being taken forward through the response to the OECD report.

Sharon Dowey: Picking up on something that Ms Meldrum said earlier, do you think we have a robust enough system for following those who choose to leave school at 16, to ensure that they have positive outcomes and do not fall through the cracks? What more could we do?

Stephen Boyle: Like many others, we will be interested in following through on the young persons guarantee, which feels like it will probably be the embodiment of how positive destinations will be determined, and following through on the data. Again, it goes back to data. The arrangements that the Government has committed to for post-school education for Scotland's children and young people have set out the targets. We will closely monitor what is achieved and consider that for future reporting through our audit work.

The Convener: Tricia Meldrum, do you want to come in on the questions that Sharon Dowey put?

Tricia Meldrum: Yes. One of the points that we make in the report is about the different pathways that are potentially available to young people so that all their learning does not necessarily have to take place in schools. There is a broader range of opportunities available through colleges, and we see quite a significant increase in the number of young people under 16 doing some learning at college and more work around foundation apprenticeships. More young people are again working with employers as part of their learning—we see some quite big increases there. The number is still quite small, but there have been quite big increases over the past few years as those pathways have been made available.

Again, our point is that that has not been picked up very well through the data, which has focused on examinations. We are not necessarily picking up some of those vocational qualifications, as they are not part of the key indicators. They are not given the same kind of focus as some of the exam results. From talking to some of the young people and hearing about some of their challenges, we know that there is a feeling that those other choices do not have parity of esteem with staying on at school and studying for highers and advanced highers. It is about trying to make sure that, whatever happens in the future, those different pathways have that parity of esteem and that that is reflected in the data and in the scrutiny of the whole education system.

Sharon Dowey: A lot of kids are starting to see that there are benefits to doing things other than higher education—going on to other destinations, apprenticeships and so on. I think that that message is getting through. I am more concerned about whether there is enough data to make sure that, if somebody leaves school when they are 16, we follow them to make sure that they have gone to a positive outcome and have not fallen through the cracks, that they have a job or that their apprenticeship has not fallen through. Is somebody following where children are going to make sure that they do not fall through the cracks?

Stephen Boyle: Stepping back from the very significant investment that Scotland makes in its

future workforce and skills and the important role that children and young people will play across all aspects of Scotland's future life and prosperity, I agree that the quality of data and tracking really matters.

We are currently undertaking some audit work on the investing in skills arena within Scotland and how well that works, looking at the success of apprenticeship arrangements, foundation apprenticeships, modern apprenticeships and how well Scotland's skills system works together—including through the roles of Skills Development Scotland, the Scottish Funding Council and so forth. We will report on that early in 2022.

In addition to our work, we agree that the data matters. Indeed, the organisations that are involved must be reporting transparently how well our post-school system is working and whether the positive destinations that we are committed to are being achieved. There is work for us in reporting on that, but it is very much for Scotland's skills bodies, our local authorities and the Government to report on progress, too.

I will hand over again to Tricia Meldrum.

Tricia Meldrum: I will return to the question about the data on 16 to 19-year-olds. That is the participation data set, and that would be the main way that you would know what is happening to 16-year-olds.

Quite a lot of work has gone into improving that data set in relation to reducing the number of young people who have an unknown classification. In the latest data, which came out a couple of weeks ago, that number was down to 4.6 per cent. It had previously been over 5 or 6 per cent and was quite different across different councils. We know that councils, schools and Skills Development Scotland have put a lot of work into trying to reduce the number of unknowns, because, if they are unknown, we do not know what is happening to them and what their destination is.

We also know that there is lots of work going on within councils and schools to improve positive destinations for their children and young people, focusing on the potential trajectory for them—whether they might go to college, university, training and so on—and working with the young people around the best outcomes for them. We saw lots of examples at a local level of improving participation and positive outcomes for that 16-to-19 age bracket.

The Convener: Thank you. That has been a very useful line of questioning. I will now turn to Colin Beattie, who has a number of questions around outcomes.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North and Musselburgh) (SNP): Thank you, convener. The report overall seems to be pretty positive, but of course, this being the Public Audit Committee, we have to focus on the negative bits. Key message 4 on page 5 of the report says that there is

“wide variation of educational performance across councils”,

in terms not only of declining performance but of improvements, against indicators. I am thinking back to previous discussions that we have had around the committee table. Are you satisfied that the indicators and how they are constructed by councils are directly comparable across the whole council scene?

