



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Education, Children and Young People Committee

Wednesday 20 April 2022

Session 6



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Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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Wednesday 20 April 2022

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EDUCATION, CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE COMMITTEE
11th Meeting 2022, Session 6

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*Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)

*Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green)

*Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP)

*Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab)

*Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con)

*Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Andrea Bradley (Educational Institute of Scotland)

Mike Corbett (NASUWT)

Greg Dempster (Association of Headteachers and Deputies in Scotland)

Jim Thewliss (School Leaders Scotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Stephen Herbert

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

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

Wednesday 20 April 2022

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:37]

Interests

The Convener (Stephen Kerr): Good morning, and welcome to the 11th meeting of the Education, Children and Young People Committee in 2022. I give a very warm welcome to Ruth Maguire, who is joining us this morning for the first time as a member of the committee. I also welcome Graeme Dey, who has become a member of the committee after previously participating as a substitute member. Ruth and Graeme are replacing Fergus Ewing and James Dornan. On behalf of all committee members, I thank James and Fergus for their contribution to the work of the committee this session.

As Ruth Maguire is joining us for the first time today, our first item of business is an invitation for her to declare any relevant interests.

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): Thank you, convener. I am very much looking forward to contributing to the committee's important work. I have no relevant interests to declare at this time.

The Convener: Thank you very much.

**Scottish Attainment Challenge
Inquiry**

09:38

The Convener: The second item on our agenda is an evidence session for our Scottish attainment challenge inquiry, in which we will take evidence from representatives of the trade unions. I welcome Greg Dempster, general secretary of the Association of Headteachers and Deputies in Scotland; Andrea Bradley, assistant secretary, education and equality, at the Educational Institute of Scotland; and Mike Corbett, national official for Scotland at the NASUWT. They are all joining us remotely, so I have one eye on a monitor here. I will keep an eye on the chat function, and I will try to bring you in when you wish to contribute. I also welcome Jim Thewliss, the general secretary of school leavers Scotland, who is with us in the committee room. You are very welcome, Jim.

Jim Thewliss (School Leaders Scotland): I am from School Leaders Scotland rather than school leavers Scotland.

The Convener: What did I say?

Jim Thewliss: "School leavers Scotland". That is something altogether different.

The Convener: Did I? I stand corrected. It is School Leaders Scotland. Apologies.

Jim Thewliss: Thank you.

The Convener: Good morning to you all, and thank you for your time. Let me begin the questioning with a very simple question on the Scottish attainment challenge and the associated funds that flow with it. Has it worked?

Greg Dempster (Association of Headteachers and Deputies in Scotland): That is quite a big question to start off with. The objective of the Scottish attainment challenge, and the Government's overall objective, is to close the poverty-related attainment gap, but, plainly, that has not happened. If that is what you mean, then no, it has not achieved that objective.

However, we are not hugely far along the road of having the attainment challenge and pupil equity funding. In the main, our members welcome pupil equity funding and agree with its purpose, and we can see from the Audit Scotland report and other publications that progress is beginning to be made on that agenda. As always with these things, it is not quite as crisp and clear as yes or no.

The Convener: Andrea Bradley, is it working? Has it worked?

Andrea Bradley (Educational Institute of Scotland): As Greg Dempster has suggested, it is right and correct that the Scottish Government has the ambition that it has. There has been cross-party consensus on the objectives of the attainment challenge and they are shared by the EIS and its members. However, I think it is too soon to say whether it has worked, because it has to be a long-range, long-term endeavour. It is simply not possible to close the poverty-related attainment gap, with all the structural inequalities that we have, within such a short time.

As for the effectiveness of the initiatives that have been developed with Scottish attainment funding, I think that the jury is out. They have been effective in some areas but perhaps less so in other areas. Certainly, EIS members report a bit of a mixed picture in terms of the overall impact of Scottish attainment challenge funding and endeavour, including the pupil equity funding component. Some examples of very good practice have emerged, supported by the funding, but, in other places, more dubious or less reliable approaches are perhaps being adopted. What has probably been missing is a really effective way of evaluating impact across the short, medium and longer terms. We will have to think about that as we continue in this rightful endeavour.

At the moment, it is probably not realistic to ask, "Has it worked?" We can ask, "Has it been working?" and, "Have we seen any elements of success that we can build on?" The answer to those questions is yes. There is a lot to learn from what has been working. A lot of members think that a lot needs to be done to share among teachers the experiences of what has been working. We need to create opportunities for collaboration between teachers so that we can make further progress that is more universal.

There is an opportunity now in the fact that the framework has been adjusted to include all 32 local authorities. Originally, only nine local authorities were included in the attainment challenge, albeit that PEF money has been distributed to almost all schools over the past few years. With the new framing, there is an opportunity for us to do more and to do things differently. It is important that we seize that opportunity to the best of our ability.

The Convener: You raise a lot of good points that I am sure we will pursue during the next hour and a half or so.

In 2019, the EIS commissioned a survey of teachers, and apparently only 26 per cent of teachers thought that the attainment challenge funding and PEF were making any difference to the most deprived children and young people. Thirty-one per cent said that they had seen no difference, and 43 per cent said they did not know.

Three years later, does that still reflect the views of EIS members?

Andrea Bradley: We have not gone back to them recently with that question. We asked certain cohorts of our members about the impact of SAC more generally, and, from that series of questions, we got more of an insight into the strategic decisions that local authorities were making. It was more about what local authorities were doing at that level.

The data around PEF was concerning for us, as it seemed to point to the fact that many teachers were being left out of decision making at the school level about how PEF money should be spent. We see teachers as being the experts in assessing the needs of young people and knowing the kinds of intervention to put in place to support them. However, critically, across too many schools and local authority areas, teachers have not been involved in the decision-making processes around which young people will be included, the nature of the interventions, how those will be evaluated and how progress will be built on after an initial series of interventions.

When PEF money was first disbursed by the Scottish Government, we wrote guidance for our members about the importance of their being involved in decision making about it. However, the data suggests that we are not there yet in terms of the processes, structures and cultures around collegiate decision making on PEF. Where you actively seek to involve teacher expertise, you are likely to have stronger outcomes and teachers who are much more in the know about how the money is being spent and how effective that spending has been.

09:45

The Convener: Mike Corbett, I go back to my original question: is it working? Has the attainment challenge worked?

Mike Corbett (NASUWT): At a very simple level, for example, Professor Lindsay Paterson of the University of Edinburgh would say no because, as he rightly pointed out, Scotland raised low-status students less than was done in England and depressed the achievements of high-status students. Using that measure, perhaps the gap has narrowed, but not in the way that we want it to.

There is also a question about whether attainment is too narrow a focus. A lot of recent work on potential education reform talks about the focus on attainment perhaps taking away from looking at the four capacities of curriculum for excellence, including producing confident individuals and effective contributors. There is perhaps something in looking more broadly at

whether we are measuring the right things, in the first instance.

I do not think that there is any doubt that everyone around the table today will have examples of good practice. There are issues with teachers having time to share good practice where it has been evident and, to build on Andrea Bradley's point, time for them to get properly involved in planning, to engage properly with research and to reflect on what might or might not work properly. Various reports acknowledge that all of this touches on the fact that schools cannot be left on their own to sort out the poverty-related attainment gap. We do welcome the fact that recent reports have referred to collective agency and said that there has to be a multi-agency approach, but that in itself raises challenges about teachers having the time to engage with outside agencies. Teachers are undoubtedly the ones at the sharp end, and they have the best ideas, but they need the time to get their ideas acknowledged and to contribute.

The Convener: I will come back to something that you just said and get the response of the other panellists to it, but first I will give Jim Thewliss the opportunity to answer my original question: is it working?

Jim Thewliss: First, I make the point that you did not ask one question: you asked two, and their answers will be slightly different, so it is important that we recognise the difference in our answer. Is it working? Has it worked? They are not the same question.

Has it worked? No, it has not. I do not think that we have had the opportunity to see it through fully so that we can understand whether it has worked.

Is it working? Yes, I think that it is, but that answer is very much based on anecdotal evidence. We have been thrown sideways by what the virus has done to the school environment and ethos during the past two years. It is therefore important that we start to take a more coherent look at what has been done with restructuring, how funding will be taken into schools, how it will be used within schools and how the evaluation of its impact will be taken forward. It has been good and useful for schools, and it has had an impact on young people and young people's learning.

We now have to start to look at something more longitudinal to start to answer your second question about whether it has worked. We also have to be very clear in our understanding of what "Has it worked?" means. What does "working" mean? What were the intended outcomes?

We started off in all good faith, looking at young people's literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing. On two of those we have done well, because how we measure them and the structure

within which we do it already exist. I will come back to health and wellbeing in a moment, because we have not looked at it in the detail that perhaps we could have done. Given what the virus has done, we should now be looking at that in much more depth and more carefully, because it has a serious impact on all other aspects of learning and young people's development. That is something that requires a huge teasing out, and we need to start to look at it in such a way that we can understand processes as well as outcomes.

If we start to look at the question more longitudinally, we start to look at it in terms of how we use and understand the data that is there. We move away from the anecdotal to get some understanding of what is happening on the journey towards the desired outcome. We become much more refined in how we use the funding that is there and how we put processes that are based on data into schools. We have a clearer idea of what the outcome is and we can get closer to answering the question "Has it worked?" if we look at stuff that is more measurable in relation to the input and define the output on the basis of the process that takes us from input to output. We could have been much closer to answering the question of whether closing the attainment gap has worked, but the virus has not helped.

Having looked at what we have done and having identified the areas in which we could do better, the report that we have here and the structure going forward will be much more useful by enabling us to become clearer about what we see working and what is not working, what could be working better and, in relation to literacy, numeracy and, more importantly, health and wellbeing, starting to position the activities and the actions that we are taking to target what we want to have as an effective output.

I will stop at that.

The Convener: Jim, you have raised a lot of issues, and I know that my colleagues on the committee will want to come back to you on quite a few of them.

