



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Education, Children and Young People Committee

Wednesday 17 January 2024

Session 6



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

© Parliamentary copyright. Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body

Information on the Scottish Parliament's copyright policy can be found on the website - www.parliament.scot or by contacting Public Information on 0131 348 5000

Wednesday 17 January 2024

CONTENTS

Col.

BUDGET SCRUTINY 2024-25 AND EDUCATION REFORM..... 1

EDUCATION, CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE COMMITTEE

2nd Meeting 2024, Session 6

CONVENER

*Sue Webber (Lothian) (Con)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)

*Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab)

*Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green)

*Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con)

*Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)

*Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)

*Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD)

*Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Sam Anson (Scottish Government)

Jenny Gilruth (Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills)

Stuart Greig (Scottish Government)

Clare Hicks (Scottish Government)

Andrew Watson (Scottish Government)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Pauline McIntyre

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Education, Children and Young People Committee

Wednesday 17 January 2024

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:01]

Budget Scrutiny 2024-25 and Education Reform

The Convener (Sue Webber): Good morning, and welcome to the second meeting in 2024 of the Education, Children and Young People Committee. Agenda item 1 is an evidence session with the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills on the budget for 2024-25 and on education reform. It is a pleasure to have you back, cabinet secretary. Alongside the cabinet secretary, from the Scottish Government, are Andrew Watson, director for children and families; Sam Anson, deputy director, workforce, infrastructure and digital; and Stuart Greig, head of the reform division. We welcome you all and thank you for your time.

Before we move to questions from members, I invite the cabinet secretary to make a brief opening statement on the budget for 2024-25. You have up to three minutes.

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): Happy new year to you, convener, and to the committee. Thank you for the invitation to speak about the education and skills budget. As members know, the overall context for the budget has been extremely challenging, as high inflation continues to place extreme pressure on public finances. That is on top of more than a decade of United Kingdom Government underinvestment, which has left our public services with little resilience.

In my portfolio and across the wider Scottish Government, we have had to take decisions to protect priorities that are aligned with our three missions of equality, opportunity and community while ensuring financial sustainability. Against that challenging backdrop, I am pleased that the education and skills budget has increased in resource by £128 million, or 4.3 per cent. The combined capital and resource budget has increased by almost £121 million—that is 3.4 per cent—in cash terms.

We continue to invest in high-quality funded early learning and childcare and wider family support. Overall, the Government will invest £1 billion in high-quality funded ELC next year. We remain committed to keeping the Promise to

Scotland's care-experienced children and young people, and we will continue our delivery of the whole family wellbeing programme.

We are fully funding our commitment to pay £12 an hour to staff in the private, voluntary and independent sectors who deliver ELC and children's social care. We are investing more than £387 million in our teaching workforce. That includes £145 million to maintain teacher numbers, as well as £242 million as part of the teachers' pay settlement, which is making Scottish teachers the best paid in the UK.

In addition, we have our investment of £1 billion in the Scottish attainment challenge over the parliamentary session to support closing the poverty-related attainment gap. We also remain committed to supporting a high-quality post-school education, research and skills system, with more than £2.4 billion of investment.

That is not to diminish the extremely challenging backdrop to the budget. Like every cabinet secretary, I have had to prioritise legal and contractual obligations in determining how to deploy the budget.

Throughout the budget process, I have deliberately sought to protect those who are most disadvantaged. An example of that is the Scottish Government's commitment to supporting families with the provision of free school meals at this time of financial uncertainty. We are starting the expansion of our offer to those who receive Scottish child payment this year, and budget has been provided for the infrastructure that is needed for delivery.

Similarly, we will make capital investment of £10 million in targeted device and connectivity provision for our most disadvantaged households with children. That will bring a range of benefits for families who are struggling with the cost of living crisis while tackling digital exclusion among our most deprived learners. That approach will enable access not only to digital tools and resources for learning but to digital society and online public services, which will expand the investment's impact beyond learners to their wider families.

This budget protects education spending throughout the lifetime of a child's education, despite the headwinds of decisions that have been taken by the UK Government. Scotland is the only part of the UK to offer 1,140 hours of early learning and childcare for all three and four-year-olds, and for all eligible two-year-olds, regardless of their parents' working status. That puts children first.

We have the highest level of spending per pupil in the UK, with the highest number of teachers per pupil. All primary school pupils in primaries 1 to 5,

all children in special schools, and eligible pupils in primary 6 through to secondary 6 can benefit from free school meals in Scotland. That is the most generous national offer of any nation in the UK, saving families, on average, £400 per child per year. Those who need the greatest support will receive it, including through our investment of £1 billion over this parliamentary session to close the poverty-related attainment gap.

Following on from that, we are taking action to support our colleges, universities and skills system with more than £2.4 billion of investment. For those who wish to move into higher education, our long-standing commitment to free tuition remains unwavering, saving students in Scotland nearly £28,000 each and ensuring that the ability to learn is not predicated on the ability to pay.

I will finish there, but I very much look forward to discussing the budget settlement in more detail with you this morning.

The Convener: Thank you, cabinet secretary. I am sure that all the topics that you mentioned will be brought up as we progress through this session. We will kick off with questions from Michelle Thomson.

Michelle Thomson (Falkirk East) (SNP): Good morning, cabinet secretary. I thank the rest of the panel for attending as well.

Before other members come in on the budget, I want to discuss briefly public sector reform, which was trailed extensively, although the budget does not contain any specific plans for how that will happen. I appreciate that the issue is complex and challenging, and that real costs are associated. I understand that the approach thus far is for some 129 agencies to look at where they could make improvements. Arguably, that is like asking turkeys to vote for Christmas. I therefore want to explore with you, from the perspective of your portfolio, your understanding of the approach that is being taken. Is it top down or will it work in alignment with your education reform programme—in which case, how will you dovetail that programme, which is extensive enough, with the wider public sector reform?

Jenny Gilruth: Michelle Thomson has raised a hugely important point, particularly in the light of the challenges that the Government faces—which are well known to the committee—in relation to the Deputy First Minister's update to Parliament at the end of last year. My portfolio is not insulated from those challenges.

We have worked hard to protect the education budget as best we can. My understanding of the public sector reform that is needed is that all organisations need to play a role—that all our public sector bodies will have to play their part. We need to take a nuanced approach to that, mindful

of the fact that that will be easier for some public bodies than for others, given the services that they deliver. I am acutely mindful of that, given some of my responsibilities to those organisations—for example, our qualifications organisation—and the services that they deliver.

Michelle Thomson touched on education reform. Following discussion of the budget, we will go on to a session on that very issue. I am mindful of the need to support education reform, which is why the budget contains additionality—of just over £12 million, I think—to support the reform process. However, I accept that we will need to work very carefully with those organisations.

At the end of last year, the Deputy First Minister set out that there will be a 10-year plan and that we will look across Government to reduce spend—to be blunt—and to see where there are efficiencies to be made across the piece. All organisations will have to be part of that drive, but, to refer to Michelle Thomson's specific point, we will have to take a nuanced approach. The way in which the budget has been delivered takes such an approach. It protects certain services, such as health and education, through the three-missions approach. I will seek to do that through reforming the public bodies in the education and skills portfolio while remembering the impact that education can have. It is not just about the spend in relation to education itself; it is also about preventative spend, which can benefit other portfolio areas.

Michelle Thomson: I have a couple of follow-on questions. Purely in terms of delivery, if the deadline was 10 years hence and there were no electoral cycles, the approach that one would choose to adopt—and public pressure—might be different to what they will be given intervening events such as elections. How will you square the nuanced approach and the pressure that there will be for demonstrable delivery, cabinet secretary? People will be crying out for real, evident change but with a nuanced approach against a 10-year delivery plan. Perhaps you can reflect on some of the complexities that you see in that.

Jenny Gilruth: I cannot get rid of electoral cycles—fortunately, because we do not have a dictatorship, which is a good thing. However, we need to be pragmatic, and that is a political challenge for all parties—not least my own, which is in government, but for the Government of the day in 10 years' time, too. We all need to be mindful that the trajectory that a Scottish Government operates on means that we have to operate with a balanced budget. We need a forecast of the savings that need to be taken across Government.

The member makes specific points about education. The Deputy First Minister is going to

set out more detail of that at stage 1 of the budget process, but I am more than happy to hear members' suggestions in relation to how that should operate. As the cabinet secretary responsible for education, my personal view is that we need to protect the education budget as best we can. The budget settlement has done that, but we need to be mindful of the fact that investment in education is not just about my portfolio area. Throughout the budget process, every cabinet secretary is keen to make those points.

I believe that an investment in education is a preventative investment that can help to alleviate pressures in other portfolio areas. That needs to be better understood through the public service reform agenda, recognising that taking investment away from certain parts of my portfolio might have unintended consequences for other parts of Government.

The invest-to-save option, which the DFM is also pursuing, gives us an opportunity to do things radically differently in education. On the reform agenda—again, we will talk about this later—Mr Dey was at committee last week talking about some of his work. There is much more opportunity for us, in education, to take a holistic approach to reform that will help to drive efficiencies but also help to improve outcomes for our young people.

Michelle Thomson: Thank you for that. You are right that we will come on to talk about the reform agenda.

I will follow on from that. In terms of a “lean” to the budget, a specific public sector pay policy has not been published. How will you support agencies that are struggling to set budgets and, as I commented earlier, where there is a real cost to the savings that they need to make? What is your role in supporting them—without the framing of a public sector pay policy?

Jenny Gilruth: I do not think that, at this time in the financial year, in budgets of the past, we would usually have published our public sector pay policy. However, I recognise the need to work with those agencies and organisations. We did so last year and we have done so in previous years. This time last year, I would have been in front of the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee to talk about some of the challenges that we were facing in relation to ScotRail. We worked with ScotRail around the confines of public sector pay for that organisation in setting its approach to resolving a pay dispute at the time.

We will continue to work with the organisations that we support, but, to be blunt, there is significant financial pressure on this year's budget—a financial pressure that I do not think the Government has ever faced—which has been compounded by inflationary pressures. We all—

including our public bodies—need to be mindful of that with regard to what that will mean for the offers that they are able to make this year in relation to public sector pay. However, I do not want to say too much on public sector pay policy, because that is outwith my remit.

Michelle Thomson: Absolutely—fair dos.

I want to explore that a bit more. I absolutely agree with you about the constraints on pay and the difficulty of the budget, but how specifically will you be able to support agencies in squaring that circle—to use a horrible analogy? They will be required to deliver to budget—exactly as the Scottish Government is required to do—and to make those changes at the same time and manage the very real issues that they have with the cost base. My question is really about how you see your role in supporting agencies with those conflicting demands.

Jenny Gilruth: It is quite a general question. I gave the specific example of transport as an area that came to mind in which I played a role in Government in bringing about a resolution to a dispute. We worked with ScotRail at the time to bring about that result.

My view, as cabinet secretary, is very much that we will support those agencies in trying to square what I recognise will be a hugely challenging financial settlement for them. It is a hugely challenging settlement for Government, too, which has meant that I have had to make some pretty tough and not particularly nice choices in relation to the prioritisation of the budget. I am not sure that, in an ideal world, any cabinet secretary would want to make such choices, and I am sure that members around the table will sit in other committees and hear cabinet secretaries say something similar. However, I think that, through this budget, we have been able to best protect education.

09:15

I recognise the point that the member makes, and I will continue to work with those organisations in supporting them to bring about resolutions. We do not yet have a public sector pay position, and I do not want to prejudge the outcome of that. Nevertheless, any cabinet secretary would tell you—I will say the same, from my experience—that it is hugely important that we work with those organisations to bring about resolutions and to ensure that they can deliver reform, which we will talk about later. To some extent, that will give us an opportunity to make some of the efficiencies that public service reform requests that the Government deliver.

The Convener: As you will know, cabinet secretary, last week we had before us one of your

ministers, the Minister for Higher and Further Education. The part of the budget that we were discussing at that meeting set out a cut in the resource budget for further and higher education. Last year, those budgets faced in-year cuts. Last week, the minister could not, when he was asked about it, rule out that happening again for the coming year. What can you say about whether further in-year cuts may be likely to happen in 2024-25?