Stephen Boyle: I will start, but I will bring Antony Clark in relatively swiftly on this point. Comparing councils is difficult—I think that we touched on that in the report—because of a wide variety of factors. No two councils are exactly the same—because of geography, levels of poverty, rurality, the number of teachers that they employ and the distances that children and young people have to travel to school. Then, of course, there are the factors, including the individual home circumstances of children, that we have already touched on and which all contribute to the difficulty in comparing one council to another.

Colin Beattie: Surely, the elements that go into populating indicators are the same in every council. If they are not, they are not comparable.

Stephen Boyle: It is our understanding that, in respect of comparability of data and how it is compiled, indicators are populated on the same basis so that every authority measures the questions that are asked of them the same way.

Colin Beattie: So, variation in indicators must be directly comparable between councils. In spite of variations in numbers of teachers and all the other things, the indicators themselves should be robust.

Stephen Boyle: Again, Antony Clark might wish to comment, but nothing came out in our audit work that suggested that there are flaws in the data that has been presented.

Colin Beattie: I will follow on from that. Given that, in a number of councils, indicators have gone the wrong way, are there any signs, looking across the board, that there is a common denominator? Is it mostly to do with schools in more deprived areas? Is there a social element? Is there a physical element? Is there anything that you can point to as the cause of indicators going down in a particular place?

Stephen Boyle: Again, I will say one or two very brief words; then, I am sure, Antony Clark will want to come in. In the report, we also comment

on investment in local authorities. For example, the Scottish attainment challenge provided significant investment during the previous session of Parliament and there is a commitment to councils from the Scottish Government on that for this session of Parliament.

09:45

We were not able to draw the clear conclusion, through the indicators that were measured, that that money had led universally to improved outcomes. The attainment challenge funding is very significant investment, so one of the key recommendations that we make in the report is that, as the investment continues, it should be made clear what it is intended will be achieved.

We have seen many interim evaluation reports by Education Scotland. There are, no doubt, many examples of terrific practice in how the money is being used. However, if we step back to look at the high-level data, that the funding has an impact is not borne out. That is probably enough from me on local authorities. I will hand over to Antony to broaden that out.

Antony Clark: Thank you very much, Mr Beattie; that is a very interesting question. First, I confirm what the Auditor General said about our having no concerns about the quality, reliability and consistency of the data. Great care is taken by the Scottish Government and local authorities to make sure that there is a consistent approach. In our report we talked about some experimental data that is being developed. I think that the Scottish Government and others always clearly test data before it is made publicly available. The data that we report is reported according to the standards of the Office of National Statistics.

At the heart of the question is what causes variability in performance. It seems to us that a host of factors bear on that. Some are to do with the different types of communities that local authorities serve—some communities are more deprived and some are more affluent. As the Auditor General said, the level of investment that local authorities have made in education services will be a factor, and there are some very specific issues to do with the quality of leadership and the quality of teaching within schools. No one thing can be singled out as being the thing that makes the difference in terms of improving educational outcomes.

You will notice from the report that some of the attainment challenge authorities are improving well; they are, obviously, the more disadvantaged education authorities. Others are performing less well and are in some ways deteriorating. Conversely, while some relatively affluent local authorities are performing well, some are

performing less well, so poverty and deprivation is not the whole story. We also say in the report that there is no clear causal link between levels of investment and outcomes.

The picture is very complicated. I would say that much more needs to be done within the education system if we are to understand better what is making a difference on the ground. That is a role for regional improvement collaboratives and education authorities, and there is also a role for the Scottish Government in identifying and sharing good practice across the system. It is a very complicated area.

Colin Beattie: Perhaps I am being too simplistic, but it seems to me that if you have the indicators, and all the data goes into the indicators on a comparable basis among councils, there must, if you look across the board, be something in common in the councils in which there are declining indicators. There must be something that you can put your finger on in each case and say that it is the most common factor.

Antony Clark: It is not possible to approach the matter in quite that way. We have reported data at both national level and local authority level. Had we looked at performance within individual education authorities, you would also see quite wide variation within and across schools. Many factors impact on positive or less positive performance. As I say, it is very important that the education system, Scottish Government, RICs, education authorities and education leaders work together to understand better what is causing positive outcomes and less positive outcomes. That is very much a live debate within the education system, at the moment.