I want to refer back to what Mike Corbett said. He quoted Professor Lindsay Paterson in an article in *Tes Scotland* in which he said:

"Inequality also fell in England, mainly by raising the low-status students while also raising high-status students. Scotland raised low-status students by less and depressed high-status students. It would not be reasonable to describe this as better progress towards equality of outcome in Scotland than in England."

That was, I think, part of the quote that Mike Corbett was referring to. Mike also asked the question, "Is attainment too narrow a focus?" Jim, can you respond to the quote from Lindsay

Paterson and then answer the question that Mike Corbett asked? Is attainment too narrow a focus?

Jim Thewliss: I would suggest that attainment is too narrow a focus, yes, particularly when we start to look at health and wellbeing, how young people learn within the school environment and how they exist within the local environment outwith school. If we are going to start to engage, as I think we must, with the local community and its support for and input to school, to start to look at the holistic development of young people, the focus on attainment is too narrow. It is the easy one, and I suppose that, in starting this, you start with what is easy and doable. We are now starting to move into the more challenging areas, and it is right and proper that we start to understand just exactly how the three capacities in curriculum for excellence that we have not looked at can start to be unwound a bit in relation to the way that the school environment operates within the local circumstances in which it exists.

The Convener: Does Lindsay Paterson have a point?

Jim Thewliss: Lindsay Paterson does have a point, yes.

The Convener: Okay. Thank you. Andrea Bradley, can we have your comments?

Andrea Bradley: As Jim Thewliss has said, we would say that the focus on attainment is too narrow, particularly in the context of recovery. It just does not hit the nail on the head and say what is required to support the young people whose communities and families have been the hardest hit by the pandemic. It is misframed in terms of their needs at the moment, and arguably it always has been.

Even with the relatively narrow focus on attainment, health and wellbeing sit alongside it, but they have had less of an emphasis over the years compared with literacy and numeracy. Even within those already pretty narrow measures, there is a really narrow focus within literacy, for example, because the assessment of literacy does not take account of all the skills, knowledge and experiences that young people develop during their learning in literacy. Assessment focuses on a very narrow range.

Yes, we have had concerns about that. We think there should be a much more holistic approach. The sole focus on literacy and numeracy in attainment is the wrong way around for many young people, because they will learn best in subjects that maybe do not obviously have literacy and numeracy at the forefront of the learning experience, albeit that they are embedded within them. We have always been concerned about the framing.

The Convener: Andrea, I am sorry to interrupt you, but on Lindsay Paterson's comment, his comparative statement, that Scotland raised low-status students by less and depressed high-status students, does he have a point?

Andrea Bradley: I would like to see Lindsay Paterson's evidence for that. Certainly, our members are very much focused on the terms of the mission, which are to raise the attainment of all and reduce the poverty-related attainment gap—for us, that should be the achievement gap rather than the attainment gap—and I am not sure that there is evidence to suggest that there has been a depression of overall attainment as we have been working towards that particular endeavour.

The Convener: Okay. Lastly, before I turn to Kaukab Stewart, Greg Dempster, what is your response to the question that I asked and also to Lindsay Paterson's statement?

Greg Dempster: I agree with what Jim Thewliss and Andrea Bradley say about the focus. I am not sure what dataset Professor Paterson is referring to in his statement, so, like Andrea Bradley, I would want to see a little bit more about that.

The attainment challenge and pupil equity funding are a small part of the overall system, and they sit within a much wider spend on education. We often hear from members—and there is a tension point in this—that they are faced with reducing core budgets at the same time as having money in place for PEF and SAC, and perhaps that spend is guarding against a depression of outcomes for the disadvantaged pupils in a system that is seeing a reduction in overall spend.

The Convener: Thank you, Greg. We have heard lots of points and it is a fascinating discussion. I now turn to Kaukab Stewart.

10:00

Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): I want to look more specifically at how headteachers involve teachers, parents and pupils in deciding their priorities for allocating attainment challenge funding. I will start with Greg Dempster. Have headteachers had enough support or training from local authorities so that they are well informed and well equipped to make decisions about the additional funding that has been provided?

Greg Dempster: With local authorities, you are talking about 32 different varieties, so the experience in different parts of the country will be very different. I cannot give you a clear and researched response to your question, because we have not been asking members about such aspects for at least the period of the pandemic.

Although I cannot give you a full answer, I know that school leaders are always extremely pressed for time and extremely stretched with their workload, and any signposting of quality interventions that they can engage with their staff on and discuss whether they would be appropriate in their situation will always be welcome. Quite a lot of work was done at the start of the attainment challenge and when PEF became available to signpost resources in that respect. I know that Andrea Bradley has been looking much more closely at the school experience, so perhaps she can give you a little more on that.

Kaukab Stewart: Headteachers get promoted because they are teachers and because of their skills in being expert leaders of learning, but then they have to become financial wizards in making best use of funds and being accountable for sometimes vast amounts of money. That scrutiny and responsibility have to be supported. I suppose that what I am asking is whether they are getting enough support in that respect and whether that is the best use of their time.

You talked about additional support for teachers who are pressed for time. What would that support look like?

Greg Dempster: The lack of management time available in schools—and the lack of protected time for school leaders—is an issue that always comes to the fore in every workload survey that we carry out with our members. If you are being pulled away to give one-to-one support to individual pupils or cover classes, that will obviously swallow up time that could be used to consider more strategic interventions, to look at your school's data, to pinpoint areas for action and improvement or to examine research and evidence on what you might be able to do to address gaps.

Over the years, local authorities have reduced in a number of areas the management hours available in schools or the number of management posts, and that will clearly have a huge impact on the capacity to undertake the work that you are talking about. The lack of management time is a message that we constantly get from members, and it is clearly something that we would want to be addressed to enable school leaders to take things forward in their schools as effectively as possible.

Kaukab Stewart: My next question, which is in a similar vein, is for Andrea Bradley and Mike Corbett. Having worked extensively in schools, I know that we will want to ensure that money is used for additional staffing, because those staff will be in front of the children, and that contact between experts and children will help the children directly. However, I have seen evidence of additional funding being used to increase the

number of principal teachers. I therefore want to drill down into the issue of extra management time and the value of money being used for that instead of putting more experts in front of pupils and increasing contact between pupils and teachers, which I believe is a good way of increasing attainment and achievement. Andrea, do you have anything to say about that?

Andrea Bradley: In the research that we did in 2019, we asked members how they saw PEF money being spent, and the recruitment of additional principal teachers was certainly one of the actions suggested by quite a significant number. I suppose that the utility of that is dependent on what those teachers are doing. If they spend a considerable amount of time in the classroom but are also leading the professional learning in the school and the learning community on equity and the kinds of interventions that will make a difference, that is probably a good model. However, if their time is being spent solely on management and on strategic activities that are not making an impact at the classroom level, that is a model that we would consider as flawed. It very much comes down to the balance of time that those individuals are spending on things and what size and how realistic their remits are.

Greg Dempster's point about management time is absolutely crucial. People who are in strategic roles or who have leadership responsibilities for key initiatives in a school or learning community must have the time to be able to design those initiatives, collaborate with colleagues on them and work on their implementation. What happens quite often in education is that good, creative and thoughtful plans are devised but they lapse at the point of implementation because there has been no time for proper communication and collaboration among colleagues to allow the plans to be fully impactful. In that respect, we are talking not just about the number of principal teachers or the amount of management time that senior leaders have, but the number of teachers available to carry out the work and to make that difference in the classroom through close interactions with young people. We see class sizes as being absolutely crucial and fundamental to this endeavour of closing the poverty-related attainment gap.

Kaukab Stewart: Did you want to add anything, Mike?

Mike Corbett: Yes. I just want to mention a wee snapshot survey of members that we carried out in the past three weeks. I might refer to other results later, but I note that, when members were asked about effective solutions for tackling issues around the poverty-related attainment gap, their top four things were more support services for schools, such as child and adolescent mental health

services and educational psychologists; more support staff in the classroom; more teachers; and tackling parental unemployment. The issue here is what should be funded nationally and what should be funded locally, perhaps through pupil equity funding and Scottish attainment challenge money, because what comes much further down the list are things such as breakfast clubs, on which some of the money has been used—and used very effectively—in the past. It is worth considering how much of the funding via this initiative should be spent on, say, employing more teachers, teachers in promoted posts, and so on.

That said—and others have already touched on this—the evidence that we have of things working well is anecdotal, but I have seen some very good work on these issues in the local authority area of East Dunbartonshire, where I used to work. Some of the money was used for promoted principal teacher posts, which allowed some of those principal teachers to have the time to focus on smaller groups of children. It is all pretty complex, but I think that it would be helpful if some of the things that our members have highlighted were linked to national funding. With many other initiatives, the money might be better spent locally, and it is vital that we find out what they are and share that good practice.

Briefly, on the point about headteachers and how they involve staff, I have to say that it is a patchwork picture. Some are very good while others do not seem to involve their staff or pupils at all. Sometimes they are well intentioned and have good ideas but, again, classroom teachers need to be much more involved in the planning stage and decision making about how funding should be spent.

Kaukab Stewart: I want to finish off by bringing in Jim Thewliss. How can headteachers be supported in evaluating the effective use of the additional funding and empowered enough to stop doing the stuff that does not work, keep doing the stuff that does and consider doing different things, too?

Jim Thewliss: You would need to be a—*[Inaudible.]*—to answer that. *[Laughter.]* I will come back to your question in various ways, but I just want to touch on one or two points that have already been made.

What we are talking about is funded inequity and the delivery of equity at school level through a variety of strategies. Delivering equity in 32 local authorities will be impossible, because they are all starting off from different points. There are 32 different staffing formulas and 32 different funding formulas across Scotland, which means that the number of staff and the amount of cash that you will have to deliver any initiative will vary enormously, depending on where your school is

and which local authority area it is in. We have surveyed members on three separate occasions over the past 15 years, and the inequity is becoming worse. If this is about delivering equity within schools, can we start to look at something that is aligned with a basic minimum staffing and funding formula?

