OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Education, Children and Young People Committee

Wednesday 9 February 2022

Session 6

The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Wednesday 9 February 2022

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EDUCATION, CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE COMMITTEE

5th Meeting 2022, Session 6

CONVENER

*Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
*Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
*James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
*Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
*Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green)
*Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
*Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Professor Mel Ainscow (University of Glasgow)
Emma Congreve (Fraser of Allander Institute)
Professor Becky Francis (Education Endowment Foundation)
Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con) (Committee Substitute)
Laura Robertson (Poverty Alliance)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Stephen Herbert

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Education, Children and Young People Committee

Wednesday 9 February 2022

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:30]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Stephen Kerr): Good morning, and welcome to the fifth meeting in 2022 of the Education, Children and Young People Committee. This is a hybrid meeting, which means that some people are in the committee room—it is nice to be back in the room—and some of the witnesses and members are joining us remotely.

The first item on our agenda is a decision on taking business in private. Are members content to take item 5 in private?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Scottish Attainment Challenge Inquiry

09:30

The Convener: The second item on our agenda is to take evidence for our Scottish attainment challenge inquiry. I welcome Professor Mel Ainscow, who is a professor of education at the University of Glasgow, and Professor Becky Francis, who is the chief executive of the Education Endowment Foundation. Both are joining us virtually. I also welcome, in the committee room, Dr Laura Robertson, who is the senior research officer at the Poverty Alliance, and Emma Congreve, who is a knowledge exchange fellow at the Fraser of Allander Institute. It is really good to have you with us.

I start with Mel Ainscow. You submitted some very interesting written evidence. I could not say that I understood all that was said in it, but I will focus on the reasons why we have not made the progress that we should have made on closing the poverty-related attainment gap. In your written submission, you mention five specific areas. For those who have joined us and are watching our proceedings, could you summarise what you have said are the reasons why we have not made more progress and what you describe as barriers to making further progress?

Professor Mel Ainscow (University of Glasgow): Thank you. It is delightful to take part in the discussion. I am part of a research group at the Robert Owen centre for educational change, which has been working closely in the system as work on the attainment challenge has progressed. Prior to that, I took part in three other big challenge programmes: I had a small role in the London challenge, I led the Greater Manchester challenge, which involved 10 local authorities and 1,300 schools, and I led schools challenge Cymru for the Welsh Government, which was a major national effort.

On the situation in Scotland and drawing lessons from those experiences, I note that before we talk about the barriers, it is important to stress that there is much to celebrate: a lot has been achieved in a relatively short time. Educational change takes time because it is complex and there are so many people involved. One of the major achievements, which should not be underestimated, is that, as far as I can see, everyone in the Scottish education system is clear on the agenda. They are clear that the push for equity and the concern for excellence are central to everything. Achievement of that in a short time is something to celebrate. We are talking about a complex process, and, as I said, change takes time.

I am relying on knowledge from my colleagues who have been involved longer than I have. As they have looked at what has happened, they have seen things that seem to be creating barriers. One of those is implementation of the thinking of the policy. Those barriers are mentioned in the paper that we presented to you.

The first question is about what the agenda is, and clearly, that is equity—in other words, inclusion and fairness. I work a lot for the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, and our mantra is, "Every learner matters and matters equally". That mantra is clearly reflected in Scottish practice, but there has been a rather narrow focus on what is called the attainment gap. Of course, you want to monitor the attainment gap and you need systems for monitoring progress, but if that is used as the goal for education, that rather narrows the agenda.

In particular, we do not need children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to have a narrow curriculum; we want them to have a broad enriching curriculum that inspires their aspirations for the future. How the agenda is articulated perhaps needs some rethinking.

The Convener: Are you saying that the focus should be on raising educational standards across the board, rather than on focusing narrowly on the poverty-related attainment gap?

Professor Ainscow: I would be a bit cautious about the word "attainment". The danger that we fall into is that we confuse the goals of what we are trying to do with our ways of monitoring it. The two things must connect, but they are separate. We need to monitor the impact on attainment across the system, but the goal should not be to look for quick fixes, which does not change achievement. We need to focus, broadly, on—

The Convener: What should the goal be, then?

Professor Ainscow: I think that your curriculum offers a broad and enriching agenda for change, which is admired in other parts of the world. Curriculum for excellence is very broad, and I think that that should be the agenda. I particularly wish to underline the need to open doors for kids from disadvantaged backgrounds—rather than to narrow things. The danger is confusing the monitoring of attainment—which you need to do for statistical purposes, to see whether things are working—with the goals that are there in the field.

This educational change is so complex because efforts need to be made at every level. Be in no doubt, however, that the most important level is the classroom. Teachers are policy makers. For that hour, whatever the teacher chooses to do and whatever he or she understands is the policy will be the policy as far as the children are concerned. That is why educational change is so fascinating and interesting—but also challenging, because we have to get everybody to agree with what we are trying to do.

I reiterate that a lot has been achieved, but there needs to be a rethink of what, exactly, is the message that we are giving.

The Convener: One of the—

Professor Ainscow: But then, our structures—

The Convener: Yes—I was going to ask you to come on to structure. You talk about

"rigid local authority 'line management'".

Are you saying that we should kind of rid ourselves of all the guidance, other than the strategic objectives, and just let the practitioners get on with it?

Professor Ainscow: Yes and no. If I might reflect on that, it seems to be perfectly sensible that, in the early phases of a large and ambitious project such as this, there should be direction and centralisation. That was clearly the way to kick-start things—I do not disagree with that at all.

However, we are now in another phase, and we need to make a significant structural adjustment to make better use of the expertise in the system. That has implications for thinking and for action at all levels of the system.

First, we need to make better use of the expertise in the schools—in the classroom. Scotland is blessed with the most remarkable expertise among teachers and headteachers. Frankly, you are not getting the best out of that, because everything is being dictated either from the centre or from local authority structures. It has to be about local context. As far as education is concerned, context matters. What works in one place may not work in another place, because the barriers are different, and the resources that are available are different.

We need a system now, as you move forward. This is my argument for adjustment, which places more attention on using the expertise in the system. For that to happen, Government has to give the lead to and has to encourage local co-ordinated action. Local authorities then have to facilitate that.

I am working quite closely with people in one local authority, and the message that we have given there—I have given it and the director of education has given it—is that the job of schools is to improve themselves. Our job—that is, the job of the local authority—is to ensure that that happens. These are the adjustments that I am talking about: to make better use of the expertise and creativity that are there within the system.

Leadership is crucial for that. It seems to me that we need a new kind of co-ordination at the local level, such that, rather than the local authorities doing things to schools, the local authority acts as a kind of co-ordinating mechanism, bringing together senior people, particularly headteachers, to discuss how we can work together to address the challenges that we are facing with our children and young people in this kind of culture.

The Convener: What is the barrier? Is it that there is too much national or, indeed, too much local authority control and micromanagement? Are you saying that we should put more trust in and delegate more authority to headteachers? Is it school leadership that we are actually talking about here?

Professor Ainscow: I think that you have summed it up beautifully—that is exactly what it is. It requires an adjustment. Educational change is about implementation; you can have the best policies in the world, with the sort of wonderful brochures and documents that Scotland is very good at—you have some fabulous documents; indeed, they are so beautiful that I have shared them in other countries—but the real challenge is implementation down the levels. As I keep reiterating, teachers are policy makers, and we have not only to engage and support them but to give them freedom. We have to give teaching back to teachers.

The Convener: If I may say, you have started us off really well with some trenchant views. I really appreciate that, as it will get us going.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): On Professor Ainscow's point about quick fixes and timescales, I note that the attainment challenge started in 2016 and we have spent £1 billion of taxpayers' money on it. When would you expect to see discernible progress? After all, six years does not really seem like a quick fix—it is the entirety of a child's secondary education.

Professor Ainscow: There has been progress, and we need to celebrate and build on it. However, we also have to stop and think, as you are doing, about how we move to another phase. I have been talking about an adjustment, but perhaps that is the wrong word; thinking about we how implement the next phase will actually require something as significant as a paradigm shift.

As I have said, there has been progress, and I just want to point out again the success in getting the equity issue on to the agenda. Every teacher, headteacher and local authority person I meet is clear that that is what we are preoccupied with. Every learner matters—and matters equally.

Michael Marra: I am not sure that that level of agreement makes a big difference to the young people in my home city of Dundee who are not getting the improved outcomes that they are looking for. We are now looking at the biggest gap that we have ever had. I note that you have told us to be cautious about focusing on attainment, but I am not going to be cautious about it. I want to see better attainment, particularly for the kids from the poorest backgrounds. It is not the only thing, but it is incredibly important.

As I have said, we now have the biggest attainment gap that we have ever had. We are now six years on and £1 billion down. I recognise that we have had the pandemic in the middle of that, and it is a huge issue, but the fact is that we had not really made any discernible progress before the pandemic. In fact, things were going backwards in a lot of places.

To me, this is not about quick fixes. Actually, there has been policy consensus on and agreement with the Government's approach to this issue for a long time now, but we are not seeing the difference that we would have hoped to have seen. Is it not fair to say that?

Professor Ainscow: It probably is, and other colleagues will give you more statistical analysis in that respect. You might know that at the moment I am working mostly in Dundee, where we have created what we call the "Every Dundee learner matters" policy. In a sense, we are trying to put into operation the kind of thinking that I am sharing with you now, based on experiences and research elsewhere.

We have characterised the agenda in Dundee as the three Ps: presence, participation and progress. Presence means regular attendance; participation means being involved, recognised, welcomed and valued; and progress is about attainment, of course, as well as other things with regard to the future. The issue that needs to be looked at is presence. Prior to the pandemic, attendance across Scotland was, frankly, pretty awful. If the kids are not in school, how the hell are they going to participate and make progress? There needs to be a push on presence, but it tends to come down to cultural issues and traditions in particular places. Dundee is a very good example of that, but you should be in no doubt that it is making some fantastic progress.