Jenny Gilruth: Over the weekend, I listened back to my minister's contribution to the committee, and I think that he set out a pretty pragmatic approach in relation to where we are at the current time.

As the committee will be aware, when I was appointed, back in March 2023, I inherited a teachers' pay deal that required to be funded from my portfolio. I therefore had to make a number of really tough choices pretty quickly to fund that pay deal. The committee will, I am sure, go on to talk about the detail of some of those budget lines.

In November this year, the Deputy First Minister published details of where those reductions had come from. To be blunt, those in-year savings had to be delivered in order to balance my budget and pay for a teachers' pay deal that had been negotiated prior to my time in post.

Those requirements for in-year savings have been baked into the settlement for this year's financial allocation. I recognise the challenge in that regard, and I am sure that we will come on to talk about that specifically in relation to this budget line.

The allocations for colleges, in particular, will, for the next financial year, look broadly similar to those that colleges have experienced in the past financial year. I accept that there will be challenges in that respect—as we have heard today, the inflationary impacts are not going away for any organisation—and I am keen to work with our colleges specifically on what that will mean for them.

As Mr Dey pointed out, the challenge that Government has faced throughout this year has been the uncertainty around our budget allocation. I hope that, when the Chancellor of the Exchequer comes back with the spring update and statement, there will be additionality coming to the Scottish Government. I would certainly request that it came to my portfolio, as the convener would expect.

However, there is an opportunity to rebalance. To be blunt, we have been through a period of extreme financial pressure on the Scottish Government budget, which has meant that we have had to meet a number of record pay deals across the piece. I think that it was quite right for the Scottish Government to deliver those things,

including the teachers' pay deal, but it has meant that we have less money overall to go round, and we need to be pragmatic about what that means for every portfolio, including my own.

The Convener: You mentioned the timeline. You came into post and, in November 2023, the Deputy First Minister then set out savings of £56 million in the further and higher education budget across demand-led programmes at the Scottish Funding Council. At last week's meeting, I indicated to the Minister for Higher and Further Education that those savings were made in the further education budget but that, in fact, they affected both the further and higher education budgets. I would like that to be clarified on the record. The fact remains that it is unclear what those demand-led programmes were and where the savings came from. Can you let us know what programmes were affected? When the Scottish Funding Council was questioned about that £56 million at the Public Audit Committee this week, it was unable to identify those specific demand-led programmes.

Jenny Gilruth: Just for clarity, convener, are we talking about the Scottish Funding Council cuts or the wider position?

The Convener: I am talking about the cut of £56 million to the SFC's budget under the line that was described—I think—as “demand-led programmes”.

Jenny Gilruth: There are a number of different demand-led programmes. I will bring in Stuart Greig on some of the specifics.

My understanding is that some of the savings that were generated from the Scottish Funding Council included—as the committee will know—money from the transformation fund, which saved in the region of £46 million. That is baked into this year's financial settlement. There were a number of other demand-led budget lines, including the education maintenance allowance, for which there was less uptake in the previous financial year than had been forecast. There were also reductions to the European social fund income and, more broadly, the strategic change transformation fund.

Stuart Greig may want to say more on the specifics of those budget lines from the previous financial year.

Stuart Greig (Scottish Government): It would be hard to add anything over and above what the chief executive of the Scottish Funding Council provided in evidence to the committee. The Scottish Funding Council operates a number of programmes that translate the budget settlement into the way that the money flows out into both the college and higher education sectors. Some of those will be bid-in programmes that the SFC has set up, which it funds and so forth. It is in those

areas that it will have seen savings, as always happens in-year. The challenge for this budget has been to ensure that those savings have been brought through instead of maintaining the budget at a similar level and then working through savings in-year. That goes back to the convener's point about in-year savings. With this budget, the tough choice has been taken at the start of the year to bake those savings into the 2024-25 budget.

The Convener: I am asking for some real clarity and detail as to where the £56 million has come from and how it has come about. It would be good, if it is possible, to get some more detail on the specifics of that. Cabinet secretary, you mentioned a number of programmes, but it would be good to see what proportion of that £56 million came from each of those.

Jenny Gilruth: I am happy to write to the committee with more detail on that. I do not have the specifics of those budget lines in front of me—

The Convener: I understand that.

Jenny Gilruth: I take your point, convener. I think that it would be helpful to set that out for the committee in more detail.

The Convener: Thank you.

Can you say something about how colleges and universities can approach the overall skills reform agenda at a time when they are facing significant financial pressures? Perhaps you can also dig into what assistance the Scottish Government and the Scottish Funding Council can offer those institutions when we are moving through that period of reform.

Jenny Gilruth: As I mentioned, I listened to Mr Dey's contribution to the committee last week. I think that the trajectory in relation to skills reform is in a similar position to that of reform in our school space, which I will talk about later.

There are opportunities through reform for efficiencies, and we need to be mindful of that in the current challenging financial context. Mr Dey spoke with great passion last week about the opportunities that colleges see in that endeavour, and I think that the reform agenda lends itself to our working more closely together. Currently, responsibilities between portfolios—and, if I may say so to my officials, even between directorates—can often feel quite siloed. There is a need for close portfolio collaboration in relation to the budget, particularly given the challenge that we all face at present.

I am keen to support Mr Dey in his work in leading on the skills side of reform. As the committee will know—again, we will go on to talk about this—I have reformed some of the governance arrangements for skills reform, to bring skills into a space alongside schools so that

we can take a cross-portfolio approach to delivering change across the system. However, that must be funded. I spoke earlier to Michelle Thomson's point about school reform—there is a budget to support that through the school reform programme, and we will continue to work with the college sector on how we can best support colleges, too, in that endeavour.

The Convener: I see that Pam Duncan-Glancy is looking to come in.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): It is just a brief supplementary, convener.

When I speak to colleges, they tell me that, in order to make efficiencies through reform, they might need some additional funding up front. However, there is nothing for that in the budget. How do you think that colleges will be able to make those efficiencies in the long term without that funding?

Jenny Gilruth: I agree with the member—there is no additionality in my budget for the support that might be needed in that respect. I would say to the college sector that I am keen to work with it—very much so. I heard that the committee took evidence from Colleges Scotland in which Shona Struthers talked about duplication in the system. I have discussed that point at length with Mr Dey, given our responsibilities in relation to qualification delivery and the levels of duplication that may currently exist in the system.

It is important to say that we have done our best to protect spend across the portfolio, and I am particularly mindful of colleges' issues of financial sustainability at the current time. I suppose that a precariousness has built up as a challenge in the sector over a number of years. Indeed, since I have been an MSP—certainly since 2016—there has been industrial action in the sector every year, perhaps bar one. That has proved detrimental and challenging in trying to change the narrative about the importance of colleges, and we really need to start celebrating the importance of our college sector.

I am not going to pretend to the member that I have any additionality to provide other than that which is provided for in the budget, but I can commit to working with the sector on areas where we can support it. That might involve looking at working differently in the reform space—indeed, I heard some quite helpful suggestions for that from committee members—but I cannot pretend to the member that I have any additionality to support some of that work. It is not in my budget. I should also point out that we have not yet reached stage 1 of the budget process, so, if the member has any suggestions from where in my budget or from which other portfolio that money could come, I am happy to hear them.

That is the reality that I am currently working in, and I will not pretend that there is additionality in my budget if it does not exist.

Liam Kerr (North East Scotland) (Con): Good morning. The budget proposes a £28.5 million cut to the teaching grant for universities. Yesterday, the finance secretary hesitantly quantified that as equating to about 1,200 first-year student places, but others have suggested that the figure could be more than 3,500. Given that this is your portfolio, cabinet secretary, you must have calculated this: how many young Scots will not have a place at Scottish universities going forward?

Jenny Gilruth: I saw some of the coverage of the finance secretary's appearance yesterday, and I have seen the press coverage, too. It is my understanding—though I am prepared to be corrected on this by my officials, with whom I have discussed this at length—that these are the additional places that we built into the system during the pandemic to protect students and support them through their learning.

We should remember that, during the pandemic, higher numbers of young people went on to higher education largely as a result of changes to the qualifications and examinations at the time. I heard Alastair Sim say that on the radio this morning. We expected higher numbers to flow into our university system, which is why we built in the additional numbers. In the period since the pandemic, we have progressively withdrawn those places, and this represents, I think, the final removal of the additional places that were built in prior to my time in office. It removes the uplift in funding for more than 1,200 places that were added during Covid.

I think that the member asked specifically about places for Scottish students. The latest official statistics show that, in 2021-22, record numbers of Scottish students started full-time first degrees at Scottish universities, which I know has been welcomed by Universities Scotland. I do not think that there is evidence at the current time that we do not have enough places for Scottish students at institutions or that Scottish students might be choosing to study elsewhere, but I am keen to keep a very close eye on that.

I go back to my initial response that these places are additional ones that were built in during the pandemic. The committee understands well enough the challenges that all portfolios are facing. To me, this was a decision that I had to take to protect outcomes for our young people, given the challenges that I am facing elsewhere in the portfolio. As I have said, it is additionality that we built in during the pandemic.

Liam Kerr: So, you are saying that only 1,200 places are being cut. You can come back to me on that if I am not correct.

However, universities are saying that they need more, not less, funding if they are to reach the 2030 target for widening access. The Scottish Government's own analysis has identified a significant risk that, under the current model, there will be disadvantages for learners from socioeconomically deprived areas. What impact does the cabinet secretary predict that these swingeing cuts will have on the widening access agenda?

Jenny Gilruth: I am not sure that I would characterise university funding in those terms. I have seen evidence from, I think, Universities Scotland, requesting that the funding for those additional places be removed and given to the sector to help it to respond to some of the points that the member makes. In an ideal world, I would be saying exactly those things, but the reality is that I must balance my budget and identify where savings can be taken from.

09:30

The member asked about socioeconomically deprived areas. Our work on widening access continues, and we will work with the sector to make progress on that.

However, I go back to my original point, which is that those were additional places that were built into the system during the pandemic, so I am not sure that I would characterise the removal or cutting of those places as swingeing. We are simply moving back to where we were prior to the pandemic.

The member also asked about the further removal of places. We are not in a position to give the member detailed information about that at this stage in the budget cycle, because the SFC must work with institutions. It is for ministers to provide the SFC with guidance on our expectations about which places should be protected. I want to work closely with the SFC on that very point.

On the member's point about socioeconomic disadvantage, we want to protect places for our most disadvantaged young people. That is the point of our widening access policy.

Liam Kerr: Many people would characterise a cut of £28.5 million, or 6 per cent, as being swingeing, so we clearly differ on that.

Does the cabinet secretary get involved in considerations of the economic and future workforce impact—both during their education and later—of anything from 1,200 to 3,800 students leaving Scotland to study elsewhere?

Jenny Gilruth: I am not sure that we can quantify that impact at this stage in the budget process, but I am happy to provide the member with written detail about that.

I explained in my previous response that we will work with the SFC on those allocations—they go through that robust process every financial year; it is not something that is new to the portfolio—and we will work with the institutions on what they will mean for them.

More broadly, the socioeconomic impact that the member asked about will be quantified in due course. We do not have that clarity or detail from the SFC at this stage in the budget settlement, because the SFC has to work with ministers to look at the allocation and what that might mean.

I cannot give the member more detail at this time about where we are with the chronology of the budget, but I will be happy to write to him, or perhaps to the committee, with more detail about that as we progress through the budget process. We are not yet at stage 1 of the budget, so, if the member has any suggestions about where else finance could be deployed or where else we could meet requests from the university sector, I would be happy to hear where that money might come from.

Liam Kerr: One thing that is certain is that, working within the total capped numbers, funding to Scottish universities for each Scottish student place is less than the cost to the university of providing that place. It is 19 per cent less in real terms than it was in 2013-14, and it is about 21 per cent less than the funding for English universities. Given that, does the cabinet secretary worry that this budget will make Scottish universities ever more dependent on international students? If so, what plans does she have to address that?