What we are actually discussing with regard to the paper before us this morning is additionality, which is what sits at the core of delivering equity. If there is a basic minimum that is then topped up and added to through whatever additional funding is given, we can start to look at something that enables and empowers schools to target resources and staff in a way that is appropriate to the local community and the needs of the young people within it.

As for the other parts of your question, I have to say that Greg Dempster and I will view these matters slightly differently, and it is important to point out that that reflects the different situation in the primary and secondary sectors. Since “A Teaching Profession for the 21st Century”, the secondary sector has had a reasonable experience of managing the funding that we have been given, and we are very much up for the whole notion of funding coming directly to and being used in schools.

On the issue of support, I hark back again to TP21. Every school was supposed to have a business manager. However, that has not been the case, and that comes back to what happened in local authorities and how money that was given at that point was not spent for that purpose. We are potentially in a significantly better position in relation to how funding is used in schools in that, for secondary schools, this is not as much of an admin issue as it is in primary schools—as long as the school has a trained and well-paid business manager. That is another issue, but it is important that we start to look at how we support young people in school through the allocation of staffing and funding resources.

As for decision making and empowerment, it is clear from this report and various other reports that have been published that decisions that are taken at the point of most impact will have the greatest impact. Schools know their local community, the young people who walk through the doors and their parental backgrounds. Indeed, Mike Corbett’s point about parental unemployment plays into this. We know our local environments, and we can reflect that in the decisions that we make at all levels. In the first instance, decisions must be based on the identification of clear outcomes. In other words, we should be asking ourselves, “Why are we doing this? Why are we spending this money? Why are we appointing this person into post?”

As for whether the money should be spent on somebody at the classroom level, I think that, by and large, it should be, because that is where you make the impact. However, if the decision is about appointing someone to, for example, a principal teacher post or a support position within the school and if those decisions are based on a need that has been identified and an outcome that has been clearly outlined at the start, you have, when it comes to accountability—this brings us back to the convener's first question about whether the Scottish attainment challenge is working—a better and clearer opportunity to provide an answer to that question that takes you away from the anecdotal. You can start to highlight the impact on young people's learning, their health and wellbeing, their social accountability, their interaction with their local community and the support that is being given to families in the local community. We need to empower schools to do that. If we start with an equitable playing field, we will have a better chance of answering the question "Has this worked?" at the end of all this.

10:15

Graeme Dey (Angus South) (SNP): The premise of PEF, as I recall it, was to empower headteachers and their staff because they are the best-placed individuals and groups to understand the needs of the school. I was therefore a bit concerned by Andrea Bradley's comments about teachers being left out of the decision-making process, but Mike Corbett's comments perhaps cleared that up. He said that there are some good examples of teaching staff being involved in the decision making and there are some examples of that not having happened. That has probably covered what I wanted to ask about at the outset, but I have a question about how PEF is deployed.

There have been a number of comments that have suggested that it is about who does what in a school and how they go about it, but some of the best examples of the use of PEF that I have come across have involved some more innovative things—for example, the appointment of truancy officers to visit families in a supportive way to understand better why children are not attending school. I have also seen secondary schools in clusters putting maths teachers into the primary schools because they have found that, on the maths front, the kids were not as well prepared as they should have been for going to secondary school.

Do you recognise that there is more to the use of PEF than simply the deployment of resources in individual schools? I direct that question to Greg Dempster in the first instance, and then Jim Thewliss.

Greg Dempster: Absolutely. Another example is the use of home-school link workers. There is a lot of work that is not simply about doing more of the same in schools. I agree entirely with you.

Jim Thewliss: In the report, I picked out the phrase "freedom within a framework", which reflects what you have said. It goes back to what I said in my previous comments about decisions being made at the local level and in a way that reflects the school background. You have picked up on one or two examples, and you are absolutely correct about how schools can respond to local needs.

One of the worrying things in the report concerns the notion of strategy and how it comes around. That touches on the collegiate aspect that we spoke about earlier. If strategy is driven from the ground up and local authorities look to support the strategies that schools are devising, we are in a much better place to enable and empower schools to respond to young people's needs in the ways that you suggest. The alternative is that strategy comes from local authorities down to schools, which then have to find their way through what the local authority expects of them.

Schools are more than happy to be held accountable for the strategies that they put in place if they are empowered to develop the strategies in the first place, as opposed to having them imposed on them within a local authority-wide structure.

Graeme Dey: In fairness, as I name-checked Andrea Bradley and Mike Corbett, I should give them the chance to comment.

Andrea Bradley: We have a lot of anecdotal evidence that schools are pooling resources and working within learning community structures to maximise the impact of their resources. Some schools have sizeable PEF budgets because of the number of young people in their pupil cohort who qualify for an allocation, but we have evidence that, instead of each school working with their smaller portion of resources, it has been decided at the school community level that the schools will pool their funding and share the resources that are purchased. That could be staffing or equipment. In one example, a school bus had been purchased and it was being shared across the school communities to enable young people in the community to get the benefit of outdoor trips, residentials and so on. There is good evidence of schools taking a collegiate and community approach to maximise the impact of the funding.

Mike Corbett: I will touch on Graeme Dey's example of the funding of a truancy officer. Some research that came out last month, which was done by the University of Strathclyde with the

Poverty Alliance, the General Teaching Council for Scotland and the Economic and Social Research Council, reinforced that overall absences are negatively associated with academic achievement. To me, that use of funding is ideal in that we have some research evidence to inform what can then be good practice and good use of the money.

The Child Poverty Action Group has focused on the cost of the school day and the fact that a lot of kids miss out on things because they do not have the funds for school trips, non-uniform days and so on. A teacher who responded to our survey last week said that their school has had cost of the school day training, which has had a big impact on how they deliver things because they no longer ask pupils to bring money to school. No contributions are sought for non-uniform days and there is a reduction in the number of sponsored events throughout the year.

There is good practice out there in a variety of ways, but it is crucial that teachers and schools have time to share that good practice in order to inform their planning. That should lead to better outcomes in the end.

Graeme Dey: My other question is directed to Greg Dempster and Jim Thewliss. The EIS survey report mentions some instances where it was felt that PEF had been used—contrary to the guidance—to plug gaps that had arisen from cuts to more general budgets. Is that still being seen?

I came across an example where a local authority was halfway through a training programme for the entire teaching staff in its employment when PEF came along. It was suggested to the headteachers in the remaining schools that had not yet had the course that they could use PEF to pay for it, in order to avoid the local authority having to meet the cost. Are such things still going on or is the approach settling down?

Greg Dempster: We are still seeing that. The difficulty is that there is no baseline that says, “Here is the money that schools already have and here is their PEF, which is additional.” When the funding in a school or an authority goes down, some of the PEF might not really be additional, depending on our definition of that. It might be used to prevent a reduction in staffing or in what is offered in the school. A school that is to lose a couple of support staff because of a change in funding or policy in the authority might use PEF to retain those staff because it knows that it needs them to make a difference and that losing them would have a negative impact.

Similarly, provision to address additional support needs or behavioural issues is sometimes supported through PEF. Those children might not be receiving free school meals because the

resource to support them is not otherwise there. That does still happen.

Jim Thewliss: I will not repeat what Greg Dempster has said, but the answer is yes. That still happens in schools. It is not nearly as blatant as it was in the early stages, when a number of local authorities were held to account by the cabinet secretary for the way that they were starting to do things, but it is there, it is hidden and it is systemic. The reason why it is systemic is that local authorities can hide it within what they are doing.

I am not suggesting for a minute that we should do away with the level of governance that sits between the Scottish Government and schools. Empowerment is not about that. However, empowerment should be based on local authorities acting as agencies to support schools and enable them to spend the available funding and use the available staffing in the best possible way. Funding should be used at the school level to buy into the services that are required at the local authority level. That is an entirely different ethos from local authorities filtering the fund before it gets to the school level, as they do at the moment, and deciding that they will take forward in certain ways initiatives that they feel to be to the benefit of schools.

The EIS survey report has covered that on numerous occasions. It is about the ethos. We need to look at that and consider how the layer of governance that sits between the Scottish Government and schools can function and operate as an agency to support schools, rather than being a filter.

The Convener: Greg Dempster has a further comment.

Greg Dempster: I do not disagree with what Jim Thewliss has said, but I want to qualify it to a degree. We survey our members annually in our workload survey, and one thing that we ask them is whether they feel that they have an appropriate degree of autonomy in relation to PEF and SAC funding. The vast majority say that they do. Most school leaders do not feel that they are being directed on that spend. However, there are times—this addresses Mr Dey’s point—when they choose to spend that money on items that have been cut by the local authority. I hope that that clarifies the point.

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): Following on from Graeme Dey’s line of questioning, I think that the obvious thing to say is that there is a gap because schools are not always properly funded. I would not want to defend attainment funding being spent on other things, but schools that I see locally do not always have a choice. Keeping staff on is a priority for

headteachers. Do you agree with that, Mr Dempster?

Greg Dempster: In part, yes. In the period since the turn of the year, absence levels in schools have been enormous. If a school has a PEF teacher—let us call them that for simplicity—who supports different initiatives but it has a lot of other staff absent, it is not going to send kids home. It is going to use that teacher to maintain them within the school. Particularly over this last period, a lot of the resource will have been used to keep the show on the road, in effect.

Oliver Mundell: My main line of questioning goes back to Jim Thewliss's point that there are 32 different models across the country. I am particularly concerned about schools in rural areas, where the same suite of options is often not available to headteachers or even to local authorities. Do you recognise that that is a challenge, given that there are not the same third-sector providers or opportunities on schools' doorsteps and that smaller schools often have smaller PEF budgets and therefore less flexibility?

Jim Thewliss: We know that staffing in rural schools is a challenge per se. However, the point about the cost of the school day and the rural poverty that is attached to it is well made. It comes back to the flexibility and the use of additionality in funding within the school sector.