Michael Marra: I will come back later to my substantive question about the other Ps in Dundee being "public pounds" and the substantial cuts that are being made at the moment.

The Convener: I will bring in Becky Francis at this point.

09:45

Professor Becky Francis (Education Endowment Foundation): I am really intrigued by the emerging conversation already. I think that the—[*Inaudible*.]—in the short term. It is right to say that there is an emergency in relation to the widening gaps. We need to diagnose where there has been learning loss during the pandemic and then think of short-term means to address the gap. Clearly, the present approaches, as Mel Ainscow said, draw on the evidence and are moving in the right direction, but it is absolutely right to say that the needs are urgent and the question must be what resources schools have to draw on in the short term.

Of course, I would say that, because the Education Endowment Foundation is primarily focused on the attainment gap, but that is for good reason. Attainment is the key predictor of pupil life outcomes. That is well evidenced, particularly for maths and English outcomes. Although none of us would disagree that the curriculum should be broad and balanced and although pupil experience is important and supports attainment, the job of schools is to promote capability and knowledge in the curriculum and ensure that pupils gain that capability and knowledge. Therefore, it is right that we publicly measure those outcomes to see what value we gain from the school system. We also know—Mel Ainscow's scholarship has always spoken to this—that outcomes are incredibly unequal at present according to social background. That is a huge injustice that we ought to target.

That is the mainstay of the Education Endowment Foundation's work and, if the committee is interested, I am glad to talk about some of the work that we have been doing in England.

Emma Congreve (Fraser of Allander Institute): Laura Robertson and I perhaps come at the matter from a slightly different angle, which is that the socioeconomic status of children—the poverty part of the poverty-related attainment gap—and the pathways that we know and need to know more about, such as how poverty, low income and deprivation feed through to pupils' ability to attend school, participate in classes, attend extracurricular activities and work at home.

We can understand how factors such as fuel poverty, overcrowding at home and a lack of private transport affects children's ability to learn once they are inside the school gates. I cannot speak too much to the practice within schools, although we have done a lot of work with schools to help them to think about how they can better understand the situations that their pupils face at home. That is a core part of the issue.

Overall poverty and child poverty are not falling in Scotland. The pandemic has put an enormous amount of pressure on low income households, and the cost of living crisis is putting even more pressure on. We need to try to think about why we are not making the progress that we wish to. That side of the equation is incredibly important to understanding why we are in the position that we are in and are having this inquiry.

The Convener: Do you have a view on Mel Ainscow's comments about the structures and what is described in the University of Glasgow's submission as "rigid … 'line management'" from the centre and at local authority level? Do you have anything that you can contribute to that discussion? Is that statement true?

Emma Congreve: I can only talk to the work that we have done. We have been working with the Northern Alliance regional improvement collaborative. That involves teachers, headteachers and educational professionals working inside a local authority.

From the research that we have done, it feels like that is a collegiate approach to better understanding the issues that children are facing. There are often issues with the schools and teachers. Teachers have a very good gauge of pupils and are probably best able to understand what is happening1 in pupils' home lives. However, it is often not possible to reflect upwards the information about the issues that children are facing across school and across the local authority. Often, it can feel as though there is a disconnect between what local authorities are saying and doing and what teachers on the ground think is necessary. Part of the reason for that is that it is very difficult for everyone to get the full picture of the situations that need to be addressed at school, local authority and Scotland levels.

The Convener: Before I hand back to Michael Marra, I would like to put one more question to Mel Ainscow, about leadership. You are talking about there being overly tight controls at local authority and central levels, so can you comment on the quality of the leadership that is required in order to make the learning environment and school successful? If we are going to devolve more and more powers to headteachers and teachers, what would that look like and, given that we are talking about barriers, what do we need to be doing to ensure that that does not in itself become a barrier?

Professor Ainscow: That is an important strand in the debate. There is untapped potential in the system. The headteachers and other people in the schools that I have been working with are very creative people, but they are frustrated—they want more space. Frankly, they want more control over the budget so that they can determine how to

create priorities in their own schools to fit the context, and how to mobilise human resources to move that forward.

Headteachers and other senior people are a crucial part of it and, as with teachers, we have to support and encourage them. We have to trust them. They are the best people to understand their schools and the context. The constant stream of messages from outside the school can be demoralising at times. I keep emphasising the importance of teachers, but by that I mean the people in the schools—there is no question but that there is untapped potential there.

There is a lot of work going on in relation to the professional development of school leaders. I applaud that. It is very important.

The Convener: What you mean by the demoralising effect of outside messages? Do you mean the demoralising effect of what you have described as bureaucratic control or are you referring to other voices?

Professor Ainscow: We have been trying to encourage the schools that we have been working with to use the best thinking about educational change. The key to that is constant contextual analysis: schools have to understand their own context—the context of the school, the classroom and the local community—so that they can understand the barriers that some of their children are experiencing. Then they can create pathways by bringing people together. That takes action, but the schools are too used to the idea that someone is going to come and tell them what to do, or issue another document or guideline. All that is well intentioned—I do not want to seem negative—but unintentionally, it creates a subtle set of barriers in the system.

The Convener: So, is your message that teachers are basically saying, “Get off our backs”?

Professor Ainscow: Yes, but everyone has a role to play. I applaud the Government’s effort and the national system. The local authorities are crucial: we need a middle tier. However, we have to create space where the professionals who know the children best can take action around the priorities that they set. At the moment, the priorities tend to be dictated from outside—as do the suggestions of any actions that should be taken. It is a cultural thing.

The Convener: That is very useful to hear. I will let Michael Marra continue his main line of questioning and then I will bring in Kaukab Stewart—I saw her expression during some of that exchange.

Michael Marra: I want to ask about the allocation of resource. As you will recognise, part of the reason for the inquiry is that significant changes have been made to how the resource that the Government spends on behalf of the Scottish taxpayer—and which is, rightly, significant—is allocated across Scotland. I have asked ministers questions on this, but I do not think that I have had much of an answer. There seems to be a move away from an analysis of multiple deprivation, although I recognise that there is poverty in all parts of the country and that the money is being spread more widely. Do you think that the recent changes to the allocation of that money will be beneficial to the educational recovery of the most deprived children and communities in Scotland?

Emma Congreve: It comes down to having the best evidence to ensure that the money is getting to those who need it, which might be different depending on which part of the country or city they are in. There are many factors to take into account.

As I have said to many committees, the evidence that we have in Scotland is often not as good as we would want it to be to identify which small areas, households or children in particular would benefit the most from more resource allocation. It is incredibly difficult for a diverse country with different needs in different parts of the country to agree on what the best approach is. We see that throughout local government funding discussions, and education is no different.

There are concerns about our being able to collect robust evidence. Eligibility for free school meals has been used for a long time as a measure to help with funding allocations, but we know that it applies only to people who register for free school meals, not to everyone who actually needs them—if I can use that word. The Scottish index of multiple deprivation also has challenges, particularly in rural areas. It is well recognised that, because the index covers the relatively large areas, it is not capturing particular pockets of disadvantage. Moreover, some measures are not as significant in rural areas as they are in urban ones.

Michael Marra: I understand the limitations. Do you understand the rationale for the change? Have you heard anyone explain it?

Emma Congreve: Because a more universal approach is being taken to free school meals, that data is becoming less good as an indicator. As the data is less available or useful as a focus on disadvantaged children, different data is required. A relatively new source of data from the Department for Work and Pensions relates to children in low-income families. That data has been around for only a few years, but it is probably the best source of local data that we have.

Michael Marra: Is that data being used to allocate the funding?

Emma Congreve: I believe that they are moving to using that for pupil equity funding.

Michael Marra: So it is for PEF, but not for the core attainment challenge funding.

Emma Congreve: I am aware of its being used for PEF. I am not sure about other uses.

Michael Marra: My understanding is that the money has been allocated according to the traditional funding formula.

Dr Robertson, when the First Minister announced the initial funding in 2016, she said that the attainment challenge would

"focus specifically on, and provide additional funding for, literacy, numeracy, health and wellbeing in primary schools in our most deprived areas. A large proportion of the Attainment Fund has been allocated to the ... local authorities which have the highest"

number or

"concentration of pupils living in poverty."

The rationale was quite clear at the time. However, Dundee has had its funding from that fund cut by 79 per cent. What do you think the impact of that will be on the poorest people in my community?

Laura Robertson (Poverty Alliance): It is my understanding that the change in the funding is intended to create a more universal approach. Some local authorities such as Edinburgh that might have fewer communities among the 20 per cent most deprived areas will get more funding to support young people who are living in poverty, of which there are plenty in the city of Edinburgh.

It is important that all local authorities have access to resources, and that the allocation is based on young people living in poverty. We need to look at other indicators, such as those that Emma Congreve spoke about. Evaluations of the pupil equity fund by headteachers and schools have been very positive about the empowerment that the funding gives to local schools. It gives them autonomy with local services, and they can offer bespoke support to young people who are living in poverty or who might be at risk of being excluded.

Much of the evidence about the pupil equity fund and the allocation of resources through it has been extremely positive. On the basis of our research at the Poverty Alliance, the main concern for us is the lack of robust evidence at national level on how schools should be using their allocated funding. There have been improvements, with the development of the equity framework and national guidance about the pupil equity fund, but there is a lack of information about how schools are using the funding at present.

10:00

Michael Marra: I share some of those concerns, and I am sure that colleagues will ask about them later.

I wish to ask Professor Francis about the allocation of resource to the most deprived areas. It sounds to me like the work that you have done has been directed at this area of making change. We are facing a 79 per cent cut in Dundee, as I have said, so with £4 in every £5 spent supporting 129 staff, we are looking at the loss of more than 100 staff who are working with the most vulnerable young people in the city. You will understand why I am animated by the decision. Do you think that such a change will support the kind of change that you are looking for?

Professor Francis: There are two different points that I would draw out; the first is the impact of deep poverty, which you are right to focus on, and the other is inequality across the board. There is a risk of conflating different indicators here, and that needs some careful thinking, particularly in relation to the art of the possible for schools and what schools are expected to do.