Jenny Gilruth: The member raises a really important point. I engage directly with university principals, and I met the principal of the University of Edinburgh just last week to discuss the exact issue of international students.

I have to say to the member that one of the real challenges comes from changes made to the immigration rules, which make it far more difficult for universities to attract students from outwith Scotland and international students, who are put off by the immigration rhetoric coming from the UK Government and what the rules might mean for visas. We heard more detail of that from Alastair Sim of Universities Scotland on “Good Morning Scotland” just this morning.

I suggest to the member that some of the challenge comes from another Government, although I recognise his point about the cross-fertilisation of Scottish places. That is not a new feature of how we fund higher education in

Scotland; it has been the case for a number of years. Bluntly, it relates to my party's policy of funding free tuition for students. I think that that is a good policy, and it is one that I will stand by, but I recognise that it creates challenges for our universities.

Because our universities are autonomous, independent institutions, they are experts in working independently of the Government to raise finance, whether through international students coming to study at their institutions or through other sources. I have a lot of faith in our university sector and, from my engagement with principals directly, in their ability to respond to the challenges. Nevertheless, I remind the member that some of the challenge, particularly in relation to international students, does not rest with the Scottish Government.

Liam Kerr: The cabinet secretary is suggesting that her Government's policies are making the universities ever more dependent on attracting international students while, in the same breath, saying that decisions taken elsewhere are making that more difficult to do. What is she doing to address that and ensure that Scottish universities are not dependent on international students?

Jenny Gilruth: I say to the member once again that, as cabinet secretary, I stand by the policy of free tuition. It is a policy that the Government funds. We also provide additionality to the sector for student support that does not exist in other parts of the UK. I am sure that we will come on to talk about that, too.

The universities are currently facing challenges in relation to international students. I have spoken about some of the challenges around the changes to immigration rules, which are making it far more difficult for certain institutions to attract inward investment through international students.

Liam Kerr: You have already said that.

Jenny Gilruth: Some institutions are less dependent on international students than others—some universities can weather the storm more than others—but some institutions in Scotland are being harmed by immigration rules and decisions taken by Governments elsewhere.

Liam Kerr: So, what are you doing about it?

Jenny Gilruth: I say to the member that it is not my responsibility, as Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills in Scotland, to mop up the mess made by a Government elsewhere in its approach to international students and immigration. Decisions that have been taken elsewhere are harming the sector in Scotland. If the member has any leverage with his colleagues at Westminster, I suggest that he make those points vigorously to my opponent at Westminster. I

recognise the challenge, but I will not walk away from the Government's policy of supporting free tuition for our young people.

Liam Kerr: No, but you will abandon the university sector.

The Convener: "Opponent" is an interesting choice of word—it makes it quite confrontational.

I will come back to the 1,200 places for university students that have been removed. It is interesting that we are seeing fewer young people coming into various points of our education system, particularly in the early years, whereas at other points—among 15, 16 and 17-year-olds—the numbers are increasing. In fact, the number of 18-year-olds in our education system right now is on an upward trajectory, and it will follow that course for the next five to six years, so it seems a bit counterintuitive to reduce the number of places for first-year students by 1,200. Do you have any comments on that? What data on school-age children at various stages do you use to determine your budget and priorities?

Jenny Gilruth: I go back to my response to Mr Kerr about those being additional places. Of course, we look to quantify, and the SFC does that measurement by looking at places, how we can allocate additionality into the system and forecasting what that will mean for the sector. I am sure that the committee is aware that longer-term forecasts predict a reduction in demand compared to our current school-age provision and that, therefore, across the piece, we expect to see fewer young people coming through the system in the coming years. That work will be factored into the SFC's—

The Convener: I agree with that, but I am saying that, for the next five to six years, we will see an upward trajectory of 17 and 18-year-olds coming into education and looking for further and higher education. I am addressing the fact that, although we will see reductions further down the line, right now we are facing a peak in numbers.

Jenny Gilruth: I go back to the point that I made to Mr Kerr about there being record numbers of Scottish young people going on to university at the current time. I do not think that the removal of places will adversely affect that.

The second point that I made to Mr Kerr was about the allocation work with the SFC, which, at this stage in the financial year, we would not expect to have detail on—that has not been the case at any point in the past. However, I am happy to write to the committee with more detail on that point.

The SFC looks at those calculations every year. It considers the very point that you make about calculating the number of spaces and the funding

that is required. Then, of course, ministers are required to make grant provisions. We will write to the SFC about our expectations of how we can protect certain courses and young people from certain groups, for example, and that will be factored in to the allocation from the SFC. However, you are right to say that the SFC looks at that as a forward planning approach.

The places that you refer to are unique in that they are additional Covid places that we built in during the pandemic. At a time of financial uncertainty and extreme challenge across my portfolio, their removal was one of the less worse options—I suppose you could describe it as that—for how we might balance the education and skills budget.

The Convener: Ben Macpherson and Pam Duncan-Glancy have some supplementary questions in this section.

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): There have been some questions and discussion about the potential reduction in numbers in the 2024-25 budget, but it is important, for context, to consider the provision that there has been in recent years. Cabinet secretary, you said that, in the 2021-22 financial year, a record number of Scottish students were state funded to go to higher education institutions in Scotland. Do you want to put a number on that? We are talking about tens of thousands of young people having a state-funded opportunity in Scotland that is not available elsewhere in the UK. Indeed, it would be useful and interesting for members to hear the numbers for 2022-23 and 2023-24.

Jenny Gilruth: I have the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service statistics in front of me. I do not know whether they are for 2022-23, but they show that more than 35,000 Scots have, once again, secured a place at one of our universities. The data from last December shows that record numbers of young people aged 19 and under secured a university place in 2023—that is, last year. That includes a record number of young people aged 19 and under from deprived areas. On Mr Kerr's point about socioeconomic disadvantage, it is hugely important that we remember that cohort of young people who are supported through our school system through things such as the Scottish attainment challenge and the fact that we have a consistency of policy approach to widening access to higher education.

Mr Macpherson asked about numbers. Since 2006-07, when my party came into office, the number has increased by more than 31 per cent to 33,880 in 2021-22. Significant numbers—as he suggests, a record number—of young people who live in Scotland are now going on to study full-time degrees at Scottish universities. That progress is certainly to be welcomed.

Ben Macpherson: What is the projection for 2024-25?

Jenny Gilruth: I do not have that figure. Mr Greig, do you have that?

Stuart Greig: The figures that are being quoted are from the actual data that is fed back from the universities and so forth, so we do not have the forecast to look ahead.

Ben Macpherson: Do you have an approximate figure? In recent days, I have heard the figure of between 38,000 and 40,000 quoted in media sources.

The Convener: I see some heads shaking, so perhaps you can come back to us on that, cabinet secretary.

Jenny Gilruth: I would not expect us to have that figure at this time in the year, because it must be forecast for next year. We need to have a degree of accuracy in responding to the member's point about media reports, but I cannot imagine that the media reports have the accurate update. I often hear figures quoted in the media that are not necessarily accurate. Once we have an accurate picture from the SFC about that provision, I will be happy to provide that detail to the committee. We are at quite an early stage in the budget process, and some of that will be worked through in the iterations of the budget.

The Convener: That is noted, cabinet secretary. I apologise for croaking—my voice is going.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Maybe I can help the cabinet secretary out about the projections for next year, because if, according to the budget, £28 million is to come out of universities, the chances are that there will be 3,800 fewer students next year than there were this year. I find that intolerable, and I hope that the cabinet secretary does, too.

The Government's detailed analysis of the budget says:

"Changes in the college and HE resource budgets risk reducing education and skills training opportunities for young people, and for older people seeking to upskill."

How does that meet the principle of opportunity and equality?

Jenny Gilruth: On the member's first point about places—I have covered this now with a number of members—the impact on spaces relates to the 1,200 spaces that we added during the pandemic. The member has now quoted additional figures, but I am not sure of the evidence base for those.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I can help with that. The figure that you have given for the Covid increase is

1,200, but removing those places saves only £5 million. Universities have £28 million to save, so if we make the comparison, we see that there will be another 2,600 fewer students next year. That means that, because of Government cuts, fewer Scottish students will be able to study at Scottish universities.

Jenny Gilruth: I think that the member is misconstruing some of the data that we have already published about the savings that were made in-year. The allocation that universities will receive is broadly similar to what they received during this financial year.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: The best-case analysis of the situation is that the reduction is only £28 million. That is a swingeing cut. The worst-case scenario is that it is nearer £50 million, so to claim that universities are getting the same as last year is just inaccurate.

09:45

Jenny Gilruth: I do not agree with the member's assertion. The Deputy First Minister published details of the in-year savings that were made back in November. We spoke to some of those savings at the start of the meeting. The member is well versed, for example, in the removal of the transformation fund, which was in the region of £46 million, at the start of this financial year. However, additional savings had to be made during the year to balance the budget.

More broadly, the member cites specific examples of course reductions that I do not yet have in front of me. Of course, during the budget process, the SFC has to carry out robust consideration of the number of places that are available. I do not yet have that data in front of me, so those calculations have not crossed my desk. However, if the member is happy to share her working with me, I am more than happy to hear it.

The SFC has to make those savings in a way that minimises the impact on learning and teaching. I have been clear about that. On the member's supplementary question about disadvantage, we need to ensure that there is support for students, particularly from disadvantaged areas. The SFC is doing some of the work on removing the strategic transformation fund that I mentioned. It has also taken savings from a range of demand-led and other budgets. Some of that has involved underspend—as I intimated in my response to the convener, I am happy to share the detail of that with the committee—and the European social funds income.

The savings that were made during this financial year are baked into the allocation for next financial year. A lot of what we are talking about is not new

but is already in the public domain. The DFM spoke to that back in November. The SFC now has to look at the return of savings and to provide me with advice about the allocations going forward. We have not gone through that robust analysis yet. That would not usually happen at this point in the financial year. However, we know that the 1,200 spaces that the member spoke to, which I have accounted for in responses to her and other members, relate to additionality being baked into the system during the pandemic.

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP):

Good morning to you, cabinet secretary, and your officials. I will go back to questions about colleges.

In your opening statement, you acknowledged that this is not the only financially challenging year for the public sector. We have had a decade of challenge, and that has had an impact on organisations' resilience. Our committee has been keen to explore how arrangements could be made more flexible for colleges to help them to manage challenges. Colleges have had some financial flexibilities around the allocation and delivery of credits. At last week's committee meeting, Graeme Dey told the committee that colleges had not made the full use of those flexibilities that was expected. Will you tell the committee a little bit more about what benefits have been seen and any issues that you are aware of colleges having faced in implementing those changes and taking advantage of those flexibilities?

Jenny Gilruth: The arrangements around colleges' flexibility were made by Mr Dey and my predecessors, so they were baked in. It is fair to say that, as you heard from him last week, some of the changes have not been as dramatic as we hoped and have not delivered the flexibility that Mr Dey and I and our predecessors hoped for.

The SFC has made some enhancement in relation to flexibilities on the college funding mode and, now that the budget has been published, it is working with the sector on what the sector can deliver with the resources that it has. However, that has not happened overnight. There has been a challenge over a number of years with the power that colleges have to be flexible.

Through the tripartite group—I know that the committee took evidence about that from Mr Dey last week—we are examining any remaining opportunity that there might be to give colleges that additionality, particularly when ensuring public accountability, because they do not have the same flexibilities that other bodies have. I recognise that challenge. Colleges have raised it with me directly since I was appointed. That work includes our considering processes that allow our colleges to have the maximum flexibility to allow funds to be generated from estate disposals, for example.

I know that the committee took evidence on that exact point last week. It is fair to say that those arrangements are not operating in the way we would have hoped. Part of the challenge relates to the classification of colleges. Stuart Greig might want to say a little more on that, because I know that it is a historic challenge for colleges. The answer rests in the tripartite group's work to look again at how we can drive forward more flexibility in this space. As you heard from Mr Dey last week, that has not worked in the way that we first envisaged.