We need to look in more detail at the whole notion of rural poverty. Lots of it is hidden, misunderstood and not addressed, and young people miss out on opportunities through no fault of their own simply because of the rurality of where they live and the ethos in that environment. That is not picked up particularly well in the report. I have noted that bits and pieces of refinement are needed, and that is definitely one of them.

10:30

Oliver Mundell: Do the other witnesses recognise that? If a headteacher has a small PEF budget but there are only limited resources to tap into in the immediate community, does that prevent the policy from working as well as it might?

Greg Dempster: There are a couple of aspects, as Jim Thewliss said. There is the rurality aspect and the size of the budget. When PEF came out, we argued for the ability for schools to think strategically over a longer period, which would enable those with small funds to roll two years of PEF together to enable them to purchase an intervention in the second year. That is a possible solution for those with small funds.

However, I hear from members in rural areas—in the wilds of Dumfries and Galloway, in

Aberdeenshire and in the islands—that they may have a reasonable level of funding and they may have identified that they want an intervention such as a play therapist, but they cannot get it for love nor money because the resource is not available in their area. There is a rurality dimension and there is a challenge for schools with smaller PEF allocations to do with what impact they can make in one year.

Andrea Bradley: What Mr Mundell describes is another facet of the dichotomy of SAC funding. On the one hand, it is very welcome, of course. Additional funding for schools to help to address the impact of poverty is absolutely welcome, but having it in lieu of sufficient core funding that takes account of the circumstances of schools, including their rurality, is a problem. It is a problem when schools have it in lieu of sufficient global funding that takes account of the geographical context, the numbers of children with additional support needs and so on. Because we have PEF in some ways, although not entirely, as an “instead of”, we encounter difficulties along the lines that Mr Mundell described.

In many cases, the cost of interventions will be higher in rural areas. Using the same formula to direct funding to children in rural areas may be inherently flawed, because it does not take account of the additional costs of services, people or even travel if a school wants to take young people into learning experiences in environments outwith their communities. There are additional costs that may not be considered in addressing the impact of poverty in rural areas. That might be something for future funding formulas to factor in.

Mike Corbett: I do not want to repeat what others have said, but the issue touches on a point that came up in a previous meeting of the committee when you discussed the digital divide. The new way of working perhaps opens up for some rural schools at least the possibility of remote access to some services and advice, but the committee has heard in evidence that there have been huge problems with network connections and access to remote learning. The same applies, perhaps, when you are trying to access experts remotely. That point about the digital divide is reinforced by what you suggested, Mr Mundell.

Oliver Mundell: Thank you. That is all very helpful. I want to ask about the small group of schools—it has become smaller again—that do not receive any PEF money at all. When I look at the list, I am not convinced that no young people at those schools would be in poverty. I wonder whether the policy can be fully effective when some headteachers and some schools—many of which are small, rural schools—receive no PEF

money at all. I guess that Greg Dempster or Jim Thewliss would be best placed to respond.

Jim Thewliss: It comes back to my earlier point—which Andrea Bradley also mentioned—about the base funding and level of support through teaching staff in schools that is available across the country. If we are to look at additionality, your point about our needing to become a wee bit more sophisticated in how we devise the level of additionality that goes into schools is something that we can look at now, moving on from where we are. We are in a better place than we were five years or so ago—we have learned an awful lot about that.

This morning's discussion is very much related to taking that on to the next stage. If the next stage looks at additionality and at a more sophisticated way of identifying the level of additionality that comes to schools, bearing in mind the discussion that we have just had, that will help. However, the notion of basic staffing formulas and basic minimum funding is fundamental if we are going to deliver equity in relation to the level of deprivation that exists in individual schools.

Greg Dempster: I agree with everything that Jim Thewliss has just said. The free meal entitlement is the mechanism for distributing PEF. That becomes less and less usable as more and more of primary schools receive universal free meals, which means that there is not the same information on claimants. Therefore, even if we accept that distribution on the basis of free meals is correct—I do not think that any of us would say that that is perfect, but it is the mechanism that we have—the information is becoming less accurate as time goes by.

Oliver Mundell: I will ask one last question. Do you think that using low-income households as the criteria for distributing funding—the Scottish Government uses that approach in other policies now—would be a potential replacement? That certainly appears to pick up more poverty in rural areas. I see that Andrea Bradley is nodding.

Greg Dempster: I see that my microphone is still on, so I will briefly chip in on that first, if that is okay. A lot of work is being done to look at what the best mechanism would be for distributing the funds. That goes right through the education system to looking at widening access to tertiary education and what mechanisms should be used to identify the poverty-related group that we are trying to tackle.

It seems as though none of the mechanisms are perfect; all of them have different shortcomings. Free school meals were probably the best proxy that we had at the outset of PEF. However, that is becoming less likely to be the best proxy. I am not sure exactly what other mechanisms you were

referring to—it might be the Scottish index of multiple deprivation or something else—but I think that the mechanism needs to be re-examined.

Changing things would create problems, because you would be talking about a transition from one mechanism for identifying who gets a finite pot of resource to another, and schools have been promised long-term stability in the funding that they currently receive. It might not be possible to deliver that immediately unless it was accompanied by a further injection of resource so that those schools that have already started their planning based on the money they were expecting would not see that disappear when they have committed to staffing, contracts and so on.

Andrea Bradley: I took from Mr Mundell's question that he was concerned about some young people in schools being excluded from the PEF allocation. We would not be looking at anything that would result in any detriment for other schools, school communities and the young people in them. There are more sophisticated measures that we could look to use, aside from free school meals and SIMD, both of which we know are a bit shaky.

We have repeatedly suggested that to the Scottish Government over the years, but there seems to have been difficulty in data being shared by the United Kingdom Government, which has information about family income levels, with the Scottish Government and local authorities.

The triangulation has not been in place that would be required to get measures that are more closely linked to family incomes. We know that poverty is about insufficient levels of family income, but there could be measures that more accurately reflect need, leading to larger numbers of young people being entitled to allocations of PEF money. That could be a solution to what you are describing in some of those rural communities.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): I want to look at evaluation of PEF. I was struck by something that Jim Thewliss said at the start about the longitudinal study in relation to the impact of PEF over a number of years. I have raised that at committee before, and the convener mentioned it this morning. I will give two encouraging statistics. This year, there were record high positive destinations for pupils from secondary schools, which is quite outstanding, given everything that we have been through with Covid. The hard work for that will have been done this year, but a lot of the work to get young people ready for the wider world and the world of work will have been done in previous years. We are told that we are not very good at measuring that.

Also, in the two years before lockdown, literacy went up 3.1 per cent and numeracy went up 2.7

per cent. That is a two-year snapshot in time. There is need for longer-term research and evaluation. I am interested in hearing briefly—more briefly than my question, perhaps—from Jim Thewliss about what such research might look like: should it follow a cohort of students over their school career? I would like to hear a little bit more about that because, if we are to make recommendations on that area for the longer term, we would like to better understand what a robust research process would look like.

Jim Thewliss: There are two parts to the answer to that question. It would be useful to have a longitudinal study following a cohort of young people. That would give some understanding of the process of funding being targeted at need. We must also start to look at the strategies that are being put into schools, let them run and support them over a long period to get an understanding of what works well, what could work better and what does not work. That will give a level of confidence to the schools that, if we start a strategy, we will not bail out of it because the funding is not there, and that we are obliged to track it all the way through and look at how it is operating and perhaps not operating quite as well as expected. That has two streams to it. One is to follow a cohort of young people and the other is to follow the processes to see how they are evolving and being supportive.

Bob Doris: Convener, that is something that we can consider as a committee. Thank you for that, Jim.

The more that I think about evaluation in the short term, the clearer it is that you must embed evaluation in the planning process from day 1. Much of the chat this morning has been about what that planning process should look like and how teachers, carers, parents and the wider community should be involved. I note that the refresh of the attainment challenge was announced in November 2021, with associated documents being published in March this year. That guidance is pretty explicit about the things that should happen in the planning process. It goes as far as to talk about carrying out a participatory budgeting process, meaning that everyone, including the wider community, would have their say.

I am unsure whether that already happened in some areas or whether that will now happen more consistently across the country. If we are planning for next term, that planning should already have started. As I said, the revised guidance came out in March. When do our witnesses think that schools will be able to take account of and put into practice the refreshed guidance? Maybe Greg Dempster could start off the reply to that.

10:45

Greg Dempster: You have hit the nail on the head with your analysis. The guidance was too late in many cases to influence planning for the period that we are now in, so that will happen for some next year. However, I think that you would see the spirit and nature of the guidance represented in a lot of the work that was already on-going. Again, that would depend on the levels of PEF that are available and whether programmes that had been agreed a number of years ago were carrying on. In those cases, things might not be revisited. However, we would hope to see the guidance being used uniformly next year.

Bob Doris: That is helpful. From the perspective of an employee or a classroom teacher—of course, you are an educationist, Mr Dempster—what do the unions think about that planning process and the new guidance? Andrea Bradley, have there been any discussions so far at a local authority level with the EIS, for example, about how, through the refreshed guidance, teachers could be engaged more in the planning process?

Andrea Bradley: The new framework was launched on 30 March, I think. The school holidays were hot on the heels of that, so there has been virtually no time for any discussion at local authority level about that, and, indeed, there has been no time for the EIS committees to consider the refreshed guidance and to put out guidance to members and so on about what they should be looking to get out of any engagement around that. That is definitely something that we intend to do.

On the point about participatory budgeting, we know from our members' research that some school communities have adopted that model and that that seems to have been pretty impactful. It is good to see that that will be the basis of the development of the next phase of the SAC programme.

Greg Dempster is absolutely right about timescales. SAC is new to 23 local authorities and all their staff, so quite a sizeable piece of work must be done around professional learning. So far, that has been missing. That maybe goes back to some of the points that were raised earlier in the discussion about how headteachers have felt supported in handling PEF and how they have been able to work with the teachers in their schools on that.