Persistent disadvantage, which is the terminology that we use in England, is a key predictor of educational outcomes, and it is what is undermining progress on addressing the gap in England. We can see that, in the 10 years prior to the pandemic, the gap in attainment for disadvantaged kids was narrowing overall, but that narrowing was not impacting on the most persistently disadvantaged. Sure enough, as the numbers of those pupils have increased and as the problems have been exacerbated—which, as we know, has been even more the case during the pandemic—we are now seeing gaps widen. It is really important to address that issue.

We also know that families and children in persistent disadvantage bring to school problems that are very hard for the schools to move the dial on. We have to be clear about the parameters of what schools can be expected to do compared with, as you have rightly pointed out, wider social services and what is done in different local authority areas.

We would also want to highlight the importance of maintaining a focus on inequality across the board. If we look at educational attainment against the spectrum from social disadvantage to affluence, we can see an absolute diagonal correlation. The most affluent pupils are overachieving with regard to the mean. The issue of having equity across the board remains fundamental to social justice, and I would argue

that we must not be dragged away to focus only on the challenge of deep poverty and persistent disadvantage, important and urgent though it is.

With the pupil premium in England, the focus is on ever FSM, which covers almost a third of pupils. I am a strong advocate of maintaining that metric and measure, but we should also be clear about and track persistent disadvantage, recognising that there are diverse and separate issues at stake.

We will come on to talk about the best ways of addressing these different issues. We have already heard a bit about how to address poverty more widely, the impact and focus on early years and so on, and I will be glad to speak more about that as the evidence session develops.

Michael Marra: I will close on this point, convener. We have heard a really useful observation on the comparison with other comparable cities and urban areas in England. I am thinking, for instance, about areas in which progress has been limited by persistent disadvantage, deep poverty or multiple deprivation—we could describe it in different ways. If we were to cut funding by 60 per cent across the board for those most deprived communities—or "challenge authorities" as they are called in Scotland—what results would we see?

Professor Francis: It is exactly as you say—we can see the intersection of geography and social background. Although social background remains the strongest predictor—I have already talked about the spectrum of disadvantage—it obviously intersects with geography. We know that there are pockets, and even wide areas, where social deprivation is both concentrated and entrenched in the long term, which bring us back to some of the cultural issues that Mel Ainscow raised. That needs to be recognised. Interestingly, in England, with the Government's levelling up agenda, a geographical approach is becoming much more prominent in education policy making.

Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): I want to go back a little bit, and bring in Professor Ainscow in particular, but the other witnesses should feel free to come in.

Having recently been a teacher—well, until last May; it is not that recent, any more—I found that a lot of what Professor Ainscow said resonated with me. I still keep in touch with my teaching colleagues, and I know that initiatives and expectations for data collection and implementation come from on high. It feels like that all the time. Many stakeholders in education are quite disconnected from the classroom and from the children who come to school every day, as well as the ones who do not. We have mentioned the importance of that.

I am interested in unpicking that a little. How can policymakers and national and local agencies increase their credibility among headteachers and teachers in the classrooms, so that they do not feel that everything is being dictated to them or coming down from on high? They need to feel that they are part of the process, rather than simply recipients.

Professor Ainscow: That is the million-dollar question that I have spent my career trying to address. I sometimes use the metaphor of levers; all metaphors have their strengths and weaknesses. What are the levers for change? We have already talked about one. A lever works when there is widespread agreement about what we are trying to achieve; that has been part of the success. Funding, which we have just heard about, is a lever. We need to use funding effectively to help people and encourage them to work together.

This is largely about collaboration. I am always arguing for more resources, and I agree with what Michael Marra said. However, in comparison with other parts of the world in which I sometimes work, Scotland is very well resourced. The big question is whether we are making best use of those resources. I am talking about the human resources, including intelligence, teachers, families, the wider community and services and, of course, children and young people, who can contribute.

We need a national debate about where we can best put our attention to facilitate locally led actions, put them on the agenda more and keep the discussion going.

We also need to look at the accountability system. We know that, in education systems, what gets measured gets done. The accountability system, which includes monitoring of results and the inspection process, gives out a message about what is important.

As the Government rethinks its strategy for implementation, it should focus on where it can create leverage in the system. That must allow for much more locally led action at school, community and local authority levels. We are currently doing work in Dundee that is very much led from within schools. The local authority has set up a headteacher strategy group, which has designed and led the policy.

One of the education officers in the system said to me recently that they thought that when we introduced all this they would have no job. Of course, they have realised that they do have a job, but that it is different; improvement is now led from within schools and their job is to support and challenge what is going on. What I described as

an adjustment has implications for everybody at every level of the system.

Kaukab Stewart: If anybody else wants to answer, they should indicate that.

Does anybody have ideas about how we can improve accountability at implementation level—local authority level and school level? At the moment, there is a lot of scrutiny and accountability at Government policy level, but I think, from what I hear, that more of that should happen at local authority level and school level.

Professor Ainscow: We need a new kind of accountability—accountability that is not done to people but with people.

One of the approaches in which I have been involved in various parts of the United Kingdom is peer review, whereby schools help one another by reviewing one another's policies and practices to learn from one another, which stimulates collaboration and creates challenge within the system. That needs to have some kind of moderation. As I said earlier, the job of schools is to improve themselves, and the job of the local authority is to ensure that that happens, so part of the local authority's job is to keep an eye on that. The national inspection system should also be a form of moderation of that process.

That is all about the adjustments that I have said need to be made in order to make better use of the resources.

Emma Congreve: The regional improvement collaborative in the north of Scotland, with which we have been working, is keen to work together as a cluster of schools and local authorities to share more data on attainment and some of the measures that I have talked about, such as tracking of socioeconomic backgrounds. They also want to analyse the data so that, across a wider area, we can understand how trends affect attainment, and so that they can share learning when schools have been able to focus on a particular matter that has been identified as an issue—for example, transportation times or poor housing quality in an area. That is a key part of what they want.

Part of the issue is that, at the moment, some software platforms and how data is collected constrain work. The systems are often developed from above and schools have to feed into them, but they do not always give the schools the information that they want. Part of the work that we have been doing via the Data for Children Collaborative with UNICEF is on systems that can support collaboration and design systems from the bottom up so that they do what the schools want them to do. There are examples of that happening throughout Scotland. We need to bring together that work in order to understand what is being highlighted and the solutions that are being found.

Kaukab Stewart: I absolutely agree that there are amazing pockets—they are actually quite vast—of good practice. I have taken part in cluster projects and shared good practice. Our challenge now is to ensure that practice is consistent across all 32 local authorities. We can explore that further.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con) (Committee Substitute): Professor Ainscow mentioned that tools are needed to measure progress in education and in closing the attainment gap. Kaukab Stewart talked about best practice and sharing information between local authorities. What other benchmarks could be used to measure progress at school level, local authority level or national level?

Professor Ainscow: The frameworks that are used give messages about what is important, so there is clearly a case for considering the matter in more detail. I suspect that Becky Francis has more specific things to say on that.

10:15

I would echo what Emma Congreve has just said. As far as I can see—obviously, I have only partial knowledge of what is happening around Scotland—there are lots of great examples, so we have to learn from those experiences and look at those examples. The regional improvement collaboratives are an interesting new structure in the system; I sense that they are working in different ways across the country.

What has been said makes sense to me. This is about horizontal movement of knowledge in relation to whatever indicators you agree; in other words, it is about what happens within and between schools and what happens between local authorities. The more horizontal pathways you create, the better.

Professor Francis: I have made my points about the importance of attainment as the primary measure and some of the ways in which we analyse that in relation to social disadvantage, and have argued that we ought to maintain ever FSM as a broad indicator of relative social disadvantage or, indeed, lower social class and focus on the more entrenched problem of persistent disadvantage.

As far as broader measures are concerned, although we at the EEF always use attainment as our primary outcome, we also look at a range of what we see as being secondary indicators—for example, wellbeing. The point about students broadly thriving in school with regard to their experience and provision is clearly crucial to

supporting their attainment. Of course, we all want what is best for our children during their time in school. Those measures are important, but I have already explained why we focus primarily on attainment.

Meghan Gallacher: I have one more brief supplementary. Local government benchmarking makes comparison quite hard, particularly in relation to its family sets and especially with regard to education and looking at the attainment gap. Local authorities not only implement national policy but introduce locally led initiatives and policies to benefit their own areas, so how can best practice be shared, particularly at a time when local government budgets are quite stretched? Obviously I am concerned about resources and funds for implementing best practice and good policies to close the attainment gap.

Perhaps I can ask Becky Francis that question. [*Interruption*.]

The Convener: We are having a problem with the sound in the committee room. We cannot hear what anyone is saying.

Professor Francis: Can you hear me now?

The Convener: We can. That is excellent.

Professor Francis: I am at risk of doing a little bit of self-promotion for the EEF, but I think it important to mention our role in the English education architecture when we talk about resource, particularly in relation to some of my earlier points about schools being able in the short term to draw on resources and evidence-led practice in order to support recovery.

I am also really interested in Mel Ainscow's points about the role of local authorities, and I absolutely applaud his comment about school-to-school best practice and supporting autonomous professional mutual improvement, which, if it is done well, can become something of a movement.

Nevertheless, within that, local authorities play a key role as brokers and in providing the sort of support and challenge that Mel Ainscow highlighted. To do that, schools and local authorities both need a pipeline of evidence-led policies and, fundamentally, interventions and programmes that they can use to support the most vulnerable children in school. That is the role that the EEF has been developing in the English education system over the past 10 years—with great success, we think—and we have been able to mobilise some of those proven approaches and interventions at national level during the pandemic. Indeed, it is heartening to see our famous teaching and learning toolkit being signposted in the pupil equity fund resources and guidance.