Stuart Greig: To add to those points, the distinction between colleges and universities is the lack of borrowing powers. That creates limits to how colleges can generate funds to invest, which is why the SFC has put so much time and effort into enhancing the flexibilities that are available to colleges. Mr Dey's evidence, and the further evidence from the chief executive of the Scottish Funding Council last week, went into that in detail.

The only additional point that I will make is on the issue of asset disposal, which the cabinet secretary mentioned. The college sector sits on a large estate, and the focus of the tripartite group is to find things that we can do very quickly with the SFC and colleges to give as much flexibility to those colleges now so that, when colleges sell off some of that estate, the funds can be reinvested swiftly. Some of those funds could be retained by those colleges so that the funds go into the local investments that are needed. Mr Dey is committed to keeping the committee abreast of progress on that.

Ruth Maguire: That is helpful to hear. In particular, the word "urgency" will reassure the committee. Cabinet secretary, notwithstanding your previous answers about what assistance can be provided, the SFC highlighted its recent report on college finances to the committee, which said that a number of colleges will struggle to remain operational. Is the work on flexibility that is described in the report the main form of assistance that the Government and the SFC will be able to give, or can other things be done to assist?

Jenny Gilruth: We need to consider other things. In a previous response to a member, I referenced my concern about the college sector more generally and the precarious nature of the sector, particularly in recent years. Baking in some of the financial challenge that we have across Government makes the situation even more challenging for the sector.

I am also conscious of the role that our college sector plays for some of our most vulnerable young people. It has a reach that other parts of the education sector do not, and we in the Government need to be mindful of that. I am keen

that, through the reform process, we better understand that.

Although I understand that the committee took evidence from Mr Dey on that issue last week—and I will shortly give evidence on school reform—we must have a better connection between the two. They currently feel disparate, which is why I have reformed some of the governance arrangements. You might think that that is a tweak—“Who cares, cabinet secretary? That is not going to deliver real change on the ground”—but I think that it is important that we have a more joined-up approach to how we deliver our education system. That delivery model was meant to be part of the narrative and rhetoric around curriculum for excellence, yet we are still siloed in how we think about the delivery of school education and higher education.

I know that Mr Dey spoke last week about opportunities for reform, particularly for colleges. That is not just about Ms Maguire’s point on flexibilities, and the colleges recognise that. The opportunities include, for example, the potential for colleges to take more of a leading role in the delivery of modern apprenticeships. I heard Mr Dey speak to some of that last week. That colleges-first model would be quite a shift for the sector in the future, but perhaps there is an opportunity, through some of that work on reform, to better support the sustainability of the sector. I suppose that that goes back to Ms Duncan-Glancy’s point that there is no additionality here—there is not, but we need to look at how we work smarter in the future to help protect that sustainability.

A number of colleges are having a challenging time. I know that the SFC is working with them directly on that. I think that, in the evidence session last week, Mr Dey spoke about the colleges that the SFC has been supporting directly. It does that anyway, without ministers getting involved, but we need to be mindful of this becoming more of a challenge for our colleges sector in the current financial climate. I think that reform and the flexibilities that we have previously mentioned offer an opportunity and a route forward.

Ruth Maguire: I particularly recognise the point about the connection between schools and colleges. That has certainly been the case in North Ayrshire, with Ayrshire College and Irvine royal academy previously running some excellent programmes, although they have not necessarily been continued. I know that the approach has not been uniform across the country, but there is certainly good work that can be learned from.

Finally, on the issue of staffing, staff costs make up more than 70 per cent of college expenditure. Colleges have been running voluntary redundancy

schemes, and the committee has heard that some are planning compulsory redundancies. Audit Scotland has stated that

“further ... staffing reductions ... could severely erode” colleges’

“ability to deliver a viable curriculum.”

What is the Scottish Government’s response to the SFC’s forecast of the potential removal of 21 per cent of full-time-equivalent staff employed in the college sector?

Jenny Gilruth: In my response to Ms Duncan-Glancy, I mentioned the real challenge that we are facing. That challenge has not grown up overnight; it has been happening over the time that Ms Maguire and I have been MSPs, and, indeed, the situation with colleges probably predates 2016.

We need to be mindful of the challenge with regard to industrial action. When I was before the committee last September, I think, Mr Rennie asked me about this very issue and the role of ministers in this respect. I am extremely limited in the role that I can play in industrial disputes in the colleges sector, given their independence from Government, but I recognise the challenge here and the on-going disputes, which I will not comment on.

At last week’s evidence session, Mr Kerr raised with Mr Dey the recommendations that were made in the Strathesk Re:solutions report back in 2022, and that report, I think, offers an opportunity to drive some of the change that we need to see here. We need to reset some of the agenda in relation to colleges and their importance in our education system, because I worry that some of that has been forgotten about in our thinking on school education. Indeed, the member has highlighted some of the opportunities that exist, particularly in work with our schools. Some of our colleges do fantastic work with our schools, and we need to quantify that impact in a better way and support the sector.

Colleges Scotland has formally responded to the Strathesk Re:solutions report, and it is meeting trade unions to look at next steps and is working with them collectively to support the continued success of national bargaining. I think that that offers a route forward.

That said, we need to inject a bit of urgency into this, particularly post-pandemic. Post-pandemic, the education sector is under an extraordinary amount of pressure; it is expected in all its guises—whether that be early learning and childcare, schools, colleges or universities—to mop up all society’s ills and solve everything. However, it cannot do that alone, and we need think more pragmatically about how we quantify the impacts of our education spend. The outcomes

for our young people in our colleges are fundamental to that drive, and resolving some of the on-going dispute—for obvious reasons, I do not want to comment on the specifics of that—will be part of that, too.

Then, as you heard from Mr Dey last week, we can move forward with these recommendations and try to bring more sustainability to the sector. Yes, that might well look like flexibilities, but it might also look like education reform if we give colleges a driving seat in delivering some of the opportunities that I think reform will offer the sector.

Ruth Maguire: Thank you.

The Convener: I will take a brief supplementary from Liam Kerr.

Liam Kerr: I will be very brief, convener.

There is no doubt that we agree on the importance of colleges and the need for support, but the further education sector is still unclear about how much funding it might have for the coming year, and yesterday the finance secretary was unable to say when it might know that. Does the cabinet secretary have any idea when the sector will have that clarity, given that it will obviously need to make plans for the coming year?

Jenny Gilruth: This brings me back to my initial response to Mr Kerr's question about college places. A lot of this will not be known at this stage in the budget process. Currently, the SFC is working on allocations and translating what that will mean for the colleges sector. That is not an unusual situation; indeed, having probed this issue with officials prior to this meeting, I do not think that we would ever have had that level of detail at this point in the financial year. It has always been the case with the education budget and portfolio that we ask the SFC to look at translating those things.

However, I heard the comments from Shona Struthers and I recognise the challenge, particularly in relation to the points that Ruth Maguire made about financial sustainability and the wider forward look. I am happy to write to the committee with more detail when the SFC has decided and given me advice on those allocations, but we do not expect to have that detail at this point in the financial year.

10:00

Liam Kerr: Do you have a ballpark estimate as to when the SFC might decide?

Jenny Gilruth: We are not yet at stage 1 of the budget process. I will defer to one of my officials, but we anticipate that the allocations will be very

similar to the core funding that colleges received and are investing in 2023-24, which was the point that I made to Pam Duncan-Glancy. In simpler terms, the funds that will be available to colleges at the start of 2024-25 are expected to be very similar to those that were allocated this financial year. I will pass to Stuart Greig, who can say whether there is a date on which we can provide the committee with the specifics that the member asked for.

Stuart Greig: The letters of guidance to the Scottish Funding Council will typically be issued in March, so I see no reason why that is not the target date this year. From now through to the early part of February is when the intense work takes place with the SFC, so that should give members an idea of the timeline.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): The budget line for student support and tuition fees payment is down £23.4 million compared with what was allocated in the previous year's budget. The explanation for that is that it is a combination of recognising the in-year savings that took place—the allocation for next year will more closely reflect actual spending during this current financial year—and some presumptions about anticipated demand. Can you give a little bit of detail about exactly where in the budget line the savings are coming from, particularly in relation to the effect they might have on student support?

Jenny Gilruth: We have a generous offer in relation to student support. Some of the budget lines that the member spoke about were published by the Deputy First Minister in November, and they were taken as in-year savings. The member is right to say that those were demand-led budgets, so a number of savings were quantified by baked-in presumptions about uptake that, bluntly, was not there. We were able to identify savings through that process.

On student support, we have built into the budget an increase in higher education student support of £2,400 for all undergraduate students. An equivalent uplift will be applied to the postgraduate support package in the same year. That is raising student support for those who might be disadvantaged—for example, care leavers, estranged students and those from the socioeconomic areas that Liam Kerr spoke about earlier.

We will have to consider student support more broadly. It is worth saying that support and tuition fees are demand led. During 2023-24, £21.6 million of savings were identified due to reduced demand. Those savings are baked into this year's financial allocation because they are both demand-led budgets and the demand was not there last year.

Ross Greer: In that case, the calculation is almost entirely a reflection of the in-year savings from this year. There is a marginal additional amount.

Jenny Gilruth: It is broadly—

Ross Greer: Can you clarify where those demand-led changes came from? I recognise that you said that the Deputy First Minister published the related budget lines in November. I cannot remember the detail of everything from that point onwards, so could you give us a bit more detail on how much of that came from demand on student support programmes versus tuition fee payments?

Jenny Gilruth: From memory, it came from a mixture of the two. I may bring in Stuart Greig on the specifics of that, but it is not a clear-cut split, if that is the point of the question.

The Convener: In response to my earlier questions on demand-led programmes, you said that you were expecting some more information to come, so I will not ask you to respond for a second time to that question, cabinet secretary.

Jenny Gilruth: You are right, convener. We will cover that in the update to the committee.

Ross Greer: That is okay, convener. I will come back in with a supplementary question.

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): Good morning, cabinet secretary and team. You have already spoken to us about the necessity of moving money from one budget area to another because of the tightness of the budget at certain levels. However, we are told that the budget has set a cut of £23.5 million for the overall lifelong learning and skills budget, £13.7 million of which is coming from the skills budget line, including through cuts to grant funding for supporting young people into employment, education and training. The Scottish Government has been very happy to push developing the skills and abilities of people who are not in universities but who might be using colleges to boost their skills training and so on. What impact do you believe that those cuts will have on achieving the ambitions of the skills system reform?

Jenny Gilruth: Mr Kidd's question is in a similar space to Mr Greer's question about savings that were made during the current financial year and the detail of those specific programmes. I can include that in the written update to the committee if that helps.

The member quoted £23.5 million. I have the savings in front of me and I am not sure where he gets that number from, although I suspect that it is from the lifelong learning and skills budget line, perhaps with an addition from elsewhere. If the member is able to clarify that, perhaps after the meeting, I would be more than happy to include

that detail in my written update, which will also cover the points made by the convener and Mr Greer.

Bill Kidd: I understand. Thank you.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I have a question about the whole family wellbeing fund. The commitment is to provide £500 million during the current parliamentary session, of which £100 million has been committed so far, which will mean spending £400 million in the final year of the parliamentary session. How on earth are you going to do that?

Jenny Gilruth: Before I answer that question specifically, I will give a very factual answer. My wife sits as a member of the Promise oversight board, so I have an interest. Given that, I will give Mr Rennie my factual response, then I will pass the question on to Andrew Watson to answer the substantive question.

We have allocated £50 million from the whole family wellbeing programme for 2024-25. That is significant investment in relation to how we go about keeping the Promise, and it is working to support local areas to transform some of their services. The Deputy First Minister has lead responsibility for the whole family wellbeing fund.

I defer to Andrew Watson on the policy, having noted my interest.