A big piece of work around professional learning needs to be considered in that regard. The feedback that I gave on behalf of EIS to the civil servants who were developing the framework included the need to have much more about teachers and their involvement in SAC and PEF,

with more provision made for them to understand what that is all about, reflect on what it means, talk to and collaborate with colleagues, and then do the professional learning piece around the processes. There is a gap that will have to be quickly considered and provision will need to be put in place if, as Greg Dempster has suggested, the system is to be ready next year and that we can take the ball and run with it.

Bob Doris: That is very helpful. Of course, the nine authorities that were already attainment challenge local authorities will have developed expertise, which I hope can be shared across local authorities. I absolutely take on board the point that was made about the guidance having just come out and that we are at the exam diets, particularly for secondary schools. Mike Corbett, when do you anticipate those conversations happening at the school level? Will there be a couple of in-service days before the summer break or early in August?

Secondly, if sizeable decisions are being made at the moment—there might not be—in how the funds should be spent, would it be better to have interim provision for the next few months, say to Christmas, so that there is time to engage with teachers and to allow for a more fundamental, effective and systematic roll-out of PEF funding that engages fully with teachers, parents and carers? Would it make sense to have those conversations as soon as possible and maybe hold off some of the decisions on how the money is spent to get it right, rather than rush to spend the money for August?

Mike Corbett: First, I remind everyone that we are still in a pandemic. We had record staff absence levels just last term, as well as many absent pupils, so many staff are not in a position right now to engage with the issue.

Having said that, I really do not think that it is reasonable for that to happen this term. It is more of a medium-term plan. We should try to work in mechanisms that already exist in schools where there is discussion about school improvement plans and working time agreements. The discussion about the new process could perhaps become a part of that. Such discussions, which involve planning over the coming year, tend to happen in this coming term. I think it unlikely that that will happen right now, so an interim approach might be useful.

I have a couple of other quick things to touch on. I will build on Andrea Bradley's point about professional learning. In the snapshot survey that I mentioned earlier, 72 per cent of our members who responded said that they had not received any training on how to support pupils with poverty-related issues. Perhaps it is important to make that

point before we get into making decisions about how the funding is used.

Bob Doris: With the indulgence of the convener, I have been given permission for a brief final question. I thought it very helpful that the revised guidance says that a report should be given to parent councils at the end of each year so that it is clear what PEF has or has not achieved in that academic year. That report would also be part of the process of refreshing and changing the approach each year. I will bring in Greg Dempster for this final question. Has some of that been happening already? Is there an annual trawl of parent councils about that direct engagement? Is the approach just affirming good practice, or is it patchwork across the country? I also see that Mr Thewliss would like to come in on that—I am sure he will do so very briefly, of course—with the indulgence of the convener.

Greg Dempster: I am sure that there will be mixed practice on that point, so I think that it would be about affirming best practice, as you say.

Jim Thewliss: I will try to be brief. Your original point was about how much of that is going on in schools. In some areas, it is happening; in most areas, it is not.

I come back to the whole notion of how that report sits and the way in which it is taken forward. I will mention one or two things in that regard. At the moment, schools will be involved in their improvement planning review and taking forward improvement planning for next year. It is impossible to separate recovery from where schools are within that process, and that will sit in school improvement planning. That is not to suggest for a moment that everything else gets ignored—everything else gets taken forward in the context of recovery within a school improvement plan. We start to look at what is outlined in the report and how it is suggested that things are taken forward.

There are one or two quite useful tools in the process to enable schools to start to meld that into where they are, given their position now and the recovery process that they are going through. The whole notion of having stretch aims—those are agreed with the local community and various agencies in the community, not just with the local authority people—is very useful in taking schools from where they are in the process to another place and moving forward from there.

The three-year funding element is absolutely fundamental to the way in which the approach is taken forward. The insistence on the notion of collegiality has been picked up in several contexts earlier on. I suggest that the level of collegiality at school level is significantly greater than the level of collegiality between schools and local authorities.

That needs to be worked on. However, the whole notion of having a logic model, and the various iterations of that model included in the approach, gives a focus and a structure to take that forward.

To answer your question, we have to start somewhere and at some time. We are at that point now, and it will be for schools and local authorities to find their way through and into the process, based on the tools and the structures that are there. There are three key aspects that we cannot move away from, which will always be there, and that we will not get to if we do not address them in the first instance.

One aspect is that we need to have significant culture change in some schools and local authorities. We have to become more attuned to understanding the barriers that there are. Why is poverty making learning difficult for young people? We must become more clever. We have touched on but not really gone into—you mentioned it earlier—the whole notion of the use of data, and how we use that to make decisions and monitor the decisions that are being made in relation to the outcomes that we want.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): I will stick with the point about evaluation. I am interested in examples of local good practice. This morning, a number of anecdotal examples have been given of good practice in deploying the funds, but I am interested in whether any of the witnesses are aware of schools, clusters, local authorities or even regional improvement collaboratives that are already doing a really good job of local evaluation. It would be of considerable interest to the committee if you could point us towards examples of successful evaluation in practice. I ask Jim Thewliss to answer first.

Jim Thewliss: As we have said, there are anecdotal examples of what is going on in schools. If the committee is interested—as I assume it is—in picking up on those examples, I am more than happy to provide examples of monitoring, tracking, target setting and how we support young people in the home environment. I am more than happy to engage with the committee on that through my professional association, and I imagine that my three colleagues will be in exactly the same position.

Ross Greer: Thank you very much. We would certainly be very grateful for that. Would any of the other witnesses like to provide any specific examples?

Andrea Bradley: I cannot really account for the efficacy of the various modes of evaluation that have been cited. To some extent, they vary according to the interventions that have been put in place. Our members have reported using established quality assurance processes, some of

which have a particular focus on equity. They have talked about tests changing and about tracking specific pupils, as Jim Thewliss mentioned, which involves using systems that enable us to drill down to relevant individual qualitative data, attendance figures and benchmarking assessments for literacy and numeracy—that might be done at the beginning, the midway point and the end of certain interventions relating to literacy and numeracy. In some cases, Scottish national standardised assessments data is used to evaluate the efficacy of the various interventions that have been put in place. Professional learning input from teachers, and possibly from headteachers, is also required.

In relation to evaluation measurement, we need to be careful that we do not go for easily measurable interventions and approaches at the expense of ones that are more complex, with the outcomes being harder to measure. I think that that was touched on earlier. If we look to do things that are easily measurable, rather than doing things that will be impactful in the longer term, there is a danger of simplicity and reductionism. The EIS has given that message consistently with regard to the attainment challenge, PEF spending and so on.

We would also like the voices of teachers—qualitative data in addition to quantitative data—to feature in evaluation, whether that be in the short, medium or long term. That should also feature in longitudinal evidence gathering, which we have talked about.

Ross Greer: You again mentioned what you said at the start of the meeting about the difference between attainment and achievement, and about ensuring that we get the wider measures of achievement right. My question is similar to the one that I asked a moment ago. Are you aware of any local authorities that are taking that more rounded, achievement-based approach, or is the picture still pretty consistent across the country, in so far as we are consistently being too narrow by looking just at attainment?

Andrea Bradley: I am not aware of individual local authorities having made specific strategic decisions in that regard, but, again, I know from anecdotal evidence that good things are happening. For example, in some school communities, measures of participation are being used. It is not just about young people's attendance at school; it is about how they interact with their peers, with the learning experiences that are designed for them and so on. However, I do not have hard and fast examples from individual local authority areas—I am sorry.

11:00

Ross Greer: Thank you very much. Before I bring in Mr Corbett, I point out that he was my English teacher—I do not think that I mentioned that at the previous committee meeting—so if any colleagues have complaints about my approach to Scottish education, they can take that up with him after the meeting. [*Laughter.*]

Mike Corbett: Thank you for that. I emphasise much of what Andrea Bradley said about what we are measuring. As has been pointed out, the focus on attainment is too narrow. The focus should be broadened, but it can be very difficult to measure some things. For example, we are rightly focusing on the four capacities of curriculum for excellence, but how do you measure whether a child has become a more effective contributor? It is very difficult to do that, so that needs to be borne in mind.

Another issue is whether we are gathering enough of the right data in the first place. I am aware that, at a recent meeting of the cross-party group on challenging racial and religious prejudice, the point was made that simply not enough data is currently being collected on some groups, particularly black and Afro-Caribbean pupils. We also need to bear that in mind. We need to collect the right data across all areas. The focus should not be on the most easily measurable data; we should look at the broader themes.

Ross Greer: I have one final question, which is a bit of a two-parter. I go back to Bob Doris's line of questioning about the new guidance around annual reporting to parent councils, but also to his questions around longitudinal studies, which I think are very important.

On one level, I think that it is a very good idea to make sure that there is a clear expectation of local accountability through, for example, those annual reports. However, there is a bit of me that is concerned that that then creates an expectation that we can and should be able to measure the impact of some of this stuff within a year, whereas we have spent quite a lot of this morning talking about the fact that, whether over a year or even an entire parliamentary session, we cannot close the poverty-related attainment gap in such a short period of time.

I am interested in your reflections on how we get that balance right between making sure that there is robust local accountability and not creating unrealistic expectations, whether among parents or at local authority level or, indeed, at the parliamentary or national level.

I am most interested in your thoughts on where responsibility for longitudinal studies should lie. Is that something that schools, clusters, local

authorities or RICs should be doing, or should it be done nationally by Education Scotland, or even directly by the Government? Where is the most appropriate place for longitudinal evaluation to be organised? We will start with Jim Thewliss.

Jim Thewliss: The answer to the first question, on reporting to parent councils, is a wee bit more easy. We have to be careful to use some of the structures and systems that are already in schools. The school has an existing relationship with its parent council, and that reporting and level of discussion on what the school will do and has been doing and achieving in a much more fine-grained way already happens in schools. To formalise things a wee bit is only to the good.

However, to put this in a different context, I think that we have to look at the education reform agenda and Professor Ken Muir's report and to consider how that all sits in relation to what we do in terms of attainment, achievement and the assessment and evaluation of progress and young people's school experience.