I can say a little bit more about our evidence on recovery and the tiered approach with a focus on high-quality teaching, if that would be of interest, but the point that I want to make in response to the question is that it is crucial that local authorities and schools are able to access a resource of securely evidenced approached and interventions. We hope that we are providing a good model in that respect.

Laura Robertson: I want to echo those remarks. The recent evaluation of the Scottish attainment challenge showed that schools widely are using the Education Endowment Foundation's learning and teaching toolkit to give them access to evidence on the types of initiatives and interventions that have worked well. There is a lot of good practice in Scotland. For example, attainment advisers have been specifically created to find and share such evidence, but local authorities need more support in carrying out that role of finding the evidence and seeing what works.

On top of that, although there is a lot of evidence out there on what works, those kinds of initiatives might not be available in certain local authorities. For example, the EEF has demonstrated the effectiveness of tutoring in tackling the attainment gap, but tutoring itself is a massive gap in current practice in Scotland. The Robertson Trust recently commissioned us to look at tutoring and mentoring provision for young people who are living in poverty in Scotland, but we were able to identify only three tutoring programmes in a couple of local authorities. It is just not something that is available to young people.

The Convener: So, only two of the 32 local authorities have tutoring programmes.

Laura Robertson: East Lothian has recently developed a tutoring programme, and there is the Volunteer Tutor Organisation in Glasgow. Those are the two that I am aware of from our mapping work, but there will be smaller-scale third sector community organisations and schools that have used attainment funding for teaching assistants to provide extra tutoring.

The Convener: You said that something is stopping local authorities from doing that, but I did not quite catch what you said. What is stopping other local authorities from implementing such initiatives that have a proven track record?

Laura Robertson: The programmes just do not exist in schools—there are no tutoring programmes for schools to utilise. That is basically what I meant.

The Convener: So there are ideas, but there is no delivery on the ground.

Laura Robertson: That is right.

The Convener: That is very clear.

Meghan Gallacher: Emma Congreve wants to come in, too, convener.

Emma Congreve: The point about the availability of evidence is really important, but we should also think about how schools can best monitor and evaluate their own programmes so that they can come up with robust evidence on what works for them in their context. That is not just about gathering metrics on a programme in isolation; it is also about benchmarking with other programmes and constructing control groups that allow you to get into the detail of what is happening and what is succeeding for pupils. That has a resource dimension; it is expensive to do that sort of thing well, and in the current climate it will be difficult to carve money out for that purpose. In the long run, however, such an approach is incredibly important for building on success.

The Convener: Becky Francis, do you want to come back in?

Professor Francis: The point that I was going to make has already been well made by Laura Robertson.

For those of you who do not know, the EEF was involved in designing and delivering the first year of the national tutoring programme in England. It was based on existing global evidence that we had curated on the productivity of tutoring—and, obviously, its usefulness in the context of the pandemic, given the often individualised nature of learning loss. If you are interested in that, I can talk more about it.

Laura Robertson has already made the point that many areas do not have established tutoring practice. In England, tutor provision had been very much concentrated in London and the south-east, so a key job for us was to extend that offer nationally. That is often difficult, because we have to mobilise resources and develop provision in different parts of the country, but it is fundamental. It sounds as though the situation is exactly the same in Scotland.

The Convener: What is the take-up of tutoring in England across the country? Is it now at the levels of London and the south-east?

Professor Francis: No. That will be a long journey. I can speak only to the first year. Some of you may know that there are issues about supply and so forth. We are not delivering the programme in its second year; that is being done by a private company—Randstad. In the first year, when we were developing and delivering the model, there was real inequality. We had our target to extend provision across the country, which we succeeded in doing. Nevertheless, it was interesting—and it was dictated by the pandemic—to see the different levels of take-up in different areas. We met our benchmark targets across the board.

It is interesting, given that the pandemic was slower to take hold in the south-west, which had not had strong tutoring provision in the past, that that was the area where delivery was implemented most quickly and numbers were strongest. We saw, in different areas, existing infrastructure and provision issues playing out, but with different levels of disruption being caused by the pandemic. It will be a long journey.

The Convener: That is the perfect segue to questions from Stephanie Callaghan.

Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): The policy aim is to eliminate the poverty-related attainment gap in the next four years. Obviously, that goes much wider when we are considering poverty—the baby box, the 1,140 hours of early learning provision, the best start grant, the Scottish child payment and keeping the Promise. All of those things will come into it. Covid has had a massive impact, too.

Is it realistic, in that case, to aim to close the poverty-related attainment gap over the next four years? If not, what would the panel consider to be a success in the next four years?

The Convener: Who do you want that question to go to?

Stephanie Callaghan: Laura Robertson first, please.

Laura Robertson: On what a success would look like in the next four years, as you have mentioned Covid has exacerbated child poverty and has impacted on the attainment gap in Scotland. We have been doing research at the Poverty Alliance as part of the “Get heard Scotland” programme, which has shown that particular groups of young people with additional support needs and young carers, for example, have been especially affected.

As the member said, we need to focus on the wider policy around reducing child poverty and on policies that specifically address the impacts of poverty on participation in school. There is a lot of successful evidence about the Child Poverty Action Group’s “Cost of the school day” programme, which has been implemented across many local authority areas, about the positive impact of raising awareness of poverty, and about how that impacts on young people’s ability to achieve. That goes beyond their grades; it is also about their wellbeing.

We must remember that young people spend only 80 per cent of their time in school, so more needs to be done to ensure that there is

sustainable longer-term funding for third sector organisations, which have been critical in providing support for families on low incomes during Covid.

I can also give the example of Maximise! which is a programme in Edinburgh that has recently been evaluated by the Improvement Service. The programme provides social security support to parents within the school. It provides advice about their eligibility for benefits and has been shown to work particularly well. There is a lot of evidence on making social security advice accessible—for example, providing it in general practices. That programme in Edinburgh has been particularly successful, so I would like to see such practices being developed more widely in local authorities throughout Scotland.

10:30

Emma Congreve: The key thing about having targets is that the focus attention on where we need to get to. The targets in themselves are important, but whenever targets are set, the drive towards reaching them should mean that better understanding what works and how we will make progress towards the targets is important. Otherwise, we might achieve the target but not necessarily know how. It might be because of other factors. Understanding the mechanisms that take us towards the targets is incredibly important.

If we have been knocked off course by Covid, which I totally understand, that will be borne out in the data in the coming years. If, in four years, we have a really good understanding about what works and how we will get to the targets although we have been knocked off course, that will be a massive step forward. That requires evidence, evaluation, analysis and knowledge of what the issues are, how we will address them and what the impact of policies will be.

We cannot simply say that the targets are not achievable because of Covid and that we should forget about them. Things have got worse, so it is not an excuse. If the targets are missed, we need to know why and we need to know how to get back on track. Therefore, evidence is incredibly important.

Stephanie Callaghan: I was looking through our papers to try to find the quote but, at some point, there is mention of the importance of parents' mental health and the impact that it automatically has on the children.

North Lanarkshire Council is implementing a hub model in which lots of services, including school and nursery provision, will sit side by side. I spoke recently to the council's chief executive, Des Murray, who told me that there will be multidisciplinary teams in the hubs and that the council is considering giving them shared funding and decision-making powers. Is that happening elsewhere? How effective is that model?

Laura Robertson: I am not sure that I have anything specifically on that, but our research shows that the mental health of parents and young people living in poverty is a massive issue at the moment. We have heard from loads of parents who struggled to afford essentials such as food and fuel during the lockdown. There needs to be more support and funding for community organisations in local areas to work alongside schools and develop a range of support services, including for mental health.

Stephanie Callaghan: My next question is for Emma Congreve. The last thing that we want a lone mum to do after dropping a child off at nursery or school is to go home and be isolated, so we need to try to engage her with something, whether it be education, a coffee shop, health, sport and exercise programmes or advice services. We need to keep parents there and get them involved. How important is that collaborative and community-based support?

Emma Congreve: I touched on that in a paper that I wrote with a colleague at the University of Strathclyde, Jonathan Norris, in which we considered some of the more socio-emotional factors that come into education. Clearly, the role of parents is incredibly important, as you have said. The stresses and strains that they face are easily transmitted both in how they feel they need to parent and to the children themselves.

As far as evidence on impacts is concerned, what you have talked about makes a lot of sense. I have not seen evidence or evaluations of the success of such an approach or evidence that shows whether the core thing for parents is to engage them in that way or whether it is potentially more effective to get more money to them in order to reduce the stress from poverty and its impacts on their mental health. That is the kind of thing that we need to understand better. Do we divert resources into those areas or into social security, or do those areas complement each other?

As I have said, what you have talked about makes a lot of sense and, in many instances, will be very helpful across the board. Ideally, we would have more evidence on the impact of such an approach compared with other types of interventions.

Stephanie Callaghan: I am aware of the recognition that has recently been given to the importance of cash. Given all the problems with energy costs and the loss of the universal credit money, the issue is really coming into play.

My final question is for Laura Robertson. You said that specific groups of children and young

people have been most affected by the attainment gap, and I would highlight Gypsy Traveller communities and children with additional support needs. What collaborative work is taking place to provide support to those young people?

Laura Robertson: Our research on the poverty-related attainment gap, which was published last year, looked at the nature of the gap and at the groups of young people who were being particularly affected. As you have mentioned, I drew attention to younger people with additional support needs, and I would also say that young people who have been through the care system, Gypsy Travellers and young white boys who live in deprived areas are also more likely to be impacted by the attainment gap than their more affluent peers. Those groups are most affected by the gap.

A lot of work is being done to support young people who have been through the care system. Schools need to have an understanding of young people's different needs, and that is the strength of, say, the pupil equity fund, which allows schools to work with local organisations that might take a targeted approach to, for example, young people in the care system or Gypsy Travellers.

Stephanie Callaghan: That is great. Thanks very much.

The Convener: Kaukab Stewart has a quick supplementary question, after which I will bring in Willie Rennie.