Tricia Meldrum might want to add to what I have just said.

Tricia Meldrum: Thanks, Antony. The only thing that I want to add is that factors that impact on outcomes for children and young people do not sit totally within the control of the education system. It is also very much about how people who work in education work with external partners. We talk in the report about links with healthcare, social work and third sector partners and, very importantly, with families, parents and carers. This is about how schools, councils and RICs work, and at the national level, how organisations work on the needs of children and young people across different parts of the public sector. Again, I say that it is a very complex picture; we are very aware that the things that impact on outcomes do not all happen within the school setting, but relate very much to other parts of the public sector.

Colin Beattie: It seems to me that indicators are there to inform and guide us on future investment and future focus on where we put

resources. If the current indicators do not do that, is there a case for saying that however comparable they might be, and however accurate they might be, we need different indicators in order to extract more detailed or cogent information that will allow us to take decisions? Is that possible?

Stephen Boyle: I will start, then Antony Clark will probably want to come in and say a word or two. We recognise that one of the key findings from the report is that there is not a broad enough suite of indicators to capture all aspects of the Scottish education system. The OECD report comments similarly.

On the element that relates to exams, it feels that that is perhaps not up for grabs, but if the level of change that we have seen over the past couple of years in how exams are undertaken leads to further change, that is all the more reason to consider the matter. If this is a reset moment and we need a new suite of indicators that measure and assess how the Scottish education system is performing—in particular, on the back of the pandemic—now is the opportunity to do so for the years to come. An absolutely key finding of the report is that there is not enough data for a rounded assessment of how the Scottish education system is performing.

Colin Beattie: What discussions have you had with the Scottish Government on that?

Stephen Boyle: We have cleared the report. I would say that there is a broad and emerging acceptance of the need for more data. Probably, however—as Antony Clark and Tricia Meldrum have said—the Scottish Government's response to the report that we are discussing and to the OECD report will inform its and our understanding of what will happen next, both in terms of indicators and getting clear data that supports delivery of outcomes.

Colin Beattie: I will move on to something that we have already talked about a little bit—exams. Paragraph 42 on page 22 of the report correctly says that the people who work in education are very much focused

“on children's and young people's wellbeing as a key priority”.

So they should be.

Is it possible to measure that focus in any way? So many things have happened in respect of local authorities and the Scottish Government trying to support young people through focusing on their health and wellbeing, and on ensuring that they are in a safe environment. Is there any way to measure that? Can an objective view be taken on it? It has obviously taken a huge amount of time, resources and effort.

Stephen Boyle: You are right that there is acceptance across the education system on parity of esteem, and that education is about more than exams. However, in order to get a wider interpretation of how the system is performing, a wider suite of indicators that capture health and wellbeing and the confidence of children and young people is needed. Tricia Meldrum will probably want to come in to say what we have learned from discussions, and from drawing on experience elsewhere, how that can be measured and what opportunities there are for the Government and the education system to broaden that out.

I think this goes back to considering the entirety of planning for outcomes, and to the quality of data and the outcomes from it. I accept that it is difficult and potentially challenging, and I draw the conclusion that if it was easy, it would have been done by now. Nonetheless, if schools are to shift away from the sole focus being on exams, as we see in the indicators, we must get over that hurdle and have a broader suite of indicators.

I invite Tricia Meldrum to say a word or two more about what we have seen and the experience from which we can draw.

Tricia Meldrum: One of the indicators in the national improvement framework is on health and wellbeing. That is based on survey data that is, obviously, not the same as the exam data, which is on every child and young person. The survey data was from the Scottish health survey in perhaps 2019, so there is a bit of a lag. The data is on very specific questions that were included in the health survey.

We know that work was going on prior to Covid on improving data on health and wellbeing, which would then have fed into the national improvement framework. That work had started but was paused because of Covid, so we are waiting to see what happens in respect of it being picked up in order to get a more rounded data set.

We know that there is work going on within individual schools and within individual councils. One of the national improvement framework drivers is on using data to understand authorities' own pupils and their own circumstances. We have seen a number of examples of schools and councils using information to understand properly the circumstances of their pupils in relation to wellbeing, for example, in order to target support at pupils using nurture approaches and so on.