If we start to align the national agencies with the level of discussion and thinking that we have had this morning, we will have a much greater chance of things operating in an air of mutuality. They will be nested and aligned, so that we will not have a report for the parent council, a report for the local authority, a report for the inspectors, if they come along, and a report for the Scottish Government. A huge opportunity exists—it sits outwith the context of this specific discussion—for the way in which we review and evaluate all aspects of progress within Scottish education. It would be absolutely negligent of us all if we were to miss that opportunity, bearing in mind what is said in Professor Muir's report.

Ross Greer: On the second question about responsibility for longitudinal work, we could do a national study and Education Scotland could be responsible for that, but are there levels beneath that where you think that such a study would be appropriate?

Jim Thewliss: I am sorry—I missed answering that. We should work with what is already there. Local authorities have quality assurance processes that are well used and which everybody understands. The report says that we should not give the system more work to do in producing more reports; we should use what is in the system now to make sure that the information goes in the correct way to the correct people so that we start to make policy decisions that are more meaningful.

Part of our discussion this morning has been about what the next stage is. We should have information that is useful not only in the context of supporting young people's learning but in the

wider context of supporting what happens at school level, local authority level and national level. Let us start to align the system as opposed to reporting in different chunks at different times to different people. We are much better at that than we were in the past, but the reform report gives us a much clearer opportunity to take it forward now.

Ross Greer: Thank you very much. That was really useful.

I believe that Greg Dempster is looking to come in.

Greg Dempster: Jim Thewliss's point about having the different parts of reporting nested and aligned is extremely important; otherwise, you could create a bureaucratic nightmare for school leaders around producing reports for multiple different bodies. That point is very important.

You asked about a longitudinal study. Clearly, there is a role at the national level, whether for Education Scotland or for the inspectorate, to take a longitudinal approach. That is relevant to the systematic design or evolution of the attainment challenge and the PEF approach. As Jim Thewliss said, there are tried and tested quality improvement systems in schools and local authorities that should take a longitudinal approach, which should inform that study. There are things within the attainment challenge that are a little bit problematic in that regard: the repeated determination that we should be accelerating progress and the language around reporting success of interventions.

I think that there needs to be more of a black-box approach whereby we accept where we are. We want to get back on the track of an improving picture, which is where we were starting to get to. However, not every intervention will be successful, and there needs to be a climate in which people can say, "We tried that and it did not work for us." That is as valuable to be shared as a success.

Ross Greer: Thank you very much. Andrea Bradley and Mike Corbett want to come in. I am conscious that I am probably eating into colleagues' time, though, so, if you do not mind, I ask you to be brief in your responses.

Andrea Bradley: I will try to be very quick. I think that you had three questions. The first one was about the behaviours that might be encouraged by expectations around annual reporting, and that year-on-year success will be reported. There needs to be realism around that, as that is not how it will look. This will not be linear progress, particularly not when we take into account the wider societal factors that impact on young people's lives—schools and so on. We have just had two years of a pandemic that has really derailed so much of the trajectory towards more equitable outcomes.

I absolutely agree with colleagues that whatever reporting mechanisms are put in place need to be bureaucracy light, otherwise we will take valuable resources away from the very young people we are trying to help and support. That is absolutely crucial.

Longitudinal evidence gathering, data and evaluation could sit, as Greg Dempster suggested, with the agency that will replace Education Scotland—possibly the inspectorate; I do not know. It depends how that evolves and how the inspection regime evolves—I am not sure that the culture would be quite right for such work. Alternatively, we could look to establish independent academic research over a long period of time to look objectively across a range of evidence bases and to report to all the actors who are part of this endeavour, not solely the Scottish Government.

Mike Corbett: I will be brief. On the parent council reports, let us focus on activities undertaken rather than get bound up with the percentages who have passed Scottish national standardised assessments and so on. I absolutely agree about avoiding bureaucracy, but we also need to avoid that just-in-case culture that has developed too often, particularly around inspections, with people saying that they need to do something "just in case". There is a danger that that will come in here, with people saying, "We need this additional bureaucracy just in case someone asks us how we have spent the money and we need to justify ourselves." That touches on Greg Dempster's point. We need to allow people the confidence to make mistakes—to have well-intentioned, well-researched ideas that maybe in practice just do not work in the end. Let us have some openness and honesty about that so that we do not have a just-in-case culture.

Absolutely, let us have some external independent research as part of this, as long as it is not too bureaucratic. Like others, I certainly would not be rushing to give the work to Education Scotland or the current inspection regime. We need to see what the newer regimes look like before we can be confident in saying that we trust them with that work.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): I want to get your views on the shift away from an approach involving challenge authority areas, where poverty is deepest, to one involving the more general allocation of funding across Scotland. That change is already having significant and difficult consequences for some of the previous challenge authorities. In my view, it is also a significant departure from what was a settled Scottish understanding of the particular challenges of communities that face severe multiple deprivation. Can you explain the

rationales you understand for this departure from a focus on the deepest poverty?

Andrea Bradley: From the early beginnings of the attainment challenge, the EIS had some issues with the way that funding was being distributed. We understand and agree that school communities that experience higher rates of poverty and higher levels of the associated deprivations require additional funding, but we thought that organising the funding in such a blunt way in the first instance was problematic because it supposed that poverty did not exist in other parts of Scotland. We know that it exists in every local authority area and every school community, so we feel that it is quite right that there has been a reframing of the attainment challenge to take greater account of that.

That is a good thing about the approach, but I have to say that we have been absolutely appalled at the levels of funding cuts to six of the original challenge authorities. It beggars belief. We do not understand why those cuts would be made at a time when we know that poverty levels are rising, when the pandemic has absolutely bludgeoned some communities and we know that individual families and the young people within those families are struggling as a result of Covid.

The Scottish Poverty and Inequality Commission has reported that the Scottish Government is in danger of missing its interim child poverty targets and the 2030 child poverty targets, so we do not see that cuts in communities that have disproportionately high levels of poverty and deprivation make any sense whatsoever.

We agree that the money should be distributed across all 32 local authorities, but we do not see that that should be at the expense of budgets that were being disbursed to authorities that were originally considered to be in high need of additional support. That is a part of it that has really vexed our members and that we have discussed a lot with Scottish Government and civil servants.

Michael Marra: What has the response to that been? What rationale for that have you been given? I share the concerns of your members about the cuts for the poorest people in some of the poorest communities in the country. What has the justification been? I have not heard one.

Andrea Bradley: It has been simply that there is a fixed amount of money and, in order to make that money go across all 32 local authorities, some will have to take a hit, basically. Some of those local authorities will experience a significant cut. For example, over four years, Clackmannanshire will have a 62 per cent funding cut over four years; Dundee 74 per cent; East Ayrshire 61 per cent; and Inverclyde 78 per cent. Glasgow has the least

sizable cut, at 10 per cent, but there are many communities in Glasgow where more than one in two children are living in poverty. To us, the new arrangements for the attainment challenge funding are problematic.

11:15

Michael Marra: Greg Dempster, we have talked a lot about additionality but, for many in the poorest communities, these cuts are very serious. In your discussions with Government, have you had a better and a more comprehensible justification for this action?

Greg Dempster: No. I think that Andrea Bradley has rehearsed all of the issues quite fully. I think that the argument has been that there needs to be a more structured approach to supporting the use of the attainment challenge across the 32 authorities.

On one hand, you have smoothing of PEF allocations whereby schools would not have been given any more than a 10 per cent cut to their resource if there has been a change in the demographic within their school, but there is not a similar smoothing with the attainment challenge funding, so there is quite a difference in approach there.

Michael Marra: Mr Thewliss, you were a headteacher in Dundee for many years—20 years at Harris academy, I believe—and you well know the local authority area and the challenges that it has. From my figures, there is a 79 per cent cut for Dundee, which affects about 100 staff across its schools. Can you imagine how Dundee will cope with that?

Jim Thewliss: I agree entirely with everything that Andrea Bradley and Greg Dempster have said. To answer your question directly, no.

Michael Marra: There is a significant context for Dundee pupils. Having that on the record from Mr Thewliss, with his experience in Dundee, is very important.

Mike Corbett, could you give us your reflections on the same, please?

Mike Corbett: Very simply, it is absolutely right in principle to broaden the approach, for reasons including rural poverty, which was touched on earlier, but I cannot fathom why there has not been some effort to have some transitional funding or transitional arrangement for the nine challenge authorities. It is clearly not right to be making those swingeing cuts that you are talking about. That will certainly have a negative impact in those areas.

Michael Marra: If I can come on to the issue of additionally—

The Convener: I think that Ruth Maguire wanted to come in on that.

Michael Marra: Please do, Ruth.

Ruth Maguire: Just while we are on that refreshed approach, I would say that I think that all of us would recognise that there is poverty everywhere. Certainly, Oliver Mundell made some good points about poverty being in rural areas and not just in urban areas, but the timing of the change is hugely difficult for the nine challenge authorities. I think it is widely acknowledged that the areas of greater deprivation have been affected the most by the pandemic and its impacts.

I should declare an interest in that my local authority is one of the areas that was a challenge authority, and it made excellent progress. We have spoken a bit about evidence of improvement. Education Scotland's 2021 report about the Scottish attainment challenge said that, in North Ayrshire, the attainment in literacy and numeracy between 2016 and 2019 had improved for learners at all stages and, in addition, the pace of improvement of literacy had been faster for children and young people living in the most deprived areas. Clearly, the work that was being done was helping.

If we are operating within a fixed budget and we acknowledge that there is poverty everywhere, is there any evidence that you could hear or any situation that you could see that would change your position that it should go to all 32 authorities? If there is evidence that the improvements decrease, for example, should the approach be changed back and the money targeted to the areas of greatest need? How do we deal with this hugely difficult decision?