Kaukab Stewart: My supplementary, which is for Becky Francis, goes back to an issue that was raised a few questions ago. I was interested in your comment about attainment being the primary outcome and that you consider wellbeing, too. Do you consider other positive pathways such as apprenticeships?

Professor Francis: [*Inaudible*.]—and it is a really good—[*Inaudible*.]

Kaukab Stewart: I am sorry—I cannot—[*Interruption*.]

Stephanie Callaghan: We have lost the sound.

Professor Francis: Can anyone hear me?

The Convener: Yes, we can hear you now.

Professor Francis: With outcome measures, we tend to focus on pupils from three to 18. Obviously, post 16, that can take in vocational qualifications. To date, the EEF has focused primarily on outcome measures to GCSE level, and, within that, on literacy and numeracy—and with good reason, given what I have said about those foundational platforms for learning.

Nevertheless, there is more for us to do, both in different subject areas in the secondary curriculum and beyond that into post-16 education with regard to not just academic qualifications but vocational pathways including, obviously, apprenticeships. In particular, we are doing more work on further education, which, as you will know, is a very complex domain and where, in contrast with the school system, there is extra complexity for rigorous research methods to deal with. For example, in further education settings, kids from different age groups might sit the same course. That is difficult for us to address with our traditional methods, but we are working on that.

Kaukab Stewart: I also wanted to ask about tutoring and the expectation on our young people and children to go to school between 9 o'clock and 3 or 4 o'clock and then do additional work. I wonder how many adults would want to do additional work in the evening—indeed, I am always mindful of that impact. [*Interruption*.] Yes, that was a comment, convener.

Has any thought been given to the impact of that? Adults seem to think that additional tutoring is a good thing. I am not against it by any means, but has there has been any consultation with young people and learners on what they feel about doing that additional work? What is the take-up rate?

Before I let people in, I want to make a comment about the Volunteer Tutors Organisation, which I had the chance to meet a couple of weeks ago. It is based in the Glasgow Kelvin constituency, and its amazing work is being rolled out across and beyond Glasgow. I just wanted to put that on the record.

Becky Francis: It is encouraging to hear that.

Your question about hearing pupils' views on this issue is a great one. The feedback that we had in the first year from pupils was that it was popular with families and pupils. It is important to point out that in year 1 of the programme, the majority of the provision was concentrated in the school day. That creates its own complications in relation to when tuition is provided. Does it happen at lunch time or at the end of the school day?

The point is that schools co-ordinated tuition provision, because of the evidence that, otherwise, there would be high levels of absenteeism and so on. It is necessary for additional work to be co-ordinated directly with the schoolteacher to ensure that there are no unfortunate unintended consequences such as tutors providing a different curriculum or teaching something irrelevant. The fact that it is very much guided by the schoolteacher addresses the potential problem of kids having to do extra work on top of their school day. Equally, there are other areas of complexity in providing tuition in the round.

It is worth mentioning that, in systems such as that in Finland, it is very common to draw kids out

of class in the school day to provide them with additional support and provision. I think that I am right in saying that up to 40 per cent of kids in Finland get that additional attention to ensure that there is comprehensive learning and that all kids reach the same levels. The EEF's evidence supports how productive such an approach can be, but getting the mechanics right, particularly while the pandemic continues, is challenging.

Kaukab Stewart: Dr Robertson, did you want to come in?

The Convener: Please be very brief.

Laura Robertson: Becky Francis has covered most of what I was going to say. On the question of when tutoring should happen, I think that it should meet a child's individual needs. Given that a lot of young people are on part-time timetables and are not going to school full time, there is an opportunity to ensure that they get that education provision when they are not in class.

The Convener: That was helpful.

10:45

Willie Rennie: I thank everyone for their evidence so far. I am looking for a bit more precision, because I am not an educationist but I am involved in the policy-making process. I get completely what Professor Ainscow is saying about empowering people who know what they are doing to do what they know best. What I do not understand is what we are getting wrong, and I need a bit more precision on that.

You talked about budget control. What elements of central budget control do you disapprove of and would change? What would you change in terms of the measurement process? I have seen the view in your paper that measurement is narrowing education, which has a disproportionate effect on disadvantaged pupils. What are we getting wrong on that front, and what are we getting wrong on guidance? I know that you will say that it is a partnership and that we have a role, but I want to know what we are not getting right and what we need to change.

Professor Ainscow: That's an easy question, isn't it?

A few minutes ago somebody asked whether we could be optimistic. I think that we have to be optimistic. Things can change. We know, in Scotland and from other countries, that it is possible to change things. In all the horribleness of Covid there are one or two positive things that can be built on. The evidence from lots of places in the world, including Scotland, is that the crisis has encouraged more collaboration within schools, between schools and with families.

Willie Rennie: Professor Ainscow, can I stop you there? I know that we have positive things, but I am in politics to fix things that are not going well. Therefore, can you tell us what is not going well and what we are getting wrong? I am quite prepared for you to be personal. I need to know what we are getting wrong and so far we have not had precision.

Professor Ainscow: [*Inaudible*.]—it is difficult to be precise in a few words, but I will sum up what I think is needed. I have described it as an "adjustment", but, as I said earlier, that is perhaps not the right word. A considerable shift in thinking is needed to build on the success that has happened and to move forward.

Government has to create the conditions in which local action is possible. That is about allocating resources, encouraging local action and encouraging local leadership at the school and area level. Government has to change its thinking in order to move forward into the next phase. Local authorities have to rethink what their roles are, including their roles in the regional improvement collaboratives. There seems to be a lot of uncertainty about that. We had a similar thing in Wales with local authority collaboration. Frankly, it was a fairly poor show in Wales and did not work terribly well, but I still think it is a good idea.

However, ultimately, the key thing is that schools must be given the freedom to make changes to move children forward and be held accountable for those changes. The mantra that I used in another place is that it has to be about high trust and high accountability. We have to trust professionals to take action and then keep them accountable. Evidence is crucial, as we have just discussed.

Willie Rennie: Okay. Let me give you some precise questions. I have been a strong critic of Scottish national standardised assessments. I think that they create league tables and distort learning in schools, and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development has made it very clear that they need to change. Are those the type of measurements that you think are narrowing the curriculum and disproportionately affecting disadvantaged pupils? Would you change SNSAs? Would you, for instance, get rid of them for primary 1 pupils?

Professor Ainscow: I do not know all the details of that so I would not want to comment in detail, but I think—

Willie Rennie: Okay, if you—

Professor Ainscow: Let me give you some—[*Inaudible*.]—indicators are crucial, and at the moment what I hear whenever I talk to teachers

and headteachers is, "It is about reducing the attainment gap."

Willie Rennie: Okay.

Professor Ainscow: That is the indicator of progress, not the goal of education. That is the confusion. People are confusing goals with—

Willie Rennie: I get all that completely. Let me give you another example. Some of the controls that we have set from the centre include the pupil equity fund and the attainment challenge. We have, in effect, ring fenced the money for those things. There has also been a more recent one around teacher recruitment—permanent posts, in particular. Would you get rid of those controls from the centre? Is that the kind of budget control that you want teachers to have more freedom over?

Professor Ainscow: I think so. That is where there needs to be some trust and accountability; remember that. When I speak to headteachers, I hear that they are frustrated that they cannot design their staffing profile in order to deliver the kind of programme that they think their children and their community could need. That cannot be centralised; it has to be specific to places.

We are talking about a very significant shift. It is very challenging to the Scottish situation, because a deeply established pattern of working will need to be changed.

Willie Rennie: That is quite a radical change.

I have a final question, which is for Becky Francis. We have talked about tutoring. From my understanding, there is a significant difference between the ways of working of the pupil equity fund and of the English pupil premium. Is the lack of encouragement from the PEF part of the reason why we are not expanding the tutoring programme?

Professor Francis: I am not sure how qualified I am to answer that, but I can speculate a little. My impression is that the difference is in the availability of different programmes that schools can easily get their hands on. As I said, that is the role that the EEF is increasingly playing in the English education system. Not only do we point schools to the evidence, as you can see from the teaching and learning toolkit, which the Scottish Government is indicating as a resource for schools in Scotland; we go much further than that in our guidance, support and resources for schools.

We have a research school network and regional brokers, who are employed by the EEF to mobilise a hub-and-spoke regional profile in different areas of England, in order to ensure the school-to-school work that Mel Ainscow has alluded to. We know the evidence, but teachers are most likely to listen to other teachers, so our research school network of 40 schools works very closely with the EEF across England to promote our resources, run continuing professional development for other schools, and initiate school-led programmes on how to use the evidence. We supply the evidence on proven projects that schools can purchase with pupil premium funding and on approaches that they can draw on and develop, again using the pupil premium resource. As you will have seen, the guidance that has been developed in England goes a little beyond the position in Scotland, in encouraging schools to use our resources.

It comes back to the earlier point that I made. Although I applaud what Mel has said about school-to-school work, professionalisation and the ownership of evidence-led practice, practitioners are very busy and are not researchers. They need to be able to draw on user-friendly and accessible guidance—and, it is to be hoped, on existing programmes that are quality assured and proven to be evidence led.

Then we get to implementation, as has already been mentioned. That is important. There are no magic bullets that will work everywhere; nevertheless, having concrete offers is fundamental, and that is something that I see to be different in those different national contexts.

I will also throw in that I sense a slight difference in relation to diagnosis. I was quite surprised that, as far as I can see, there have been no large-scale projects that have been independently assessed—in assessment that goes beyond teachers and is run by an external organisation—to test current pupils to assess their learning loss against generalisable prior cohorts. Again, we have commissioned such work in England, because we really need to know what problem we are trying to solve.

I am sorry if I am teaching grandparents to suck eggs, of course, but it seems to me that it is important to get a precise definition. We know about the complexity. There is individual pupil-level complexity, classroom-level complexity, school-level complexity, area complexity and so on, so it is important to drill down to see what the problems are before we start addressing them.

Willie Rennie: I was going to finish there but your last point is interesting. What precisely are we not doing? What is happening in England that is not happening here in terms of measurement?