We know that, at the local level, schools and councils have a handle on that in terms of their own priorities, but it is not yet reflected in national data. Work was started on getting better national data. It was paused because of Covid, so we are waiting to see what will happen when it restarts. At

the moment there is quite a gap and we have not seen how the work will be taken forward. There are issues around confidence, which is one of the four capacities of curriculum for excellence, so we expect to know whether things like that are happening and being delivered.

Colin Beattie: I have one last question on this subject. We have highlighted in questioning that there is disparity in the indicators in respect of the prominence of exam performance versus the wider outcomes. In your report, you make it clear that the Scottish Government and local authorities should be working together to ensure that more prominence is given to the balance. Is there any indication that is happening?

Stephen Boyle: I will hand over to Antony Clark to update the committee. We made a very clear recommendation to broaden the tone, the measures and the language that we use about school and about measuring success, through all the wider indicators and broader pathways that relate to measurement of how children and young people feel about themselves and the experience that they get from school education.

Antony Clark: It was clear when we were doing our audit work that government at national and local levels accepts that that needs to happen. You will recall that the OECD report reaches a conclusion that is very similar to the one in our report, in that it concluded that as you get into—*[Inaudible.]*—from the ambitions of curriculum for excellence in terms of wider outcomes.

There is a genuine commitment. There is awareness of the issue and there is willingness to make the change happen at national and local levels. I would be very surprised if that were not to be one of the key actions that flows from the Scottish Government's response to the OECD report.

The Convener: Thank you. I will bring Sharon Dowey back in, then, I think, Willie Coffey has a question on the area that Sharon Dowey will pursue.

Sharon Dowey: The Scottish attainment challenge, supported by the attainment Scotland fund, is designed to reduce inequality in education. However, in paragraph 74 of the report, on page 31, Audit Scotland notes that

"the SAC does not fully reflect broader demographic issues",

and specifically mentions rural communities. What improvements could be made to the ASF to reflect the inequalities mentioned in paragraph 74?

10:00

Stephen Boyle: I will happily say a few words and then I will invite Zoe McGuire to come back in and say a little bit more about what options exist.

The background to the Scottish attainment challenge and the attainment Scotland fund was the aim of tackling the attainment gap that existed between Scotland's most deprived and least deprived communities in relation to children and young people in education. The funding was based on the identification of nine attainment challenge authorities in Scotland—those that had the greatest concentration of instances of multiple deprivation, as identified by Scottish index of multiple deprivation factors in quartiles 1 and 2. That led to the funding, which flowed from those factors.

There are critics of that approach. Certainly, as you allude to, that it was perhaps too blunt a tool with which to allocate funding came across in our conversations with education practitioners during our audit work. They said that it did not sufficiently address factors such as rural areas where there were perhaps not so much pockets of poverty but a wide dispersal of poverty, or where, in a generally affluent local authority, there were pockets of deprivation that were not reflected in the authority's overall profile. That led to suggestions that there may be better approaches. In particular, the funding announcement that was made during the summer said that a further £1 billion of funding will be made available through attainment challenge funding. Therefore, there are other mechanisms .

There are some safeguards in the current measures. There is some direct funding to schools, over and above the total council area funding, which attempts to allow for some of those disparities. However, the feedback that we received from education providers is that that was not sufficient and that there was a risk that it was too blunt a tool to address pockets of deprivation or particular features of a local authority that the overall SIMD targets did not measure well enough.

We captured in the report the need for a wider look at whether there are different tools to use in allocating funding to close the poverty-related attainment gap.

Zoe McGuire may wish to say more on this topic.

Zoe McGuire: As the Auditor General said, the report suggests that there has been a feeling that the SIMD did not quite capture the spread of deprivation. We did some fieldwork in our first set of work up in Shetland, and there was very much a feeling that, given that SIMD is measured by postcode and that a rural area can cover a very wide area, SIMD does not necessarily reflect

deprivation in an area, and, as the Auditor General said, sometimes small pockets of deprivation within more affluent areas are not targeted.

Another thing to think about while we are still in the midst of the pandemic is how it has affected deprivation levels. Some families might be in a different position from the position that they were in previously, when the SIMD was first put forward. That has to be brought out as well in how any additional funding is targeted in the future.