Andrea Bradley: I think that you might be suggesting that, where there has been variability in terms of the impact of the funding, there should almost be penalties applied or—

Ruth Maguire: No, I am not suggesting that for a second; I am simply acknowledging that there is poverty everywhere and that there is a fixed budget. I am saying that, from my perspective, I see evidence that that targeted assistance to my area, which was in great need, has made improvements. If we found that, down the line, spreading the money across the whole country was having an impact on those improvements or had resulted in the money not having a great impact, would that change your thinking around whether the support should be targeted or universal? That was my question.

Andrea Bradley: What I was trying to say earlier is that I think there has to be sufficient global funding of education and of all of the things that are necessary for all young people to have a

good experience at school, regardless of their particular needs or socioeconomic backgrounds. There will be some additionality required over and above that, given the levels of poverty that there are currently in Scotland and more widely in the UK.

We absolutely need more funding to go to all areas. What we would suggest is that it should not be done first and foremost through the attainment challenge. Rather, it should be done through core national funding to all schools and school communities via local authorities, with some kind of additional package, perhaps like SAC, to provide a targeted focus on top of that. At the moment, the problem is that the core budgets are insufficient.

I agree that the money should go to all 32 local authorities. We argued that from the outset. We think that that is a positive development in the reframing of all of this, but it is just difficult to see how we will get back on track with progress by taking away huge swathes of funding from those areas where poverty has been a longstanding issue. We see a conflict in that regard, and it may be that the approach is undermining what is a good rethink of how the money should be shared across all 32 local authorities. However, we would argue that additional funding could and should have been found to avoid cuts to those areas in the first place.

Jim Thewliss: Notwithstanding the point that Andrea Bradley made about basic core funding, which I am totally aligned with, when we looked at attainment challenge funding in the first place, it was directed towards deprivation and the nine areas of deprivation were picked up there.

We should know—the Government statisticians will know—the number of young people who are impacted by deprivation within those nine areas. We have had a discussion around how we define deprivation, but let us take it that there is a definition there. It is a reasonably straightforward statistician's exercise to look at how much core funding per capita was allocated across those nine areas and reallocate that per capita into the other remaining areas. I know that there is a financial aspect to this, but in terms of equity and fairness to the young people who are in the areas who have been supported in a certain way, it is surely immoral to take away that funding. We should allocate the money on a per capita basis across all the areas, working out how much was allocated per capita to the nine areas in the first place.

Mike Corbett: If we step back from the funding, which we have been talking mainly about today, and we go back to those points from our members that I mentioned earlier about the need for more support staff, more teachers and more support services in schools to tackle issues around

parental unemployment, we can see that those are all national issues that need to be addressed by improvements and increases in national budgets. They are not just for education, because, as we have said, it is not only down to schools to have the ability to narrow the poverty-related attainment gap. That is vitally important and we cannot forget about that.

As has been mentioned, the other point is about perhaps using better measures to target the funding. That is important. I understand the point that, if the funding seems to be working better in one area than in another, you might would look to switch that focus somewhere down the line. However, that gets away from what I was talking about earlier around the idea of giving confidence to staff to try things and suggest things with the best intentions and without feeling that they will get penalised if one of their ideas does not work. I think that we have to be cautious.

Ruth Maguire: Thanks to everyone for those answers, they were helpful. I feel that I should be really clear: I was not for a second suggesting removing funding where things work; I was suggesting that funding should remain where it has been shown to work. That was my point. I would also say that I totally agree with Mike Corbett about teachers and schools being given the space to try things and to fail, because we know there is learning in that, too, so it is important to have opportunity and space to do those things.

The Convener: I think that it was Greg Dempster who mentioned the black box, and he wants to answer your question.

Greg Dempster: Very briefly. You will not get any of us defending the withdrawal of resource from different local authority areas. It is not something that we would support, because we would all be looking for greater investment in education across the board, so you would not expect us to say any of that. The bulk of the attainment challenge funding is now PEF, and PEF is distributed on the basis of free school meals, so you would expect that it follows that the authorities that you have referenced would be getting a much higher share than other authorities. On the face of it, that would seem to be a more equitable way of distributing the money. However, that does not overcome the fact that it was distributed in a different way and that there has been a cliff edge for these authorities.

Michael Marra: I want to focus a little on issues of additionality, with particular reference to the pandemic. Witnesses earlier questioned a quote from Professor Paterson and what dataset that referred to. It referred to the 2018 Programme for International Student Assessment data regarding the decline in more affluent pupils' attainment. We

know that things have become worse since then, because of the Covid pandemic. We have touched on additionality, cuts to council budgets, cuts to parts of the education budget and backfilling. Mr Thewliss gave examples of that.

I am particularly concerned about whether we are backfilling the impact of the pandemic now. We know that things have become worse. We also know from the Audit Scotland report that progress had been limited before the pandemic, with £1 billion of Scottish taxpayers' money rightly being spent on the activity, but with limited progress. Need has increased, but where do we find ourselves now? Are the measures to cope with the impact of the pandemic that are being taken by the Scottish Government sufficient? As far as I can see, this is it: the Scottish attainment challenge process is the allocation of resource. I will start again with Andrea Bradley.

Andrea Bradley: In a word, no—we do not think that the plans that are being put in place for recovery are realistic or ambitious enough, given the impacts of the pandemic. Even pre-pandemic we did not think—as I have said a few times this morning—that the SAC would be the solution to reducing the poverty-related attainment gap.

We need significantly greater overall funding in education to enable class-size reduction, so that teachers can work more closely with individual children and with small groups of children and do things that are really creative and in the spirit of CFE.

11:30

We need more specialist additional support needs provision in classrooms. We need that provision to be on hand in schools so that it can be deployed to classrooms, as well as teachers having additional knowledge and understanding of additional support needs. We also need on hand the range of external agencies that can support young people who have additional needs—CAMHS, speech and language therapists and educational psychologists. Sadly, in spite of there being significantly increased numbers of young people with additional support needs in recent years, we have seen cuts and cuts and cuts to those services year after year after year.

We need teachers to have additional non-class contact time in order that they can think, reflect, collaborate, talk about what works and what does not work, and build strategies to make the improvements and provide the support that young people so desperately need. Such time is all the more important because of the shocks of the pandemic and because of what is needed for recovery.

It seems to us to be basic, but there is a big gap in the Scottish Government's free school meals policy. It currently includes young people from primary 1 to primary 5. There will be a delay in its being rolled out to P6 and P7, and young people in secondary schools are completely missing from it. There are things that need to be done urgently now to make sure that all children and young people are not hungry at school and have absolutely stigma-free access to food. That seems to us to be a really basic and obvious thing to do, given the economic, financial and social impacts of the pandemic.

We also now have the spectre of the cost of living crisis looming. There are so many more practical things that could and should be done in the interests of recovery that should be the foundations upon which things like the SAC and PEF are built, which on their own are too shaky.

Michael Marra: Mr Thewliss, do we risk being here in a few years, looking back on the reshaped programme for the Scottish attainment challenge and closing the attainment gap and saying that that might have been adequate pre-pandemic but post-pandemic it was not fit for purpose?

Jim Thewliss: I am not sure that the programme is not fit for purpose, but we could have made it better in relation to how it could impact on young people, their learning and their health and wellbeing. The structure that we have is for attainment challenge funding structure and PEF; they are what the system is accustomed to working with. I have made the point on several occasions this morning that we could do much more up front, in the context of the school environment and how funding is allocated and how schools are empowered to use it.

The discussion that we have had over the past 10 minutes or so has been about how sharing out between 32 local authorities what was intended for nine could and should have been done much more equitably. That could have been done as a per capita allocation that was targeted at need. It would have required more funding; as all four of us have said, there should have been more funding. A much better way would have been to ally PEF to that and have it applied at school level, with schools being given the decision, within local authorities' strategic planning, to look at how they address need. In that environment, headteachers and school staff know best.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I know that time is marching on.

I have a flavour of it, but I want to really understand what life is like in the classroom just now. We have heard about the various pressures. The question is for Andrea Bradley, in particular. We are just coming out of the pandemic—some

people say that we are still in it—and there are significant mental health problems. There is pressure to perform on attainment and closing the attainment gap. I speak to many teachers, but I want to hear from you what life is like in the classroom.

Andrea Bradley: We have gathered information from our members recently about that. We have heard quite a lot of anecdotal evidence that young people are struggling with socialisation. They have difficulties in concentrating for sustained periods, difficulties listening to peers, teachers and support staff, and difficulties in verbally communicating. There is also increased distraction from mobile phones and digital devices.

There seems to be less resilience among young people and an increased number of behaviour concerns. What is particularly alarming is the number of very young children who are exhibiting challenging behaviour—very young children who have made the transition from early years provision to primary 1. A number of violent incidents have been reported as a result of distressed behaviour in very young children.

As Willie Rennie suggested, the mental health crisis is growing from what it was pre-pandemic. That will have been, to some extent, the result of bereavement. Thousands of young people will have experienced bereavement over the past two years and we know that a disproportionate number of them are in communities where levels of poverty are high.

Of course, we have also had, among senior-phase students, the anxiety of having to prepare for an exam diet at the same time as coping with all or many of the things that I have outlined that have been generally experienced by young people in schools.

In addition to teachers struggling to maintain education continuity while handling all the mitigations that have been in place in schools, they are daily seeing intensification of need among their young people. Teachers have been contending with and trying to juggle a huge amount over the past two years.

It seems that there has not been a firm enough grasp of that among decision makers, who have often sought to keep the attainment drive narrative going with all the business-as-usual processes and demands. That way of working is unsustainable; there has to be acknowledgement of the need for recovery for all. Recovery must include teachers, because they are absolutely critical to the on-going and longer-term recovery of our children and young people and of our education system in its entirety.

Willie Rennie: You have highlighted that there seems not to be a grasp of the competing

pressures. Where is that coming from? Is it the councils? Is it the Government? Why do they not get it?

Andrea Bradley: That has been the case in various organisations at different times. For example, towards the end of the autumn term in 2021, there was an announcement that Education Scotland would resume scrutiny activities—it seemed to be completely cut off and remote from the reality in schools. To its credit, it did an about-turn, probably because of protestations by us and others about the inappropriateness of that.