Professor Francis: Again, I apologise in advance if I get this wrong. In terms of measurement, not only is there the Renaissance Learning research that is being generated by and for the Department for Education, there is a series of other national-level commissioned research, not least that commissioned by the EEF, which is cohort work that is being done with the National

Foundation for Educational Research and the Fischer Family Trust on measuring the impact of the Covid gap in relation to pre-pandemic cohorts.

Willie Rennie: You are saying that we do not fully understand the impact of the pandemic on those key groups.

Professor Francis: I would not say that at all. I have no idea about the extent of your work. However, the work that I have seen evidence of in what I have read has been based on teacher assessments and perceptions rather than tests that have been run by external organisations.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): We are having a really interesting evidence session this morning. I was quite taken by Professor Ainscow who, it seems like a lifetime ago now, said that we should celebrate success. He was quite clear that there are lots of challenges still, but it is right to put some of the successes on the record.

We see that school leavers from low-income backgrounds in Scotland are doing better in relation to positive destinations, and, in the past few years, there has been a record narrowing of the gap between the most deprived and least deprived groups for positive destinations. That is to be celebrated, as is significant progress that has been made at national levels 5 and 6, although we would all agree that it is not fast enough.

However, I want to flip the question on its head and direct it at Professor Ainscow, given that I mentioned him. We know that progress has been made, but do we know how we achieved it, and do we know how we can achieve more?

Professor Ainscow: We have some indications. My colleagues at the university have been working within the system for 10 years or so, and what we in organisational development always say is that the best way to understand an organisation is to try to change it. A lot of the work that my colleagues have been doing is a form of collaborative action research and we have seen that, when you get collective efforts within a school or within a school and its communities or when schools work with other schools, we make progress. It is good to look outside, including looking at England, but we should not forget that England has its own problems with all this that Scotland does not have.

There is a tradition of collaboration in Scotland and the education system is remarkably inclusive. Most Scottish kids go to their local school. That does not happen in some other countries. Those are strengths to build on, which is why I think—or hope—that, as we come out of this horrible period, this is a good moment for a rethink about the next phase of implementation, but it should build on the evidence that we have that collaboration within the Scottish education system has moved it forward. I reiterate: it is a relatively inclusive system. When it is defined, equity is usually about inclusion and fairness. Progress has made it more inclusive; the next step is about making it fairer.

Bob Doris: That is helpful, but let me broaden it out and ask the other witnesses. The reason for asking the question was that we do not know the reason for the progress that has been made. It could be to do with exceptional careers advice for young people or teachers prepping young people for their exit exams, but it could also be to do with successes three, four or five years ago, because that is how long the attainment challenge has been going for and how long significant amounts of PEF money have been in the system.

Earlier in the meeting, we spoke about early learning. I want to give one example, then ask about how we measure the success of that. I will also widen the question out to other witnesses.

A few years ago, one of my local primary schools encountered significant issues with what they thought of as physical literacy and the health and wellbeing of young people. The school used PEF money to bring in a third sector local organisation to do physical exercises—not physical education but physical workshops—with the young people over a period of time. The school told me that that led to pupils showing much greater confidence in the classroom and there being better interaction between the young people. Spending that money led to success. That was done with pupils in primary 1, P2 and P3. Those kids are now going through the education system. The point is: we do not know our successes until we achieve them.

11:00

That takes me back to the question about measurement. How do we know the successes that we are baking into the system for the future? Is there a longitudinal study going on? Is there a cohort of young people who were there at the start of the attainment challenge and who have been monitored as they have gone through that over the years? That is an open question. I am conscious that schools will say that they are already doing all the things that we are talking about here today. They will say, “There’s great work going on. Just let us get on with it.” How do we measure that in a way that is not bureaucratic but that will build an evidence base for doing more?

Perhaps Emma Congreve could answer first.

Emma Congreve: As far as I am aware, no dedicated resource has been allocated to robustly monitoring and evaluating the schemes that are going on. We are not talking about initiatives in

isolation; we are also talking about how they build on each other. Work in early years feeds into interventions at primary school and beyond. A longitudinal approach to that would be really helpful. I may be wrong, but I do not think that that is being systematically looked at.

There will be people looking at the longitudinal evidence that exists. We have the Growing Up in Scotland framework and the Understanding Society longitudinal study. There is a limit to the extent to which those longitudinal studies can link interventions to data, unless there is a lot of effort to ensure that that is the case. That is partly why the Northern Alliance regional improvement collaborative has involved some partners in thinking about that. The first step is to understand the issues better. Moving on from that, we need to understand the impact of interventions.

There is a plan for monitoring and evaluation at a Scotland level, with an intention to look at what is happening overall, but there is a lack of attention at the smaller scale to building a robust picture of what works or to understanding some of the interventions. It is great to be able to relate some of that work to what is going on in England, but some parts of the Scottish context are rural and remote. Cities like Glasgow and Dundee have faced particular issues caused by their own backgrounds. We need a lot more detail.

Bob Doris: That takes us to the nub of the difficulty. It is hard to monitor good work in schools. It is hard to get evidence or to track it without creating burdensome bureaucracy and a paperwork exercise. That is why I think that a cohort study would be welcome.

The Scottish Government's review of the attainment challenge over the past five years shows that some schools are using the SHANARRI indicators—safe, healthy, achieving, nurtured, active, respected, responsible and included—as a light-touch way of measuring young people's wellbeing. There is no systematic or nationwide approach to doing that.

My final question is an open one. Can any of the witnesses point us to a piece of research that has been done, or to some monitoring that could be done, that would follow young people from the early years and through their school career and would show or demonstrate the success or otherwise of PEF spending and attainment challenge funding?

We want to measure that in a way that is not burdensome. We want to learn what works for future generations. Poverty bites countries over generations. We want to learn what works and embed it in our system for the long term. Do any of the witnesses want to say something about measurements and outcomes that would not be bureaucratic?

Emma Congreve: I will comment briefly on the point about bureaucracy and measurement in schools, which is a really useful point. As I mentioned earlier, something that we have been thinking about with the Northern Alliance is how schools can use systems that are already in place and used from day to day to enter information about pupils, store notes and those kinds of things. A number of different systems are in use, none of which quite do what the schools want them to. It is about whether the solution is to replace some of that or to merge some of the data that is already collected in a more helpful way. That is a really critical part of the evidence-gathering story going forward and it resonates with a lot of schools and teachers in terms of the burdens that they are under. Unfortunately, I do not have an example to give you.

Becky Francis: That is a great question about bureaucracy and the challenge for schools in facilitating research and data collection. When the Education Endowment Foundation started 10 years ago, there was real anxiety about running large-scale randomised controlled trials in education. Very little of that had been done previously in the UK, or in educational research across the board.

I am proud to say that, 10 years on, more than half of the schools in England have been involved in one of our randomised controlled trials. The energy, effort and commitment of teachers and schools in participating in research and being part of that collaboration towards evidence-led practice has been eye watering and inspiring. Cohort research obviously takes place in different universities—including University College London's institute of education, which I used to run—but there is the national pupil database. We link our RCT work with that database, which enables us to do the tracking work that Bob Doris mentioned.

That work is already proving productive and it allows other agencies and What Works Network centres to draw on our data. For example, What Works centre for Children's Social Care has drawn on our longitudinal data to track impacts for looked-after children. It feels as though there is a collaborative effort towards collecting that data and the mission behind it. Andreas Schleicher has commented on how impressive that school commitment is. Galvanising that professional interest in evidence-led practice across schools can be really energising.

Bob Doris: Thank you very much.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): I have a couple of questions for Mel Ainscow, although

others may want to respond, in which case they should indicate that.

Mel, I am sympathetic to your argument about the need for more professional autonomy for individual schools, teachers and heads, and I am interested in your suggestion about greater devolution of budgetary powers to headteachers. It is only a few years since a suggestion along those lines was made in Scotland, but at that time the feedback from a lot of headteachers was that they did not want to become the chief financial officers of their schools. They wanted to be leaders of learning and did not want to be buried under the bureaucracy that would come with significant additional financial responsibility. How would you respond to that?

Professor Ainscow: It is an interesting issue, because a similar pattern can be seen in countries that have gone down that road. When the idea is introduced, headteachers say—understandably, because they have not done it before—that they do not feel skilled in that area. I guess that some are worried about what it will mean in terms of their accountability. However, once they have gone through that pain barrier, the evidence is clear that what is needed is to give not just headteachers, but other school leaders, working collaboratively, the space to decide what staffing needs they have—the profile of the teachers, support staff and so on that they need—and the flexibility to design a resource approach that fits with their priorities.

It is clear that that is what is needed, and there is evidence from quite a lot of countries around the world that it works. That, for me, would be a significant move forward, but I think that you can expect that kind of predictable reaction.

Ross Greer: You mentioned that a number of countries provide good examples. Our predecessor committee in the previous parliamentary session visited Sweden and Finland, one of which provides a better example than the other. In the examples that you are aware of, is it the case that there is more administrative capacity in the schools, rather than at municipality level, to make the transition manageable? In other words, are headteachers able to manage the additional burden because they are not expected to do it themselves? Are there teams of administrators located in schools, rather than in the local authority, to help them with the work?

Professor Ainscow: That is exactly the process. Headteachers need to have different kinds of expertise in their school offices in order to address those issues, and that takes the fear factor away.

I am part of a group that has just done a review in Portugal on behalf of the OECD. Portugal is an interesting example because it has made enormous progress on equity and inclusion over the past 20 years. It is a small country, which is a significant point with regard to Scotland. A strong and well-established element of the system in Portugal is that the schools are in clusters, which are formal structures. Someone is elected as director of a cluster for four years, and they have the ability to use resources, because a lot of the support resources are delegated to the cluster level. Such an approach needs careful planning and sensitive support, but I believe that it will be an essential move at some time in the near future.

Ross Greer: Are you saying that, in the Scottish context, our 32 education authorities, which are essentially clusters that education is delivered through, are too big?