Andrew Watson (Scottish Government): The commitment is still that the Government will invest £500 million in whole family wellbeing. The next key stage for us will be publication this year of an investment strategy, which will set out more detail about our plans for the funding. One thing that that strategy can do is consider the evaluation of the funding that has been given so far. We are due to publish, later this month or early in February, a significant evaluation of how the fund has been performing so far. That will inform the strategy that the DFM will publish later in the year.

Decisions about remaining funding within the parliamentary session are for annual budget cycles. We have not set out a multiyear budget for that. Decisions about levels of funding beyond 2024-25 are clearly part of the budget process.

Willie Rennie: I will not be too political with you, but could you realistically spend £400 million in one year to meet the Promise?

Andrew Watson: I have a couple of points to make on that. The first is about the purpose of the spend. A lot of the funding has been routed through children's services planning partnerships, so there is a particular way of using that funding at the moment. The evaluation will tell us how effective that has been. One of the answers to your question is that the funding might be used in

different ways in the future, and that might affect the ability to spend it within the time period.

The second thing that the DFM will consider is the feedback from delivery partners. Mr Rennie is possibly implying that there is discussion with partners about their ability to spend quickly in local areas, and we need to take that into account in future plans. It is fair to say that spending a large amount of money in a short period of time can be challenging, but the answer to the question lies in who is spending the money and for what purpose.

The final point is that one of the rationales behind whole family wellbeing funding is that it is about holistic support for families. There are quite strong connections between whole family wellbeing funding and other investments that the Government is making, such as investments in care for school-age children.

The other thing that we need to do with the investment approach is look at the range of different funding streams that all have an impact on the same families and communities. We might take quite a strategic approach to those issues.

Willie Rennie: Convener, I note—I do not expect an answer to this—that Nicola Sturgeon, the former First Minister, asked the question of the current First Minister last week and did not really get an answer, and I note that we have not really had an answer today. I hope that the cabinet secretary will ask the Deputy First Minister to respond on whether the money will be committed in full by the end of the session.

Jenny Gilruth: I am happy to ask the DFM to respond. She has lead responsibility. However, that is the public commitment at the current time. On Willie Rennie's point, she is leading on feedback about the timescales. We will take that point away as an action from today's committee meeting.

Willie Rennie: Thank you. I will turn to early learning and childcare. I have seen the pledge to pay workers in that area at least £12 an hour.

Jenny Gilruth: Good.

Willie Rennie: I have had a promise that more will be coming in addition, in order to close the gap between the private, voluntary and independent sector and council sector pay rates, which results—as you know—in the departure of experienced staff from private nurseries. I was promised that we would have a solution, but I have not seen anything. What is happening?

Jenny Gilruth: The £12 an hour—

Willie Rennie: Sorry—I have had an acknowledgement from Minister for Children, Young People and Keeping the Promise that that will not deal with the problem that we have talked

about, which is the loss of experienced staff to earn more than £12 an hour. It does not help. How are you going to close the gap?

Jenny Gilruth: The sustainable rates review gives us an opportunity to do that. Bluntly, we need the PVI sector to be operational in relation to how we deliver our childcare expansion. Willie Rennie and I have talked about that previously.

The £12 an hour commitment is important. The draft budget provides local authorities with an additional £16 million to pay for staff in the PVI sector who will deliver funded ELC from April this year. That demonstrates our commitment to the fair work agenda, but it also demonstrates our commitment to recognising the challenges in the PVI sector. We have discussed that previously. Willie Rennie might think that it is not enough, and the sector might think that it is not enough. Okay—I would like to hear from where in my budget the additional money should come.

Willie Rennie: No, no, no, no, no, no, no. It is your promise—your issue, which you promised to resolve. It is not my issue but yours, so do not put it back on me.

Various nurseries have come to me and said that they have advertised posts at £12 an hour, but their local council is advertising exactly the same type of post for £16 an hour. How are they supposed to close that gap? They are charities. Where do they find that £4 an hour? They have serious problems if you cannot provide funding that is more equivalent to council nursery funding.

Jenny Gilruth: I accept the premise of Willie Rennie's question. My point was that I am dealing with an extraordinarily challenging budget settlement, as are all cabinet secretaries, as a result of an unfair allocation from the UK Government. We can have a debate about that another day, but let us look at what I have for my portfolio.

The additional money to pay £12 an hour that has flowed to my portfolio as a result of our commitment is to be welcomed. I recognise that some local authorities might pay more than that, but there has been significant investment—from the First Minister, actually—in that specific commitment. It helps to bridge the gap between the PVI sector and the local authority sector. It also means an increase of about £2,000 a year for eligible staff who work full time. That is to be welcomed.

I recognise that challenges will remain. The sustainable rates review gives us an opportunity to reset some of that.

However, we need to work with the PVI sector on delivery of what that will look like. I have heard some of the critique around that, including from Mr

Rennie today, but the reality is that there is nothing in my budget to meet the extra additional money that is being asked for. If we need to look again at the offer, additional money will need to come from somewhere else, as it cannot come from my budget. I say again that we are going into a round of budget negotiations in the chamber and there will be opportunities for Opposition parties to put forward suggestions.

I hear Willie Rennie's point that it is my problem, as cabinet secretary. I accept that. However, we have taken direct action in the budget to support the PVI sector. Such action had not been taken previously. I hope that Willie Rennie recognises that.

Willie Rennie: You might be in trouble with your First Minister, because, during the SNP election hustings, he promised to resolve the problem.

Jenny Gilruth: And he has done so.

Willie Rennie: He has not. He promised to do it completely. I heard him. He promised that he would close the gap between council and private nurseries. I have heard nothing today to indicate that you have solved the problem that he said he had identified and would commit to solving.

Jenny Gilruth: There is additionality in the budget of £16 million to increase pay in the PVI sector.

Willie Rennie: That does not deal with the problem.

Jenny Gilruth: I do not agree.

Willie Rennie: You do not agree with the First Minister, in that case.

10:15

Jenny Gilruth: The First Minister committed to the additionality: it is in my budget, so direct action has been taken. Mr Rennie might think that it is not enough, but that is a separate issue. Action has been taken to close the gap between the PVI sector and the local authority sector. We will have to continue to work with local government on some of the challenges, because they are not going to go away. However, the additionality will make things better and will mean that eligible staff get an extra £2,000 a year. I would have thought that Mr Rennie might have welcomed the additionality.

Willie Rennie: Nurseries will hear what you are saying and they will not be impressed, because they have been waiting a long time for this, but let us move on.

I have a final question. How will you ensure that there is adequate funding to meet the commitments that you have made to a national Gaelic plan?

Jenny Gilruth: On Gaelic, the Scottish Languages Bill will be considered later this year, and we will continue to work with Bòrd na Gàidhlig and others on their obligations relating to a national Gaelic plan. The bill will give Gaelic and the Scots language official status, and it will change some of the ways in which we support Gaelic and Scots in schools, including through changes to education. We will support the plan's development.

It is worth saying that support for Gaelic has increased from more than £15 million back in 2005-06 to about £25 million in the current budget allocation. Our Gaelic funding is split between money for education approaches and money for what I suppose we would classify as the cultural side of things. For example, MG Alba sits in my budget line, and we support Gaelic broadcasting through it.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Good morning, cabinet secretary—I do not think that I said that earlier. Thank you for your contributions so far.

You will be well aware of the importance that I place on non-contact time for teachers. How will the 2024-25 budget support the aim to reduce contact time for teachers?

Jenny Gilruth: That is an important point, which I am sure we will discuss at length in the chamber this afternoon. Part of the challenge with behaviour, attendance, the curriculum and reform relates to conditions for teachers in their places of work. Last year's negotiations on the pay settlement did not include changing or improving conditions for teachers, but we now have an opportunity to reduce class contact time, to which we have committed. As I said when I wrote to Pam Duncan-Glancy at the end of last year, we have commissioned independent research that will look at that exact issue.

Across the country, class contact time will look different for every teacher, despite the allowances for non-contact time that were built in for all teachers following the McCrone report. We are looking at the national picture in order to get a granular view of current allocations. Earlier, the convener and I spoke about the falling pupil roll, which will have an impact on what we are able to deliver. We need to be mindful of the forecasts and the financial challenges with the budget, but I am committed to looking at how we can deliver.

Another challenge that I face is that what we are able to do will depend on negotiations with the Scottish Negotiating Committee for Teachers. The tripartite approach was adopted by McCrone and Jack McConnell when I was at school—some years ago now—so we need to work on that tripartite basis if we are to reduce class contact time across the country.

I accept that there are challenges, but there is also an opportunity to get this right for Scotland's teachers. Having reflected on my past eight or nine months in post, I think that that part of the jigsaw has not yet been tackled. Providing time is a way in which we can respond to some of the challenges in our classrooms, whether they relate to attendance or behaviour.

We also need to build in time for teachers in relation to curriculum reform. One of the reasons why I decided to delay legislating last year was that I did not feel that secondary school teachers in particular had been given that time. We need to give them that time. We can have a debate with the trade unions—I am sure that we will—about the purpose of that time, but we need to build it in to how we support the teaching profession in the 21st century. We are not there yet; the work is ongoing. I do not have the commissioned response, but it will be coming to me. I am looking at Mr Anson, because his team has been leading on commissioning the work. I think that we expect to have it by the end of this month.

Sam Anson (Scottish Government): Yes—we expect the report in January.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Thank you. We will find agreement on much of what the cabinet secretary said about the importance of non-contact time in relation to behaviour in schools and terms and conditions for teachers. However, I heard nothing about what is in this year's budget to deliver the change this year, so can I assume that the cabinet secretary does not expect the promised reduction in contact time to be delivered this year?

Jenny Gilruth: No. I think that we will make progress in relation to that commitment this year, but delivering a reduction in class contact time will not happen overnight. It will take work from the SNCT, which has not been able to resolve the issue for years. Negotiation has been on-going since the last election, so there have been challenges for some time. We will work with the SNCT on delivery of the commitment. I do not yet have the evidence base to give a full answer. I am happy to include that in my written update to the committee, because I expect the evidence to give me numbers about additional budget in relation to delivery of the commitment. Is that a good answer?

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I appreciate that, cabinet secretary, but the commitment was made in the manifesto to elect the current Scottish National Party Government in 2021. Teachers have already been waiting and looking for that for years.

I will move on to breakfast provision and free school meals. There does not appear to be anything in the budget for provision of breakfast in every primary and special school, which was

another Government commitment. Does the cabinet secretary expect to deliver free breakfasts in all primary and special schools during the coming year?

Jenny Gilruth: We are still working towards meeting that commitment. Free breakfasts are actually available in a number of schools across the country because headteachers are choosing to use pupil equity fund money, which is additionality that the Government provides, to invest in free breakfasts. Hundreds of schools across Scotland are already offering free breakfasts. I have asked officials to give me granular evidence and to audit what is currently happening. There is a mixed approach to breakfast provision.

I should also say that some local authorities make political choices to invest in funding breakfast provision. That is a choice for local authorities to make. You might argue that I should provide that additionality to the system. There is sometimes a tension regarding local authorities' responsibilities. We are working towards delivering the commitment, but I recognise that a lot of schools are already delivering free breakfasts, so I need to have the national picture of what that looks like.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: With respect, cabinet secretary, that is not a statutory requirement that is funded by the Government, which is what the manifesto said would happen. That is the good will of some schools that are using PEF—which is already stretched to the limit—rather than the Government funding a pledge that it made in its manifesto.

Jenny Gilruth: With respect to the member, I say that the allocation of money to my portfolio is extremely challenging, which is why I have had to take tough decisions in the financial settlement. The member has heard about some of those and I am sure that we will rehearse them later.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: It was your commitment, cabinet secretary.

Jenny Gilruth: Pardon?

Pam Duncan-Glancy: It was your Government's commitment.

Jenny Gilruth: I understand that it was my Government's commitment. I asked the member where I should find that additionality from in my budget. I also say to the member that I do not yet know what the national picture is in relation to provision of free breakfasts, because some local authorities are taking a decision to deliver them anyway.