Sharon Dowey: There is still some more work to be done to make sure that the money follows the child rather than the postcode.

Stephen Boyle: There is an opportunity, in reviewing the attainment challenge funding allocations, for wider consideration to be given to indicators. In particular, given the significance of the sums that have been allocated, are there alternative approaches that might better target children and young people than those that have been used to date?

The Convener: Does Willie Coffey want to come in?

Willie Coffey: Yes—thank you, convener. My question is for Stephen Boyle and is on the inequality agenda.

Your report is good—it recognises that the gap has narrowed. That is quite clear and is to be welcomed, and I commend local authorities for it, particularly those in the group of nine that have made efforts to begin to close the gap.

However, you go on to say that closing the gap needs to happen more quickly. What are your views or recommendations on how that can happen more quickly? I sometimes wonder how on earth that can be done more quickly if the education system has done the best it can in the circumstances that it has found itself in.

You also mentioned that a further £1 billion is coming down the line to help. Do you get the sense that the Government is listening to your messaging that we need to think smarter, more cleverly and differently about how we deploy the funding to reach the communities that you, Tricia Meldrum and Zoe McGuire have mentioned? Do we need to think about how we can better shape deployment of the funding to get the quicker turnaround that you hope for?

Stephen Boyle: I will start, but I am sure that Antony Clark will want to say a word or two about the local authorities' role.

As you set out in your question, there are a number of factors as to how that might be achieved, building on the conversation that have had already about the quality of data and the wider suite of indicators. We recognise that progress has

been made—nationally, the attainment gap has narrowed—yet we still see a wide variation in performance across councils. We think that that is due to the quality of the indicators. Good-quality data is needed in measuring intended outcomes.

There is a need to build on good practice as well. One of the recommendations in the report points to the many examples across the country of interventions and high-quality education. There is a clear role for the regional improvement collaboratives, which are fairly new, and for sharing their expertise across the country, whatever happens in future with Scotland's education bodies. The inspection approach that Scotland takes to education will also play a significant role in driving improvement.

Unfortunately, as ever, there is no one single answer to this. The Covid-19 pandemic has, of course, exacerbated difficulties, given its impact on Scotland's children and young people. There is a sense of urgency—we do not shy away from that. A very significant period of time has passed, and I think that we all have a right to expect that the huge plans for further investment will lead to a step change.

As we see in the report, there have been fairly marginal improvements—those have been below the Government's ambitions. My colleagues and I have had conversations with Government officials about stretch aims. Stretch aims are a good thing and it is right that there are demanding targets. The targets have been based on ambition and I guess that this is about sustaining that level of ambition. For all the reasons that we spoke about at the start of this conversation—we are 10 years post-Christie—if this is one of the changes that Scotland can make as a country, we are right to be ambitious. However, it is not easy—I would not suggest that it is. There will be a range of components in making the change that is before us.

I am sure that Antony Clark will want to say a word or two.

Antony Clark: The Auditor General is absolutely right. This is not easy and straightforward, and there will be debates about whether the pace of improvement was sufficiently fast. Our view was that the progress that was made in closing the attainment gap fell quite a bit short of what the Scottish Government had committed to—members will have gathered that from the report.

As the Auditor General says, it is not that there is one single thing that needs to happen. It is partly about leadership, it is partly about data, and it is partly about practice within schools. I also refer back to Tricia Meldrum's comments. This is not just about schools; it is about the life

circumstances of children and families—things that can contribute to better long-term outcomes. There has been a terrible and tragic event for many people across Scotland. No one can think about it as having been a positive thing, but it has shone a real spotlight on inequalities in ways that we have not seen for many decades.

The strong sense that we are getting is that the Scottish Government, local government and others want to build focusing on and addressing inequalities into their recovery planning—planning not just for education recovery, but for economic recovery and health recovery. If people have what we might call a joined-up approach to Covid-19 recovery that places equalities at the centre, one would hope that we might see some more rapid progress in closing the attainment gap as a consequence.

Willie Coffey: That is really helpful. Thank you.

The Convener: Craig Hoy has a series of questions. I think that he wants to make a declaration of interests before he puts his questions.

Craig Hoy (South Scotland) (Con): Yes. I draw the committee's attention to my entry in the register of interests, which details that I am a member of East Lothian Council's education committee.