Professor Ainscow: Logically, it would seem so, although as an outsider I would not want to comment too much on that. However, I suppose that the regional improvement collaboratives could be a key to that.

Ross Greer: Is that not moving in the opposite direction, with 11 or a dozen regional bodies instead of the small clusters that you have highlighted?

Professor Ainscow: The question is: what is the role of each of those levels? I have emphasised the need for much more autonomy at the school level, and I am now suggesting that, at the network or cluster level—or whatever system you put in place—you create a collaborative governance arrangement. You will then need some kind of co-ordinating mechanism, which could be the local authority or perhaps the RICs—I do not know. It might be different things in different parts of the country.

The key is to give that space and, as I mentioned, to have the accountability to ensure that it is used effectively by people who understand the local situation—that is, the context, the community and the children. They bring people together. In the school improvement world, it is often said that school improvement is technically simple but socially complex. It is not that difficult to say what needs to happen; the difficulty arises when you try to get all the different partners to agree and pull in the same direction. That is why we need shared understanding at every level and, as I have emphasised, leadership at local community level in schools.

Ross Greer: My second question is much more political, but I am interested to hear your thoughts on it, given your experience elsewhere.

The phrase “postcode lottery” is not unique to Scottish politics, but it is used an awful lot here in relation to not just education, but health and a range of other areas. One of the challenges with

decentralisation and giving local authorities or schools much more autonomy is that we inevitably end up with more variation, which creates a particular tension. The Scottish Government and we as a national Parliament are held accountable for the performance of Scottish education. There is partly a tendency for us to be collectively judged, at least at election time, on the national performance of the education system. However, the more power that is devolved to the local level through decentralisation, the harder it is for those who are held accountable nationally to have any influence over outcomes.

How is that tension managed in other settings? How would you resolve it here?

Professor Ainscow: This takes us back to the question of the accountability system that you have. We need horizontal accountability at the local level, professional accountability among practitioners and some kind of co-ordinated accountability in the local area, with the Government looking at the big picture, collecting evidence and monitoring what is going on.

11:15

I am not sure whether I am answering the question, but I know that the issue of accountability is a matter for review in Scotland, and my honest view is that it needs reviewing as it is not working at the moment. To be frank, the inspection system does not seem to be working terribly well, from what I hear from people in schools. A secondary head who took over two or three years ago said that his school had not been inspected for 10 years. The first thing that he did was look at the data on attendance and exclusions. It was a disaster, but nobody had been looking at it. Somebody has to keep an eye on that and step in.

Ross Greer: I agree with you about the inspection system. I hope that it will be significantly reformed by the current process. Unless anybody else wants to comment on that—please indicate if you do—I will move on to a couple of questions for Laura Robertson about some interesting points in her submission.

Laura, you mention

"educational instruction outside of school"

as an intervention in the context of the attainment challenge. Will you expand on what is meant by that? How does it come up against the tension around consistency of access? As much as we are aware that there are issues with young people not attending school, the overwhelming majority of young people do attend, whereas far fewer young people attend youth clubs and so on, which I presume are the other contexts in which those interventions are intended to take place. Even if we funded them significantly more than we do at the moment, we would still not get a level of participation that was equivalent to the one that we get in compulsory education.

How would additional interventions in the context of the attainment challenge reach the young people that we need them to reach, compared with doing it through schools—where, admittedly, not all the young people are present, but the overwhelming majority of them are?

Laura Robertson: The main issue is a lack of resource within families. We have done research that shows that families face barriers to accessing support outwith school because they just do not have the financial resource. Extracurricular activities such as clubs are just not feasible for families that are living on low incomes.

For me, as I mentioned, it is about sustainable funding for third sector community organisations. We have seen this week that a lot of small community organisations in Scotland are really going to be hit by the cost-of-living crisis. We will have to see what the impacts of that are, but it is likely that many organisations will have to close. That is an important issue for a lot of young people, as 80 per cent of their time is spent outwith school and it is those organisations that provide a lot of family support. I hope that that answers your question.

Ross Greer: Absolutely. I am still wondering, though—if we were to significantly increase the amount of funding that goes to the third sector and the organisations that are reaching out to young people in other contexts, would additional funding alone ensure that we reach everyone that we are trying to reach if the objective is to close the attainment gap, or are changes in approach required as well?

I am trying to figure out for the purposes of our committee inquiry whether we should consider recommending that some of the money be allocated not to schools, but directly to third sector organisations. Is it as simple as reallocating the money or do we need to explore whether we should recommend changes in approach as well?

Laura Robertson: There is also the factor of raising awareness. From our review on tackling the poverty-related attainment gap in the early years in particular, I know that the Scottish Government has done a lot of work on extending free hours of childcare, but for a lot of families living in deprived areas, there is a lack of awareness about what they are entitled to. Alongside that extra investment, it is about ensuring that families are aware of the support that they can access.

Ross Greer: Thanks. That is all from me for now, convener.

The Convener: That was an interesting line of questioning. I wonder whether Emma Congreve wants to add something on extracurricular support, because she also mentions it in her submission.

Emma Congreve: Laura Robertson covered it well, but I will briefly add to what she said. Children spend quite a lot of their lives outside school, and the role of extracurricular activities in terms of skills, socialisation and the socio-emotional skills that they develop is incredibly important for attainment and for doing well in school and later on in life. We need to think about what can be offered outside school, which is a particular environment that some children may not do well in, and extracurricular activities can add a lot to that. The evidence suggests that that has a positive link to attainment. Those activities do not have to be youth clubs; they can be music lessons or sports teams after school. There are a range of things.

As Laura Robertson said, the key barrier is lack of resources in families, but there are different ways to take down those barriers. One is free or low-cost provision by the third sector and another is more money being directed into families' pockets. The key thing to think about is how we do that effectively and what works in the areas that we are talking about to help children to engage in activities that we know will benefit their overall performance at school and in later life.

Ross Greer: Convener, may I rescind my comment that I had finished and ask one more follow-up question?

The Convener: Sure.

Ross Greer: In the examples that we have of areas where extracurricular activities are free of charge or, at least, there are no significant financial barriers for families, there is higher participation, but it is not 100 per cent. How do we reach young people who, even if we remove every financial barrier, still face other barriers to participating, such as chaotic family lifestyles, or who simply do not want to participate in extracurricular activities? The activities are voluntary. That is great and they help a lot of young people, but what about the young people who simply choose not to participate in them?

Emma Congreve: That is a valid point. Laura Robertson talked about awareness raising. One factor might be a lack of awareness of how attending such activities helps children. Parents might not be aware of how important they are.

The key is to understand the root cause of why people do not attend. Financial barriers will be one cause, but they might not be the only one. There may also be stigma and all kinds of other barriers. Rather than casting the activities aside because not every child will attend, which I know you are not doing, we need to figure out why that is the case. If we are clear that extracurricular activities are important, we need to understand the range of barriers that prevent children from attending them. A lack of private transport is a big one. Even if provision is free, getting to it can be difficult. However, we could do with a bit more consideration of what the barriers are.

Ross Greer: That really is all from me this time, convener.

The Convener: Last but not least, we come to Fergus Ewing.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): The late songwriter Johnny Mercer wrote a song that is still sung that said:

> "Accentuate the positive
> Eliminate the negative".

I mention it because, perhaps unintentionally, there is a risk in discussions such as the one that we are having that we run into doing the converse: that we eliminate the positive and accentuate the negative. I hope that we all recognise—I expect that we do—that, every day, our teachers work hard and put effort, enthusiasm and expertise into the job that they do. I have been an MSP for 22 years and I receive vanishingly few complaints about our teachers. It is correct to put that on record—not that the discussion has been unduly negative.

I also put on record the fact that the Scottish Government is, I understand, putting in £215 million of Scottish attainment challenge funding this year as well as protecting free tuition for higher education. That has not been mentioned, but it is key to addressing the problems of the poverty-related attainment gap.

The discussion has been interesting, but it tends to be of a general nature. There are lots of abstract nouns, but it is more difficult to get concrete actions. That is perhaps understandable but, following Mr Rennie's line of questioning, I will try to drill down. Will Professor Ainscow say exactly what he meant when he said that headteachers require control over their budgets? Will he give me three examples of what headteachers might do in practice to make things better and tackle the poverty-related attainment gap?

Professor Ainscow: That is a good question. The danger of a meeting such as this is that we talk in generalities. The ideas behind what I have presented are based on having worked with schools in many different places over many years. As I have said, I have seen that context matters.

What will work in one place might not work in another and the barriers in one place might be different from those in another. We need the potential for senior people at local level, particularly at school level, to analyse their situation and say, "Who are the youngsters we are concerned about? What do we know about them? What barriers are making it difficult for them and how can we work together to make progress?"

That approach can be used for many things, such as attendance. Statistics are helpful, but they are insufficient. They tell us what things look like and can show us patterns, but they do not tell us why things are the way they are. If we want to intervene, we must ask questions. If some children are not attending school, let us find out why—is it to do with their families, transport or illness, for example? It could be to do with all those things. As people in schools are so busy, they tend to have hunches, which become beliefs. However, when my colleagues and I work with schools, we help them to use the evidence that they collect, starting with statistics. We also encourage listening to the voices of children, colleagues, families and anyone else who has a role to play. From that, you create a collective understanding of a situation and, in so doing, you take collective action in order to move forward.

That approach can apply to things such as attendance or children misbehaving or being excluded from lessons too often. I will give a specific example. A large secondary school that I worked with looked at year 9—it was in an English context—and realised that a significant number of young people were invisible in school. Nobody knew their names or seemed to know anything about them, but when teachers in that school collected evidence through talking to those young people and watching them in the classroom, they found that those youngsters went through the day without anyone using their names. Those youngsters put their hands up in lessons but were rarely asked to contribute. They were kids who were doing all right; their behaviour was very good and their homework was done and all that, but were they included and were they being valued? Not at all.