I also say to the member that some local authorities took a decision to wipe out school meals debt. Others have not done that, so the Government has provided an additional £1.5

million in this budget to some local authorities that have not been able to wipe out school meals debt, in order to encourage that good behaviour.

In relation to free school breakfasts, funding is provided, for example through PEF, to allow local authorities to take political decisions, at the local level, to provide that additionality. Some have done so. I praise those local authorities for promoting and supporting the nutrition of young people in our schools. Other authorities have taken decisions to invest that funding elsewhere. I want to know what the national picture is. That is why I have asked for an audit of breakfast provision.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Thank you, cabinet secretary. If that is the answer about breakfasts, I think that headteachers in schools across the country will be asking, “How many times do you want me to spend my PEF?”

I will move to my final question, if that is all right.

The Convener: Can I interject? Ross Greer wants to come in on the theme of breakfasts before we move on, if that is okay.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Of course.

Ross Greer: Did you mean the theme of school meals debt?

The Convener: Yes—sorry.

Ross Greer: I apologise to Pam for jumping in.

Cabinet secretary, can you clarify what you were saying? Are you saying that local authorities that have already wiped out their school meals debt will not be able to access the new fund that has been announced, and that that fund is purely for the authorities that have not yet taken that action? Is that correct?

Jenny Gilruth: That it is my understanding of the way in which we will administer the fund.

Ross Greer: Will local authorities have to apply proactively for that fund and give evidence of the level of debt that they have? I am asking because, when I began doing freedom of information research on that, it became clear that some larger local authorities, in particular, were actually masking their level of school meals debt. They were confirming only the debt data that they held centrally and were not bothering to ask all their schools about that. In some cases, the actual level of school meals debt is larger than what the local authorities have been telling us all. I am not sure whether you have different information.

Jenny Gilruth: I cannot give Mr Greer a specific answer in relation to local authorities masking their school meals debt—I do not think that it would be wise for me to do so—but I take the point. The issue is one that Aberlour and others have made

suggestions on, and I know that Mr Greer has previously done work on it.

We will administer the fund such that local authorities will have to apply, but they will also have to provide us with an evidence base in relation to the debt, so we will look at the granularity when it comes to claims about school meals debt.

However, I say to Mr Greer—as I think I said to Ms Duncan-Glancy on breakfasts—that local authorities already have the power to wipe out school meals debt. Many of them have done that and, again, I praise them for that action.

Ross Greer: The Convention of Scottish Local Authorities has produced excellent advice and guidance on how schools should manage their school meals debt. Will local authorities that have not adopted that guidance—I think that there is quite a high overlap between authorities that have not written off the debt and those that have not adopted the guidance—be encouraged or even required to do so by the Government in order to access the money that you are making available?

Jenny Gilruth: I do not know the answer to that—I will defer to Mr Anson on the subject—but I think that that would be our expectation.

Sam Anson: It is absolutely our expectation that authorities will adhere to the guidance.

Ross Greer: Excellent. Thank you.

The Convener: We will go back to Pam Duncan-Glancy. Thank you for allowing that interjection.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: No problem at all, convener. When we were discussing breakfasts and free school meals, I was mindful that my colleague had a question on it, so that is fine.

My next question is about teachers in schools. It is fair to say that, in the same way that headteachers will be asking, “How many times do you want me to spend my PEF?”, local authorities will be asking, “How many times do you want us to spend our budget?”, given how tight it is.

In an answer to me on teacher numbers, the cabinet secretary said that, if the national average pupil teacher ratio rose above 13.7, she would look to claw back some funding from local authorities. The national average is currently 13.2, but local authorities have already said that they are fearful that they will have to give some money back, and 15 local authorities have not met their targets. Will the cabinet secretary clarify the position on that and set out in clear terms whether she expects any local authorities to have to return funds that have been allocated for that purpose?

Jenny Gilruth: I am very happy to do so. Ms Duncan-Glancy mentioned a pupil teacher ratio of

13.7. Scotland has the lowest pupil teacher ratio in the whole of the UK, which is welcome. That means that we have the most teachers per pupil in the whole of the UK.

I think that Ms Duncan-Glancy is asking about the £145.5 million of additionality that we baked into the local government settlement that was meant to be for additional teachers in the system. It is fair to say that some local authorities have used that for protecting teacher numbers. Again, I praise those local authorities, especially the heads of education and council leaders who have said that they will use that ring fencing to protect the number of teachers in schools, because we know that teachers make a difference—that is how we improve outcomes for our young people. We cannot close the poverty-related attainment gap with fewer teachers in our schools.

However, some local authorities have taken other decisions, for a number of reasons. I think that Ms Duncan-Glancy mentioned a figure of 15. In some of those cases, teacher numbers have gone down by one or two, so we should probably not consider them in the round. From memory, I think that there has been a significant fall in teacher numbers in four or five authorities. I have asked all those authorities for an explanation as to why that might be the case. I have not yet made a decision on that challenge, but I retain the right to recoup some of the funding.

It is worth saying that, as far as I remember—Sam Anson will correct me if I am wrong—we administer the £145 million in such a way that we hold some of it back so that, if a local authority does not meet the requirement to ring fence that funding for teacher numbers, we will not pay it out. I retain the power to do that and to hold on to that additional funding.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I appreciate that, but, in your answer to me, you said that, while the national average pupil teacher ratio remained below 13.7, you would not claw back funding. It is 13.2. Will local authorities have to give the money back or not?

Jenny Gilruth: In answer to Ms Duncan-Glancy's question, I said that I would look at the merits of every local authority's position in detail.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: So, you will not look at the national ratio, which is what you said in your answer that you would do.

Jenny Gilruth: I might defer to Sam Anson in relation to the pupil teacher ratio. However, I am also concerned about the fact that some councils are choosing not to use the additional £145 million that the Government has provided to protect teacher numbers.

The point about the PTR is part of the answer, but it is not the whole answer. If the additionality that central Government has given local councils to pay for teachers has not been used for teachers, the question has to be what it has been used for and why it—

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I do not disagree that it is not the whole answer, but it is the answer that you gave me.

10:30

Jenny Gilruth: I will defer to Sam Anson on the role that the PTR plays in our calculation—it might be that we factor that in. In my correspondence with local authorities, I have asked them to set out any extenuating circumstances that might explain the situation. For some, there might be a rationale. I have heard responses from local authorities that account for some of the change. We need to be mindful of that, but there have been other reductions in the system that I do not find to be acceptable, particularly when, at a time of extreme financial pressure, we are providing that additionality and protecting it. We expect teacher numbers to be protected in all local authorities.

Sam Anson: The process with local authorities has been clear throughout. In February 2023, we wrote to local authorities with a set of criteria for the £145 million. The primary point of those criteria was that, at a national level, teacher numbers should remain constant. In the recent census in December, they fell ever so slightly. Therefore, for the local authorities where teacher numbers reduced—Pam Duncan-Glancy is right that there were 15—we asked for an explanation as to why that was the case.

We are currently working through those responses, which are complex and give a variety of reasons. We are trying to assess the extent to which some of those are justified and where we feel that they are less justified.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I have a final question, if I have your permission, convener.

The Convener: Yes.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Thank you.

The Government is considering the reasons why the numbers fell, but are you also considering what other things local authorities might have had to use some of that money for in relation to education, such as free breakfasts, writing off school meal debt or meeting the needs of pupils with additional support needs? We should remember that the budget increases the resource for that by only £600,000. Are you looking at how else they might have had to spend that money?

Sam Anson: We are looking in detail at all 15 responses. We have asked local authorities to present to us proactively the reasons why they feel that they have not been able to use the £145 million for the express purposes of maintaining teacher numbers.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I appreciate that. I suspect that it might be about recruitment issues or geographical issues. I expect that you will get back a whole host of reasons, which will be interesting. However, where the money was given to local authorities and they did not maintain the numbers, are you also asking whether they deployed it to the education budget to address some of the other challenges that we have already discussed?

Jenny Gilruth: We would expect to see details of that additionality in their returns. Last year, the committee took evidence on this point from someone, who shall remain nameless, who talked about the role of teachers and other professionals in education being important. I do not think that we can replace a teacher in a classroom with people who are not trained teachers, so we need to be mindful of that.

In an arrangement between the Government and COSLA, we agreed that the additionality would be protected for teacher numbers—that is what our local authorities signed up to deliver. They understood the rationale behind the approach and the requirements around the funding. That is why I have the opportunity to hold back some of the funding at a certain point in the financial year. Some local authorities might not have thought that we would do that, because it did not happen last year, but I retain the power to do so.

We will look in detail at the four or five instances in which there have been significant falls in the numbers. In some of the local authorities that Ms Duncan-Glancy mentioned, from memory, we are talking about falls of one or two. We should look at those instances, but we will look in detail at where we have seen greater falls.

Ms Duncan-Glancy makes a point about other areas where the money might have been spent. I am happy to hear that rationale. We set out the requirements, and we will look at the responses in detail, recognising that, for all local authorities, this has been a challenging time, just as it has been for Government.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Thank you.

The Convener: My recollection of the evidence was that it was about the complementary nature of having teachers, pupil support assistants and speech and language therapists in the classroom, so it was not perhaps as binary as—

Jenny Gilruth: Yes, it is not one or the other.

The Convener: We will move to questions from Bill Kidd.

Bill Kidd: The cabinet secretary and her officials have already covered a great deal of the issues to do with dealings with local authorities after the budget. However, what specific discussions have you had with local authority representatives on how the budget settlement will support the delivery and improvement of education and children's services? The question is not about the difficulties that you have had; it is about how the budget will make improvements in children's learning.

Jenny Gilruth: I thank Mr Kidd for his question, which raises an important point. We have a new deal with local government through the Verity house agreement arrangements. As the committee will be aware, some of the budget settlement looks to remove a level of ring fencing. There are two budget lines from which we remove ring fencing, and they are already baselined into the grant for local government. They will be contained within that but come from my budget. Additional lines come from me directly, which are more ring fenced, although they are quite a small proportion—around 5 per cent overall. Therefore, other than that 5 per cent, local authorities have some flexibility in relation to how they spend.

Through the Verity house agreement, I was keen to establish a quality assurance framework between us and local authorities. We have been working on that since this summer. In August, we began engagements with COSLA. I meet COSLA very regularly—every two or three weeks—and I am keen that we deliver on a change in that relationship not just through Verity house but through accountability. I might argue that, as cabinet secretary, I am hyper-accountable to the committee, the chamber and the media, but education is delivered by local authorities, and they retain statutory responsibility for that.

When we look—as I do—at the performance in last year's exam results, we see that there is variability in the system, and we need to tackle it with regard to outcomes. That is how we close the poverty-related attainment gap, and we need to drill into some of that. At Education Scotland, we have a team of attainment advisers—with whom the committee will be familiar—who support every local authority in trying to close the gap. Part of that work has been driven by local authorities identifying their stretch aims, which involves forward planning and saying, "In three years' time, this is the progress that we will have made in closing the gap." Education Scotland is involved in challenging and also supporting local authorities. That speaks to Mr Kidd's question about improvement and delivery. We need to get into a

better space that recognises that local authorities have responsibility for that.

As far as improvement is concerned, whether it is in behaviour, attendance or curriculum, local authorities have a real responsibility. Some of them take that extremely seriously and they have really good support mechanisms in place, such as quality improvement officers. I want to work with local authorities to support them to deliver that.

Part of the improvement will be supported by the appointment of the new chief inspector. I do not want to jump ahead, because we will talk about reform in the next session. The interim chief inspector has a key role to play in supporting local authorities with improvement and has powers to carry out their own inspections of local authority improvement mechanisms and how they work to support schools. I know that some people in the system say that that is a starting point for the new chief inspector. I am sure that she currently has her hands full with a few other things that I have sent her way, but I think that we should look at how central Government supports the improvement function at local authority level, because there are 32 different approaches to it around the country. Sometimes that difference is a strength of the Scottish education system, but sometimes we are not great at learning from other areas where there are pockets of good practice. That is where Education Scotland and the attainment advisers have a key role to play.