Good morning, Mr Boyle. I think that it is commonly and widely accepted that poverty and inequality are very stubborn stains on the fabric of modern Scotland. You said in your opening remarks that those living in the most challenging circumstances would be hit hardest by Covid. In paragraph 87 of the report, you speak of the need for the Scottish Government, councils and their partners

"to fully understand the impact of Covid-19 on all young people and gather the relevant data if they are to support the development of appropriate responses."

Are you satisfied with the action that has been taken to date in relation to that?

Stephen Boyle: Good morning, Mr Hoy. We refer in the report to a number of steps that have been taken, none of which will be complete yet, to sufficiently assess the impact of Covid-19 on children and young people and identify steps to address that. That builds on the conversation that we have just had with Mr Coffey about the range of steps that will need to flow from the pandemic.

We refer to one such step in the report. The Scottish Government undertook an equity audit—no doubt, similar activity is taking place across the country—to assess the impact of the pandemic, the range of indicators and the need for a broader suite of indicators. In particular, assessment will be needed of the volume of public spending that

will be allocated to education—both the £1 billion for attainment challenge funding and the very significant component of local authority budgets that education makes up—and whether that money is well spent and is sufficiently targeted, whether the existing SIMD indicators or other mechanisms are used.

I probably cannot give you the assurance that you are asking for this morning as to whether all the steps have been taken. I think that will come through our work at the national level, work undertaken in local authorities and, fundamentally, work that councils and their partners do to assess the impact and develop the necessary plans. It is work that we will continue to return to.

Craig Hoy: Over the past 18 months, councils, and their education departments in particular, have been working round the clock to set up hybrid learning and distance online learning and to get in-classroom learning back up and running. Do you think that councils have had sufficient resource to compile the relevant data or is that something that could be lost in the scramble to get education back up and running?

Stephen Boyle: I will hand over to Antony Clark, given his role as the interim director of performance audit and best value and, importantly, as the controller of audit, and given his closeness to how well councils are responding.

Antony Clark: You are quite right, Mr Hoy. There is a risk around this aspect of restarting the education system, but the sense that we have from our engagement with local authorities and the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland is that schools have been making a sterling effort in thinking through and understanding the circumstances of different children and the support that they need in the hybrid setting and the additional support that they might need as we shift into the education recovery phase. We are broadly confident that that is happening at the moment.

Craig Hoy: Gathering the data and compiling the evidence of what has happened is one thing, but implementing a series of measures so that we avoid bad outcomes is another. It is not as if we are trying to compile the data in order to learn lessons should we see Covid occur again in the future; it is to deal with the damage that has taken place now. Do you have sufficient assurance that we will see this journey through to the end and that there will be measurable implementation of different initiatives to make sure that we tackle the worst of the impact of Covid on particularly vulnerable children?

Antony Clark: I do not think that I can give you that assurance, but I can give you an assurance that all the people with whom we are engaging in

the system are committed to making that happen. Only time will tell whether that will be successful.

Craig Hoy: Your report explains that improving outcomes for children and young people through school education requires the contribution of wider stakeholders—health, social work and the third sector—and that the Covid-19 children and families collective leadership group, which was established in May 2020, will help to provide scope to build future cross-sector collaboration. How important in improving outcomes is the contribution of those wider stakeholders and why?

10:15

Stephen Boyle: I am happy to start and I am sure that Antony Clark and perhaps Zoe McGuire will also want to comment on what we have seen.

The community contribution to the achievement of outcomes is very important. We have commented on the importance of working closely in partnership with stakeholders in health and in councils, as you touched on in your question, and the fact that the school community involves many different contributors. It probably broadens out to the wider school experience. There are many different pathways, whether involving skills or modern apprenticeships, and they start at an earlier stage; they do not start at the moment that a young person leaves school. There will be access to different providers and opportunities that will lead to that kind of post-school experience. That sense of it being a matter of collective effort and collaborative leadership to deliver better outcomes for Scotland's children and young people is hugely important, especially on the back of Covid.

I will ask Antony Clark and perhaps Zoe McGuire to say a little bit more about how that collaborative leadership is working.