The Scottish Government maintained its expectation that young people would complete national standardised assessments in the midst of it all. We have continuing collection of data on achievement of CFE levels, and we had the decision to go ahead with an exam diet early in the academic session, when we did not really have the full picture of what Covid was going to do. We could have guessed what Covid might do over the course of this academic session.

Full account was not taken of the recovery principles that the Scottish Government and Education Scotland co-authored, with input from others, about the primacy of health and wellbeing, coming out of the pandemic. There seems to have been a lot of collision of policy priorities and a lot of inconsistency in messages about what is important and what should be less important at this time.

Willie Rennie: What do you think that the consequences of that will be in the long and the short term?

Andrea Bradley: I think that to fail to take proper cognisance of the impact of the pandemic on children and young people, their families and their communities, and on wider society and the professionals who work with young people, will be a huge error of judgment. We all have to understand the magnitude of what has happened to Scotland and to the world over the past few years and to understand that even just fixing the damage that has been done by that will take a lot of creativity, collaboration and additional resource.

Prior to the onset of the pandemic, we were trying to emerge from more than a decade of austerity, which had battered school communities, children and young people and their families. We had not even recovered from that decade-long period of austerity when the pandemic came along and dealt a further few—well, more than a few—additional hefty blows. People must not fail to understand that. We need not only to get back to where we were pre-pandemic, but to do better than get back to where we were pre-pandemic.

We must think differently, work differently and resource differently if we are to make a longer-

term difference. If we do not do that, we will see all the impacts of poverty. We know about the health inequalities that emerge, which emerge not only later in life but during childhood, and the inequalities that exist in relation to criminal justice, longer-term employment and housing. We will continue to see all those things unless we properly equip the education service to do its part in addressing poverty and do all the other things that need to be done in other parts of society to more decisively tackle poverty at source.

Willie Rennie: I do not want to focus only on you, Andrea—maybe the others will come in a second—but I know that you have focused on this area. Do you think that a rush to get back to the way things were might result in longer-term mental health problems, unemployment and criminal activities? We know that a whole range of issues come from the attainment gap, and the gap between the wealthy and the less wealthy. Do you think that the situation will get worse if we rush to get back to normal in the way that you have described?

Andrea Bradley: If we rush and simply look to do a quick repair job rather than full restoration, we will not sort out the longer-term problems. Even if we get relatively short-term gains in attainment in school across a narrow range of measures, that will not do what we need it to do on the eradication of poverty. That, too, would be tinkering at the edges, albeit that we would make things better in some ways for a cohort of young people.

As we come out of the pandemic, we must take the opportunity to reframe and rethink so many aspects of our society. If we are genuinely committed to equality and social justice and so on, that has to be worked on across a range of policy domains. I know that employment is reserved, but employment, housing, transport, social security, education and social services are all facets of our public service that play their part in that endeavour.

Willie Rennie: I am finished, unless any other members of the panel want to come in.

Mike Corbett: I reinforce some of those points. Our members are saying that they have had a massive increase in workload to keep the system going. As has been touched on, there has been a huge increase in pupils with behavioural issues that teachers are having to deal with. Andrea Bradley touched on the mental health crisis. That is undoubtedly informed by trauma in many pupils, but the same applies to teachers. There is a desire, which is perhaps understandable, to somehow get back to normal, but there is no normal any more. There seems to be a lack of recognition of where teachers are at the moment.

11:45

That manifested itself in 67 per cent of our members saying, in a survey back in January, that they had considered leaving the profession in the previous 12 months. What we are facing is a looming recruitment and retention crisis. Given that there will be no recovery without teachers, all those matters need to be addressed in the ways that were touched on earlier. If we want to help pupils by working with them individually or in small groups, we need more teachers. We need teachers to not be worked so hard, to not have so many classes and to have classes with fewer pupils in them. All the points that were made earlier are absolutely vital. That gets us back to the point about overall national funding, which is currently inadequate if we want to get where we need to be.

Greg Dempster: I would like to add a little to the points that Andrea Bradley made. Mr Rennie, you asked about the reality in school at the moment, and I would agree with everything that Andrea Bradley said. I am hearing about the intensification of need that she talked about, particularly from those who have nursery classes or nursery schools. They are seeing a big increase in dysregulated behaviours, which I presume will progress into and through primary schools. We need to keep an eye on that, and there might be a need for further investment there.

Another reality in schools at the moment, which would lead me to say that we are still in the pandemic—you said that some say that we are still in it and some say that we are coming out of it—is the huge amount of staff absence that there has been, which in turn has swallowed up huge amounts of school leadership time in covering classes. That is a real impact for our members.

To add to the implications that Andrea Bradley mentioned, surveys of our members suggest to me that the desirability of school leadership roles is waning quite significantly. There have already been problems with recruitment into headships, particularly in some areas, but across the board there is an issue with recruiting heads in the primary sector in particular. We asked members who are depute heads to respond to the statement, “I am a depute headteacher and I am keen to become a headteacher,” and 18 per cent of those who responded were positive. To me, that would be an implication. The first time we did the survey was in 2016, when 35.7 per cent were positive. That represents a significant drop-off over time.

Jim Thewliss: Notwithstanding the points that my colleagues have made, all of which I align myself with and am attuned with, I have one or two points to make in relation to Mr Rennie’s question. The first one is in relation to what school is like

now. Over the course of the past 18 months or so, an effort has been made to keep schools open, for all the very varied reasons for which schools have been kept open. We have understood the need to do that and that is what we have done. The level of pressure that school leaders have been under to do that has been well detailed by my colleagues.

When it comes to moving forward, I have already said that it is very important—especially in the context of our duty of care to young people and their future development—not to separate recovery from improvement. Recovery needs to happen on account of what we have gone through, but we have an obligation to young people in school as regards improvement at any point in time. That said, there will be a cost to pay in the future in relation to physical and mental health and wellbeing as a result of what we have experienced. There will be a cost to pay in the future—perhaps in the very near future—in relation to the cost of living and the real-time increase in poverty that young people are experiencing.

We need to be very astute in the decision-making process that we are going through and very conscious of the fact that although the pandemic may be over, life will not be the same and life chances for young people will be very challenging. In the decisions that we make now, account must be taken of what life is like for the staff in schools, of the level of pressure that they have had to put up with over the course of the past two years and of the cost that will have to be paid in relation to that in the future.

In the context of the reform agenda, it is important that we start to look at better and different ways of working, a different ethos in schools and a different relationship with our school communities. There is an opportunity there. As I said earlier, it is very important that we do not miss that opportunity.

The Convener: Thank you. That brings to an end the first part of our meeting. I thank Greg Dempster, Andrea Bradley, Mike Corbett and Jim Thewliss for joining us and giving us the benefit of their evidence. I wish you all a good morning.

We will have a short suspension to allow the witnesses to leave before moving on to agenda item 3.

11:50

Meeting suspended.

11:53

On resuming—

British Sign Language Bill

The Convener: Welcome back. Our next item of business is consideration of legislative consent memorandum LCM-S6-17, on the British Sign Language Bill, which is UK Parliament legislation. The bill recognises British Sign Language as a language of England, Wales and Scotland, places a duty on the secretary of state to report on the promotion and facilitation of the use of BSL by ministerial Government departments and places a duty on the secretary of state to issue guidance on the general promotion and facilitation of BSL.

The entirety of the bill extends to Scotland. Clauses 1, 2 and 3 all relate to the reserved matter of equal opportunities but fall within one of the exceptions to that reservation. As such, each of those provisions relates to matters that the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish ministers have competence for.

The Scottish Government recommends consent because, although the Scottish Parliament has passed the British Sign Language (Scotland) Act 2015 and has established a precedent of support for the promotion of BSL, the bill will additionally recognise in statute BSL as a language of Scotland. Furthermore, the Scottish Government has stated that

“the Bill will be beneficial to Scotland’s BSL communities, as it will promote the use of BSL in Scotland, particularly in relation to reserved functions.”

The committee considered its approach to scrutiny of the LCM at its meeting on 30 March and agreed to write to the Scottish Government to seek an update on progress since the introduction of the 2015 act. The response from the Minister for Children and Young People is included in members’ papers. The minister has stated:

“A significant part of the Act is delivered through the British Sign Language National Plan 2017-2023 ... A new National Plan will be published and implemented following the conclusion of the current plan at the end of 2023”.

Do members have any comments?

I am very enthusiastic about the fact that Scotland has played a leading role in terms of the 2015 act, and I think that that is a point of progress that should be noted and commented on. The fact that the UK Parliament’s legislation will establish BSL as a language of Scotland is very much to be welcomed. I think that we are all in agreement.

Are members content that a short report be prepared by the clerks and signed off by myself and the deputy convener?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: Ideally, the report should be published by the end of this week.

Is the committee minded to recommend in its report that the Parliament agree to a legislative consent motion in the terms outlined in the LCM?

Members indicated agreement.

Subordinate Legislation

Police Act 1997 and the Protection of Vulnerable Groups (Scotland) Act 2007 (Fees) (Coronavirus) Amendment Regulations 2022 (SSI 2022/97)

11:55

The Convener: The next item of business is consideration of two pieces of subordinate legislation under the negative procedure. The first instrument to be considered is the Police Act 1997 and the Protection of Vulnerable Groups (Scotland) Act 2007 (Fees) (Coronavirus) Amendment Regulations 2022. Do members have any comments on the instrument?

As members have no comments on the instrument, does the committee agree that it does not wish to make any recommendations in relation to it?

Members indicated agreement.

Teachers’ Pension Scheme (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2022 (SSI 2022/102)

The Convener: The next instrument for consideration is the Teachers’ Pension Scheme (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2022. Do members have any comments on the instrument?

As members have no comments on the instrument, does the committee agree that it does not wish to make any recommendations in relation to it?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: The public part of today’s meeting is now at an end.

11:57

Meeting continued in private until 12:21.

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