Bill Kidd: Thank you very much for that.

I have a final question. Do you believe that the direction in which we are heading shows genuine and measurable signs that delivery of educational services is improving?

Jenny Gilruth: Tentatively I would say yes, but we need to work together more closely. It is fair to say that, in the past, Government and local government have sometimes had our challenges, some of which I have just rehearsed with Ms Duncan-Glancy around teacher numbers.

However, in my experience, COSLA has a pragmatic approach to the delivery of education at the local authority level. It wants to be transparent about what that means for the outcomes for our young people and wants to support the improvement of those outcomes.

It is my job, as cabinet secretary, to give local authorities the opportunity to deliver on those improvements in order to help our young people to succeed. We have reset some of the relationship with local government. I am not sure that I can give the committee a scorecard at the end of this year but, if Mr Kidd comes back to me next year, I will give him a mark out of 10 on how we have improved that relationship. Particularly, it is not just about having improved relationships but about

working better to improve outcomes. That is why the accountability framework that we are working on with local authorities—particularly in relation to the variability across the school education system—is hugely important.

Bill Kidd: Thank you very much indeed for that.

The Convener: Finally, cabinet secretary, you have spoken about resetting your relationship with local authorities and the way that you work together. I am interested in what scorecard you might give to the City of Edinburgh Council, which is looking to deliver £8.2 million of cuts to the devolved school management fund—if you are aware of that.

Jenny Gilruth: I am not sighted on the specifics of the City of Edinburgh Council. I think that the committee took evidence from Peter Bain of School Leaders Scotland on that, and SLS has previously raised with me the devolved school management challenge. I will take a look at the specifics in relation to the City of Edinburgh Council. The convener and I are having a meeting on a separate issue so, in that meeting, we could perhaps update her on any engagement that officials have had with Edinburgh council.

The Convener: It is on the front page of the *Edinburgh Evening News* today.

Jenny Gilruth: I should say that that is not my local paper.

The Convener: Before we finish this part of the session, Michelle Thomson will come in very briefly.

Michelle Thomson: In relation to the earlier discussions about student numbers, I checked the UCAS clearing table, which shows that, in 2019, there were 28,750 Scotland-domiciled students. Setting aside a range of other factors, which we all understand, if there was a reduction of 1,200 from the 2023 figure, which was 30,050, that would take us back to 28,850, which compares very favourably with the 28,750 in 2019. I thought it that would be helpful to put that on the record. Do you have anything to add to that?

Jenny Gilruth: That is helpful, and it is correct to recognise that we are going back to the situation that existed prior to the pandemic. We should be mindful that the education system has been through a period of turmoil in relation to Covid. That additionality was built into the system, much in the same way that, post-pandemic, we have now gone back to holding examinations in schools. Things are different. When we try to baseline or measure things against the year that came prior to there being additional places in the system, I do not think that gives an accurate depiction, much like when we try to compare the attainment gap with that which existed last year or

the year prior to that, because we had different arrangements in place for those years.

Ms Thomson is absolutely accurate and correct in her assessment that comparing those numbers with 2019 gives a better overall understanding of the progress that we are making in relation to student places.

Michelle Thomson: Thank you.

The Convener: Thank you very much, and well done to Michelle Thomson for getting that on the record.

That concludes the first part of our evidence session.

10:42

Meeting suspended.

11:12

On resuming—

The Convener: Welcome back. We will continue taking evidence from the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, moving to questions on the education reform agenda.

Alongside the cabinet secretary for the second session are the Scottish Government officials Clare Hicks, who is the director for education reform, and Laura Murdoch, who is the deputy director of the curriculum and qualifications division. I invite the cabinet secretary to make some brief opening remarks on the education reform agenda before we move to questions. You have up to three minutes, cabinet secretary.

Jenny Gilruth: I am pleased to be back at the committee to update on progress on education reform. I provided updates to Parliament in November and December last year, and the Minister for Higher and Further Education appeared before the committee last week.

The International Council of Education Advisers report that was published in November recommends that we do not change structures too much in the short to medium term and that we should focus on improving teaching professionals and their development, collaboration and innovation. That is at the forefront of my thinking. We cannot unleash the potential of reform without taking the teaching profession with us.

The consultation on the proposed education bill closed just before Christmas. It sought views on proposals for the new qualifications body and the approach to inspection. A series of events heard the views of almost 1,000 teachers and many others working in education, and my thanks go to all of them. We will continue to engage throughout

the reform process, including, critically, with the voices of children and young people.

The role of leadership in the national bodies will be crucial in transforming practice and culture. In November, I appointed the new Scottish Qualifications Authority chair, Shirley Rogers, who is the first woman to hold the post, and I approved the appointment of an interim chief inspector of education, Janie McManus.

I also announced my intention to initiate a curriculum improvement cycle from this year. That will include curriculum content, the role of knowledge, transitions between primary and secondary, and alignment between the broad general education and senior phase.

11:15

My view is that maths education should be the initial focus for improvement. We will recruit a maths specialist who will lead on that while working alongside our national response for improving mathematics, and we will seek input from teachers later this year.

The reform bill will be laid before Parliament this year. It will progress the establishment of the centre of teaching excellence and decisions on the reviews that I received last year. I remain committed to debating the proposals for the independent review of qualifications and assessment early this year; it is crucial that those recommendations are examined thoroughly.

The current generation of young people had their formal education disrupted for almost two years by a global pandemic. Last year, on-going industrial action further hampered the continuity of schooling. Scottish Government figures that were published in December suggest that school attendance has fallen to a record low. All of that is compounded by changes in behaviour and relationships in our classrooms. Evidence from England and Wales that was published last week by the Centre for Social Justice spoke about the fraying disconnect between home and schooling post-pandemic.

Scotland's challenges are not unique and reform cannot sit in a vacuum of expectation, informed by the cosy consensus that Walter Humes warned the committee of. It must try to deliver improved outcomes for our young people and, as the ICEA argued last year, a clear and beneficial impact on the learning experience of young people and their teachers should be the acid test of any proposal. Reform needs to improve outcomes for our young people, build on quality learning and teaching, support our teaching workforce and engage parents and carers.

I look forward to answering the committee's questions and to hearing any suggestions that committee members might have.

The Convener: Thank you, cabinet secretary. I invite questions, the first of which will be from Willie Rennie.

Willie Rennie: We are quite far into this reform programme; we could say that it started in 2016. I would like to understand from the cabinet secretary what she thinks is wrong with Scottish education and what we are trying to fix.

Jenny Gilruth: Ha! I believe that Mr Rennie has attempted to set a trap for me in asking about what I think is wrong with Scottish education.

Willie Rennie: No.

Jenny Gilruth: I think that there are many strengths in Scottish education. In 2015—the year prior to the one that Mr Rennie cites—I was in the classroom, so I went through the most recent curriculum reform iteration as a teacher. We need to learn lessons from the implementation of curriculum for excellence in the implementation of any changes to the current qualifications, because there are things that we should do differently in future. We need to engage the profession in that and create time for the profession to be fully engaged.

I do not necessarily think that there are things wrong with Scottish education, though I would accept that there are challenges. We see that in the programme for international student assessment data that was published at the end of last year. I met Professor Graham Donaldson, whom the committee will be well acquainted with, just after my appointment in the summer last year. We talked about some of the challenges in relation to broad general education and the senior phase.

One thing that I think is unresolved from curriculum reform in Scotland is the transition from BGE and the straight-through curriculum to the senior phase. There is a disconnect. I argue, from a classroom teacher or head of department level, that part of that is about the hours that are allocated to courses. It does not work when you timetable at the current time, so you break the broad general education to deliver more courses. There is variation in the system, and I think that the committee might have taken evidence on that. Certainly, in the previous session of Parliament, Mr Greer and I heard evidence on the number of courses that are delivered in S4.

I have a report on my desk from Professor Louise Hayward, who talks about entitlements in the system. That is a challenge to Government that we need to resolve through reform. Right now, we do not have entitlements; the number of subjects that are delivered in schools varies

across the board, and we need to use reform to address and improve that.

Willie Rennie: You have dug into quite a bit of important detail, but I have never had from any of your predecessors a simple explanation for why we have slipped down the international rankings and why there is a yawning poverty-related attainment gap. I have never had that explained properly and succinctly to me. There is clearly recognition that there is a problem, because we have had an eight-year programme of education reform, whatever you might think of that. There is clearly a recognition that there is an issue, a problem or, as you describe it, a challenge. However, can you succinctly explain to me how we have got into this position?

Jenny Gilruth: I do not think that it is something that has happened since 2016.

Willie Rennie: No, I accept that, but what was recognised in 2016? Nobody has explained it. Why have we embarked on education reform if there is nothing wrong?

Jenny Gilruth: I do not think that the current reforms mirror those that existed in 2016—forgive me, I was not in post at that time. We are working in a completely different space to that which existed when I was first elected, in 2016, and when Mr Swinney, I think, brought forward those changes. We live in a post-pandemic world, and I tried to contextualise some of the challenge that we face in Scotland by saying that it is not unique to us.

Mr Rennie asked why we are uniquely falling down the international league tables, as it were, in relation to the PISA data that was published last year. We are not unique. When it comes to comparable countries, that was the Covid edition. However, in my statement to the Parliament, I made it very clear that we need to turn that trajectory around.

Willie Rennie: Okay, I accept all the pandemic stuff. I do not know whether I am going to get anywhere with this, but I am genuinely puzzled that the Government has embarked on a 10-year programme of education reform without really being able to explain why.

There was a kind of panic in 2016, and we set bold ambitions to close the poverty-related attainment gap, whether completely or substantially. At that point, there was an ambition to respond to get us further up the PISA tables, whatever you think of their validity. Nicola Sturgeon said that closing that gap was her “defining mission”. Now, we have moved on from all of that and are saying that it is all about the pandemic. Surely we have to recognise that something was wrong. My view is that you had a ragtag bunch of reforms that did not really come

together because you did not understand what the problem was. Is that not right?

Jenny Gilruth: I do not accept Mr Rennie's illustration of what happened prior to my time in office.

Willie Rennie: So, what do you accept? Why did we do all this?

Jenny Gilruth: Mr Rennie asks why we wanted to close the poverty-related attainment gap. Surely the answer should be obvious to him: we want to ensure that children who live in poverty attain and go on to positive destinations.

Willie Rennie: Why did it happen, then?

Jenny Gilruth: Why did it happen? Why did the poverty-related attainment gap—

Willie Rennie: No. Why did the education system allow the poverty-related attainment gap to get so wide—much wider than in other countries of a similar type?

Jenny Gilruth: I am not necessarily sure that it could be said that Scotland's attainment gap is wider than that of any comparable country. I do not have the data in front of me, but I do not think that we are unique. We were one of the first countries to identify the challenge. Before a number of countries took action in that space, we said that there was a problem.

I will give a bit of a technical answer, but it is my honest opinion. In the past, historically—certainly, when I was at school and, I imagine, when Mr Rennie was at school, although that was longer ago—*[Laughter.]*

Willie Rennie: That was savage.

Jenny Gilruth: At that time, certain young people were encouraged to leave school after S4. Basically, they were told, "Do you know what? School's not for you. You're not bright enough," and they were filtered off somewhere else. Things have completely changed in our schools now, as a result of the Government's reforms and a different approach to how we measure success, which says, "Do you know what? If you're going on to study an apprenticeship or a course that might not be the traditional five-highers offering, that, too, has accreditation and merit."

For example, last week, I was in a school in Glasgow that is doing fantastic work with the Scottish credit and qualifications framework's ambassador programme. Four confident young people presented to me the work of their school and got accreditation for it. In the past—when I was at school in the 1990s—we encouraged some young people to leave school. We said that school and university were not for them. We have completely altered our approach to what education is about.

Willie Rennie: I accept that. Let us move on. I am not sure that I have had a clear answer.