Antony Clark: As the Auditor General said, this is a hugely important area. We know that local authorities and education authorities have for many years been working in partnership with health, the third sector, police and others to try to provide joined-up support to children in their learning. We also know that schools are an important part of this, but not the whole story. We made that point earlier. Think about the different needs of children: they are all individuals. Some children have additional support needs. Some children might require special support. That is not always best delivered by a school; it can often be best delivered by the third sector or a charity. That makes it all the more important that there is effective joint working between the education authority, the school and their partners in the local area.

We also need to think about the broader things that can contribute to good outcomes for young children: decent housing, having food on the table and stable employment in their families. That for me also reinforces the importance of education being situated in the wider context of the community. I am very much in agreement with the Auditor General on this. Zoe McGuire may have something to add to that.

Zoe McGuire: I agree. In our first set of fieldwork, when we went out to councils, we saw on the ground the effect that third sector organisations had in improving young people's outcomes. They could target certain young people; they took a holistic approach around the school and the child in order to understand their needs. There are some good, positive examples of where the third sector contributes to that.

Craig Hoy: The children and families collective leadership group was set up in addition to the Covid-19 education recovery group. How effectively do you think those groups, specifically the children and families collective leadership group, are in sharing and highlighting good practice? Do you as yet have any indication of whether good practice is finding its way through to measurable and implementable solutions?

Stephen Boyle: I suspect that it may be too early to draw any firm conclusions. Again, I will invite Zoe McGuire to say a word or two more, but we have commented in the round that the groups responded quickly. There was broad representation from across interested parties. They were all making their best endeavours to share good practice and collective leadership across the country. How successful that will be is something that we will want to return to. The groups themselves, of course, will want to make assessments of the impact of their contribution. It will remain on our radar, but at the moment it is probably a little bit early to draw conclusions.

Zoe McGuire: I just echo that it is a little bit too early to draw those conclusions. It is also for regional improvement collaboratives, education authorities and the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland to come together to help to share that good practice.

The Convener: I will end with a couple of questions about the money. If I read it correctly, the report seems to conclude that while overall total national education spending on schools rose between 2013-14 and 2018-19 by 0.7 per cent in real terms, there was quite a bit of variation within that. One of the things that struck me was that the report concluded that in those councils that were targeted for attainment Scotland funding, there was quite a variation.

For example—keep me right if I am wrong on this—my understanding is that with the exception of Glasgow City Council all the attainment challenge councils saw a drop in education spending in that period if you exclude the attainment Scotland funding. I thought that the attainment Scotland funding was meant to be additional, to tackle a particular problem. Do you have any reflections or comments on that and do you have a view about the impact on councils in which there was a reduction in the budget for mainstream operational spending?

Stephen Boyle: I will hand over to Antony Clark in a moment or two, but first I will comment in overall terms.

I think that your analysis about spending on Scottish education increasing from £4.1 billion to £4.3 billion, and the 0.7 per cent in real terms figure that you mentioned, is right. Part of the money, of course, is the attainment challenge funding. One of the aspects to highlight from our report was the doubt about the durability of that—it was subsequently confirmed to have been extended—and how that impacted on spending and sustainability. It is something that both we and Education Scotland found in our work. The sustainability of the funding matters to its effectiveness.

It is always the case that a sense that money will be available for a short time influences the choices and the spending patterns of councils, and of schools in particular. Much of the funding was devolved for individual headteachers to determine how to spend. We recognise those factors in terms of the need for a sustainable funding model in the Scottish education system and the impact that the attainment challenge funding had on the overall picture through the period that we looked at.

I will hand over to Antony Clark to explore a little bit further how that interacted with councils' overall education spending.

Antony Clark: You have interpreted the report quite correctly. What we saw in the report was quite a mixed and variable pattern of education investment by local authorities, whether they were attainment challenge authorities or non-attainment challenge authorities. To an extent, it is really a matter of local policy as to how local authorities choose to invest in education, social work, housing or other services, but we did see variability across the piece.

There is an open question, I think, about the effectiveness of the attainment challenge funding. The evaluation work presents a slightly mixed picture in the feedback from headteachers and others that are using the funding, but, as you will see from the report, we have not seen that filtering through to improved education outcomes using the

relatively narrow measure of exam results at this point.