I am arguing that we have to create what I would call an inquiring stance in the system, where schools and school partnerships—which are crucial—collect evidence about their individual situations to identify barriers, mobilise resources, take action and monitor the impacts of that action. I am arguing for a school system that is research based—and not just using the kind of research that Professor Francis will bring to the situation; although that makes a contribution, it is important for schools to analyse their own contexts.

I am not sure that that answers your question.

Fergus Ewing: I am impressed by the passion with which you espouse your views. Instinctively, I am supportive of the idea of headteachers having more discretion but, when we get down to specifics, Professor Ainscow, many things are fixed, such as salaries. I presume that you do not think that headteachers should start to pay some teachers more or less than they are paid per the tariff. There is so much of the budget that is fixed—building repairs, rates, heat, lighting and insurance, for example. I was interested in whether there were any specifics.

When I speak to constituents about education, they do not talk in that language at all. The language and vocabulary that we use is not used out of the Holyrood bubble or system. They say, "I wish children could get musical instruction or a musical instrument," or, "I wish that they could get more tutoring." Those matters were referred to earlier in the meeting and perhaps we have not explored them enough. My constituents may also say, "Maybe children should learn how to touch type," which is mandatory in Holland. That is still seen as a marginal skill for the 20th century, but it is now essential for the 21st century. I have no idea why the educational establishment has not homed in on that. They could say, "I would like more business people to come into schools to explain to our kids what they actually do." Those are the things that I think my constituents would mention, but they have not been mentioned this morning. That is not a criticism of anybody; it is just a general observation from somebody who, unlike my colleague and friend Kaukab Stewart, has not really been involved since they left school, which was five decades ago or thereabouts.

11:30

Professor Ainscow, I want to challenge you on a specific point. I am not persuaded that there is an evidential basis for your contention that headteachers and teachers do not focus on individual children. My impression is that they do their best to do that and, by and large, they manage to do that.

I am not sure whether you meant to assert that there is a general failure across the board to identify, or even communicate with, large numbers of pupils in schools. I must admit that I find that a very difficult contention and one that does not square with my experience of going to what used to be called prizegivings, which I am sure are called something else now. The children at Grantown grammar school have a huge array of achievements—they seem to be happy and well known to their teachers, almost as friends. I am afraid that I do not recognise the single example that you gave as being evidence based, which I think was the point that you were making.

Professor Ainscow: Much of what you said supports my case. You talked about what your constituents would want, and it seems to me that part of the role of management and leadership is to listen to the voice of the community and ask what kind of education system we need. That is why I say that that cannot be dictated nationally. Those decisions need to be made at the local level by involving and listening to the young people, who have an important role to play, listening to colleagues in the school and in other schools and, as you say, listening to families. Therefore, I think that what you said supports my argument. Somebody has to manage that and it has to be managed at a local level. There is untapped potential in that regard.

Fergus Ewing: I will ask you one final question and then, to be fair to the other witnesses, I will invite them to comment on the specifics of any of the topics that I and others have raised and to tell us whether they think that we should be making specific recommendations about some of those matters.

I will go back to the national versus local issue, which, Professor Ainscow, you have raised as your main point. As an example, if we take the kids who need a bit more assistance in learning because they have fallen behind, or who need tutoring for whatever reason, surely there needs to be a national prescription that that requirement cannot be neglected, and it must be dealt with. How that is implemented is then a matter for headteachers and local education authorities. However, dealing with such issues cannot be left to random acts.

To take the example of children who need tutoring, I think that there is a strong case for doing something more about that. There needs to be a national prescription on that. Otherwise, we are leaving it entirely to decisions that are made at a local level, and we end up with—although I do not like the phrase—a postcode lottery, which was alluded to earlier.

Professor Ainscow: I do not think that we are in disagreement. I am not sure about the word "prescription", but there needs to be a national lead and a clear indication of what is expected and how people are to be accountable. However, that has to be interpreted according to the context. In Scotland, you have rural areas, islands and cities such as Glasgow, which are all completely different worlds. Local interpretation of those national requirements is essential. I do not think that we disagree on that. I certainly was not implying, in case I gave that impression, that anything goes. Remember what I said: there needs to be high trust and high accountability. We need to trust people to do the right things. We have the fantastic resource of teachers and other people in Scottish schools. We need to trust, support and get behind them, but we need to hold them accountable.

Fergus Ewing: Maybe there is more agreement than might have been apparent. To pick another line from said song, we have maybe tried to

"Bring gloom down to the minimum".

I will move to the other two witnesses, because it is only fair to give them both an opportunity to say whether there are any specific issues on which we could do more, whether nationally or locally, prescriptive or otherwise, to address the attainment gap in order to help other kids from poorer backgrounds in particular.

Professor Francis: Yes, exactly—we need to focus on the gap. I take the point that, when you ask constituents what they would like in education, there will of course be an array of different responses. However, the focus should be on the evidence about the attainment gap.

Again, the prior discussion has probably drawn to a good conclusion, which is that what is needed is a clear central policy—and a mandate, where necessary—but also, where possible, professional autonomy and ownership, in order for that energy to be gained on the ground. A locally specific context must come into play as well.

The encouraging thing is that the Scottish recovery programme emphasises some of the key things that we know from the evidence will make the best impact. For example, we know that the quality of teaching makes the biggest impact on pupil progress, and that that is doubly the case for kids from disadvantaged backgrounds. Your recovery programme focuses on bringing additional teachers into the system. Quality is key in that. I do not know whether the Scottish situation is following the same trends as in England, where applications for teacher training are falling; there may be issues of recruitment and retention to keep an eye on. Nevertheless, the thrust is exactly right.

Then there is the issue of securing the coverage of high-quality provision across the country, when we know that the pattern tends to be that kids from socially disadvantaged backgrounds are least likely to be able to access high-quality, subject-specialist teaching. Given everything that has been said, I imagine that that is also the case in Scotland. That requires intervention at national policy and local authority levels.

You asked what headteachers can do. We recommend a tiered approach, based on the distillation of the evidence across the board. First, that involves a focus, even though it is not catchy in recovery terms, on the high-quality provision that I have just been talking about: high-quality

teaching, recruitment and retention, and spending money to secure that and to provide on-going CPD to existing classroom teachers to ensure that we realise the best from the profession, particularly for disadvantaged students.

Secondly, headteachers should focus on evidence-led and proven projects and interventions, particularly in the context of the pandemic. For example, we have talked about tutoring, specific proven literacy and numeracy programmes and so forth.

Thirdly, headteachers should focus on wider cross-school programmes that ensure that kids are ready to learn. Again, that is doubly important in the context of the impacts of the pandemic. That involves thinking about wellbeing, presence and attendance in the classroom, behaviour programmes and so forth.

For busy headteachers, to think about a conjunction of those different approaches, in that tiered approach, when spending the PEF funding, will be crucial.

Emma Congreve: I will finish with one specific and one general point. The research that we have been doing has been in the north of Scotland, in a mix of rural and urban areas across the Northern Alliance RIC. One thing that came up, which has not been spoken about today and is quite an issue for some children, is the time that it takes to travel to and from school. It might not be that they live all that far away from the school, but the bus route that has to go all around the houses to drop everyone off can mean that it is an hour each way. Perhaps an inquiring mind might wonder whether that could be done in a different way. Obviously, it limits time at home for doing homework, and there may not be a bus that takes pupils home after an extracurricular activity, so such activities might be out of the question.

My general point is that, across the board, it would be helpful if we had better linkage of the focus on child poverty and those interventions with the work in the education system. We could make better use of the evidence from local and national interventions and join those two up. It is the poverty-related attainment gap—poverty is a big part of what is going on here and sometimes the approach can feel disjointed, when we think of the attainment gap versus the child poverty policy. It would very helpful to bring those two closer together.

Fergus Ewing: I thank both Becky Francis and Emma Congreve for their answers and the specific issues that they have raised. It is self-evident that the issue of recruitment and retention is important.

I am very pleased that Emma Congreve raised the issue of school transport and I say, without fear of contradiction, that it is a serious one for many parents. It can take a long time for children to get to school—even for those who live just a few miles away from their school. In distributing the attainment fund we must ensure that it reaches areas where there is hidden poverty—in many parts of rural Scotland, such travel is an additional cost that simply does not arise in urban areas.

Laura Robertson: I do not have anything to add to the original comments, but I would like to reiterate Emma Congreve's comment about reducing child poverty. There are examples of positive things happening in different local authorities, such as the cost of the school day programme and Maximise!, which I have already mentioned. More needs to be done to ensure that such things are not just happening only in certain areas and that programmes that are shown to be effective are implemented across the board.

The Convener: That brings us to the end of this part of our meeting. On behalf of the committee, I thank Professor Ainscow, Professor Francis, Dr Robertson and Emma Congreve for the valuable evidence that they have given us this morning.

Subordinate Legislation

Nutritional Requirements for Food and Drink in Schools (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2021 (SSI 2021/481)

11:41

The Convener: Our third item of business is consideration of subordinate legislation: the Nutritional Requirements for Food and Drink in Schools (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2021. The committee first considered the regulations at its meeting on 26 January 2022, when we agreed to write to the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills for more information. The committee has received a response from the cabinet secretary, which is included in our meeting papers. Do members wish to make any comments?

Willie Rennie: It was helpful to have a response from the cabinet secretary. However, it begs further questions about the initial legislation and regulations. There are still many unanswered questions and we should continue to monitor the situation, but I am satisfied that we can proceed.

The Convener: We received a letter from the cabinet secretary in response to our letter, but it gave us no end date, no clarity on the conditions for lifting the regulations and, disappointingly, no record of how the regulations had been implemented since they were first enacted in December. The only assurance that we got was that officials were speaking to each other—we were looking for something more than that. Having said that, I agree with Willie Rennie.

Given that no further comments from members are forthcoming, does the committee agree that it does not wish to make any recommendations in relation to the instrument?

Members *indicated agreement.*

11:44

Meeting continued in private until 12:27.

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