The Convener: I will come back to that point in a minute, but I wanted to ask about something else that is covered in your report. It would have been very fresh at the time of the report and we now have some benefit of a slightly longer view of it. Money was set aside to help with the logistics of schools reopening at the start of the year. I think that there was £50 million additional funding allocated to help schools reopen safely. At the time, as I recall, councils said that it was insufficient to do what we need to do, but I think the Scottish Government said that it was sufficient. Have you had an opportunity to review that to see whether somebody was right and somebody was wrong?

Stephen Boyle: We recognise the debate that took place at the time about the £50 million funding, and the commentary from places that it would not be enough to cover all of what was required. We have also seen that, over the course of the summer, since the report was published, additional funding has been made available to support some of the reopening requirements. Whether that allows us to draw a conclusion that one party was right and another was wrong, I am not sure, but we recognise the complexity and the additional funding that has flowed and also the on-going costs around additional cleaning and personal protective equipment. Policy choices about the funding environment for individual schools and councils will probably have to factor in all those Covid-related safety measures for a good while yet.

The Convener: Yes, I think that that is so. You have mentioned on a number of occasions in this morning's session the £1 billion announced over the summer, which is presumably a commitment by the Scottish Government to, at least for this parliamentary session, keep investing in mechanisms for closing the attainment gap. Is that additional money over and above the core funding for education delivered by local government?

Secondly—this has been a thread running through our conversations—this is not just about where things go wrong but where things go right. What sense do you get of a sharing of good practice—of things that work using this funding? There are clearly certain stipulations about what it can and cannot be spent on, which led to some very innovative ideas, especially in the early days of its introduction. Do you get a sense that there is collaboration and sharing of good practice and that if there is an additional £1 billion in the system it will be well spent, provide value for money and have the desired effect?

Stephen Boyle: I will cover part of your question; Zoe McGuire may be best placed to

comment on the extent of collaboration that is taking place across councils.

As we touched on in the report, there are undoubtedly great examples of how the money has been used across the country and of the impact that it has had on children and young people. As reflected in the Education Scotland interim reports looking at the success of the pupil equity fund over the past few years, we see a need for examples of good practice to be shared more widely, through the collaboration that exists in the sector, whether through leadership arrangements or inspection arrangements; all those things serve to ensure that that money is being used to effect best practice.

As we have touched on this morning, we were not able to draw any firm conclusions that the money had made a widespread difference, as is suggested by the indicators—and probably the lack of widespread indicators that need to come. One of the conclusions that we would draw is that, as the Government has committed to the additional £1 billion over this parliamentary session to close the poverty-related attainment gap, it should seize on the opportunities for better indicators of good practice to support better outcomes as we move forward.

I will ask Zoe McGuire to come in on some of the examples of collaboration and practices that we have seen and to address the point that you asked about the additionality of the money over and above local government spending.

Zoe McGuire: We saw examples of good practice being shared across local authorities. Coming back to the sustainability of the funding, I think it has been recognised that the spending was more useful when successful projects were put in place to boost capacity around staffing and so on rather than on specific objective things. That information—that idea around sustainability—is very much shared across local authorities.

I will pass to my colleague Tricia Meldrum to confirm the point about the £1 billion investment being additional.

Tricia Meldrum: It is my understanding that that is additional. We know that the attainment challenge fund is running until next year. We do not know what will happen beyond the attainment challenge fund so we are waiting to hear announcements on whether there will be something separate that will replace it or how it will work going forward.

10:30

On sharing good practice, I would make a point about the role of Education Scotland in working with the councils and with the regional

improvement collaboratives. Its role is very much around working with individual schools and councils, looking at what is happening and what is working, and sharing that within regional improvement collaboratives and across the whole organisation; it is about sharing that work more widely and helping to roll it out across the system. There are recommendations in the report around Education Scotland working with its partners to continue to do that and understanding what is driving improvement and what is contributing to the variations, so that we can continue to build on good practice. I am referring particularly to the drivers around things such as teacher professionalism and leadership and using data to understand local context. There is a key role for Education Scotland there as well.

The Convener: Thank you very much indeed.

On behalf of the committee, I thank Stephen Boyle and his team this morning—Antony Clark, Tricia Meldrum and Zoe McGuire—for keeping us informed and answering the questions that we put. We really appreciate your time and the work that you are doing.

I draw the public part of this morning's committee to an end.

10:31

Meeting continued in private until 11:20.

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