There is an expectation in the education world that we will have substantial reform, although opinion is divided. I will summarise what you have said: basically, a lot is going on—there are big challenges with behaviour, absence and the pandemic—and we need to deal with those and invest in teachers rather than in structural reform. I get that argument. Will that alone deal with the problems of the poverty-related attainment gap—which is still big—and performance overall, internationally? Will it be enough?

Jenny Gilruth: My rebuttal to Mr Rennie relates to how we quantify the poverty-related attainment gap and the role of schools. We have a huge programme and a commitment to investing significant amounts of public money in closing the gap, but schools can do only so much. On average, our children spend about 20 per cent of their time in school and 80 per cent at home. In that mix, we may need to remember the limitations on schools when it comes to some of the work on closing the gap.

On Mr Rennie's second point, it is in improving performance that I think we can make a real difference in how we invest in our teachers. We did that last year through the pay deal. We need to do more work on that, as we heard earlier, and I am sure that Ms Duncan-Glancy will talk about that, too, in relation to class contact time. We really need to invest in the profession, recognising their role in driving improvement. Teachers will be key to ensuring that we get to where we need to be in relation to improvement.

Mr Rennie talks about a tension between substantial reform, the various bodies and all the reports that I have on my desk. We will come to the chamber in a few weeks' time for a wider debate on qualifications, and I am keen to hear views from members on that. I am really struck, however, by the amount of pressure that the education system is under, particularly our secondary schools.

The committee will reflect on the fact that it is only this year, following the pandemic, that the SQA has reintroduced some of the qualification requirements that existed before Covid. Some of our young people have never had to sit any internal assessments or do the assignments that might sit alongside them, and they are suddenly being asked to do all those extra things. Many teachers might not have previously delivered some of that course content, because the SQA stripped it out. Therefore, I need to measure and balance carefully the changes that are coming in the future with the current reality, which, as we will hear in the chamber this afternoon, is challenging.

Willie Rennie: I get that. My fear is that your course of action is a bit more about the status quo and will not deliver the promise that you have made to make significant progress on overall performance and on the poverty-related attainment gap. Are you not afraid that that might be the case? I understand the pressures—I get all that—but are you not afraid about that? I characterise your approach as the “status quo”, although I know it is more than that, but are you not worried that, if you do not drive forward more substantial change, you will not get substantial improvement?

Jenny Gilruth: The status quo will not cut it. Mr Rennie knows the PISA scores, and I have been up-front about our approach in responding to the challenge in relation to maths education, for example. There is a challenge right now in relation to languages education, too, and I am sure that we will come on to talk about it.

We need to look again at some of the courses that are delivered. That is not about the status quo; it is about the role of knowledge within curriculum for excellence. We heard a critique about that at the end of term, and I am sure that we will come on to discuss that in a bit more detail. We need to fundamentally consider some of the course content in relation to the delivery of CFE in the BGE to ensure that the curriculum is fit for purpose in the modern age and to update and refresh some of it.

On the maths curriculum, I have spoken to maths specialists—I confess that I am not one—and have heard that there is a certain way in which our young people require to be taught maths to build their learning. That needs to be better supported across the system.

Mr Rennie will not hear the status quo from me. I will come to the Parliament with a plan for the action that I intend to take. I am extremely mindful that there is lots of flux in the system just now in connection with the expectation stemming from the various reports. I was not the cabinet secretary during lockdown, nor during what happened with the SQA, but at that moment in time there was an anger in the system, as I still hear from teachers, around the SQA—and Government, to be fair—during the examinations period, with real frustration.

When I was appointed, I was told that there was a real appetite for radical change in the system, but I would gently suggest to the committee that, if you engage with secondary teachers, particularly those who teach S4 and up, you will find that the degree of appetite for radical reform is not as present as it might have been in the system in 2021.

Willie Rennie: Okay.

I have two quick questions. First, the Hayward review has two elements: changing the curriculum and changing the qualifications system. There is more in it than that, but those are central. Are you rejecting the extra columns of personal achievement and project work? Are they now gone?

Jenny Gilruth: I have not yet responded to Professor Hayward’s review, so I am not going to respond in committee today.

Willie Rennie: Go on—just between us.

Jenny Gilruth: Just between us? I am not sure that is how it works.

Willie Rennie: Nobody is watching.

Jenny Gilruth: I will respond formally to Professor Hayward’s consultation. There are parts of it that I think we will take forward, and there are parts of it that I will need to consider. The Hayward report would mark a substantive change in how we deliver qualifications in Scotland. It needs to be translated into an action plan for schools to implement, and it is not there yet.

To be fair to Professor Hayward, she talks about a 10-year plan and about setting out how we would map change. I am a modern studies teacher, however, so I am thinking, “How would I timetable that?” Those are the practical things that the Government needs to have an answer to in responding to her report, and we do not yet have those answers. I will respond to all the recommendations.

11:30

Willie Rennie: Will we have that in time for the debate that you are proposing?

Jenny Gilruth: I would like to hear your ideas first, Mr Rennie, before I pre-empt my response.

Willie Rennie: You never do.

The Convener: The committee is looking for a definitive timeline for your response to the review.

Jenny Gilruth: Not only do I have to respond to Professor Hayward’s review, but there are a plethora of different reports on my desk. The point that I made at the previous committee meeting was that we need a bit more connectivity between what is happening in the lifelong learning and skills portfolio, which is Graeme Dey’s responsibility, and schools.

The Convener: Last week, we were able to get a timeline of March from Graeme Dey in relation to his portfolio, so we are looking for something similar from you. The committee wants guidance on when we can expect some information.

Jenny Gilruth: We will also be working to a similar timeline—the end of March—if that helps the committee.

Willie Rennie: Will the debate happen before that or after?

Jenny Gilruth: I would like the debate to inform my response to the recommendations, and I want to ensure that I have heard all the ideas that Willie Rennie and his colleagues have.

Willie Rennie: I have lots of ideas.

Jenny Gilruth: Good.

The Convener: There will be lots of ideas from Mr Rennie.

Jenny Gilruth: I look forward to hearing them.

The Convener: As ever. Michelle Thomson has a question.

Michelle Thomson: Last week in the chamber, the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care, Michael Matheson, gave a speech with which I strongly agreed. He emphasised the need for culture change and talked about some of the work that is being done on that. I intervened to comment that, because of my previous life experience, I know that changing culture as part of general change programmes is the hardest thing to do. Do you think that the culture within the civil service, national agencies and local authorities needs to change? Do you back up what Professor Humes from the University of Stirling described in a previous evidence session as “a cosy conformity” in the culture? If so, in what ways does it need to change?

Jenny Gilruth: I read some of the evidence that the committee took from Professor Humes. I met him in the summer after my appointment, because he has expressed many views on the Scottish Government’s performance on a variety of different topics over the years. His points about cosy conformity are quite accurate. There is not a lot of grit or challenge in the system. There is lots of grit directed my way, because I am the lightning rod for grit—I am the cabinet secretary—but I refer back to my response to questions from other members in the previous committee meeting about accountability at the local authority level. We seem to have forgotten that local authorities have such accountability, so we need to take the opportunity to reset some of that through the Verity house agreement.

I talked about the accountability framework in my response to a member earlier. We need challenge and we need grit. Sometimes, in Scottish education, we become reliant on hearing from the same people about the same topics. I make that observation as a previous member of the committee and having observed some of the

witnesses who have already appeared. We need to hear fresh voices.

We also need to hear from teachers. During the previous parliamentary session, when Ross Greer and I were on your predecessor committee, we would hold private evidence sessions with teachers. I do not know whether the committee has explored that idea. I recall that the committee was keen to come to my behaviour summits, but teachers would not feel comfortable if they thought that their views were being recorded for purposes such as a parliamentary debate. They benefit from private time with politicians listening to them.

The first school visit that I undertook when I took up my role was to the school in Edinburgh where I taught. I asked my officials, Edinburgh council representatives and the headteacher to leave the room so that I could talk to the staff honestly about what was going on. That really helped to inform some of my thinking in the early days after I took up my post.

Professor Humes is absolutely right that there is a cosy conformity. We need a bit more challenge. I welcome the challenge, because it is a huge part of the job of being a cabinet secretary, but we also need to ensure that the critical voices in the system, such as that of Professor Humes, are listened to and not managed.

We cannot reach a consensus with the critique of Scottish education, and that is okay. However, to drive improvement we need to be a bit more honest about that, because, as per Willie Rennie’s point, consensus has delivered the status quo. Perhaps the challenge around some of the deliverability is how we unpick some of that.

The Convener: I am heartened by what you have said, cabinet secretary. Going back to cosy conformity, how actively have you looked at diversity, particularly cognitive and cultural diversity, in the various roles that are in place?

The tradition is to have experts only in the chosen field, but the data tells us that bringing people in from other areas—as part of a mix, of course, because we need their expertise—can be highly effective. The data also tells us that it can be fairly disastrous to only involve people from certain sectors. I am thinking about the banking sector in 2008, for example. What active consideration have you given to the roles to which you might seek to appoint people or to refresh—without setting any hares running, obviously?

Jenny Gilruth: On diversity, we have our first female chair of the SQA. That is good—it represents progress in the qualifications body. More broadly, we maybe need to give a bit more thought to diversity, because, if you are talking about the advice that I receive as cabinet secretary, that comes primarily from civil servants

in the Scottish Government and, to a large extent, advice on learning and reform comes from Education Scotland.

When I was a staff member there, many years ago, the Education Scotland staffing complement depended on secondments. In my experience, that was helpful because it meant staff coming out of the classroom, having a refresh and engaging with pedagogy and changes to the curriculum, then going back into the system. The organisation pivoted away from that model of secondments under the previous chief executive, so it is now quite static. We need to think again about how we refresh some of the thinking that I hear as cabinet secretary to ensure that it is fresh, that it comes from the classroom and that it can deliver tangible improvements.

I can only do so much going out and engaging directly with teachers, but I do it pretty much every week. To go back to Ms Thomson's point about diversity, if you go into a school, you will see that teachers have the solutions. They know what is working—to go back to Mr Rennie's point—and they know what is not working, and they know how they could fix it.

When you sit down with a group of teachers, they are always quite pragmatic in coming up with solutions. Therefore, in response to Ms Thomson's specific point about diversity, there is something to be considered about how we capture that in responding to Professor Hayward's review as well as the other reviews on my desk.

It feels as though there is a bit of a disconnect—it certainly felt that way when I was appointed cabinet secretary—between where we have got to on policy reform and all the different people who fed in to those reports, if we are talking about consensus and the reality of being a classroom teacher.

Michelle Thomson: Of course, that is the case not just in schools but in other key stakeholder groupings.

Jenny Gilruth: Yes.

Michelle Thomson: I will move on. One of the other things that has been talked about is empowerment in the system and a kind of licence to operate, if you like, and how the Scottish Government can create an environment in which teachers are empowered, given that there is a part in the middle where COSLA and local authorities sit. My question is almost from a leadership perspective. What leadership can you put in place to ensure that teachers are empowered? Of course, that translates all the way through the system.

Jenny Gilruth: Back in 2018, when Mr Swinney was Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills,

we had a joint agreement with COSLA. Since then, we have taken a number of actions in relation to the empowerment agenda. I think that the committee took evidence on that from SLS, which understandably had an interest, given its membership. We have the headteachers charter, which looks at setting out how we could deliver a more empowered system. We have empowerment guidance for school leaders and staff. Ms Thomson, you also spoke about the importance of other members who support school education, and we need to be cognisant of the role of parents and the wider community in that.

The driving of the empowerment agenda is contingent on local authorities. In my experience, they can curtail that empowerment agenda, and I think that the committee might have heard evidence to that end.

Michelle Thomson: Yes, we did.

Jenny Gilruth: I have certainly heard evidence to that end. Sometimes, authorities take a monolithic, one-size-fits-all approach to their area. That can be really disempowering for headteachers. It can also mean that headteachers and middle leaders in schools—as I experienced in a previous life—can be disempowered in things such as the recruitment process, so they do not have the ability to appoint a member of staff to their team. Those are the key decisions that you would expect middle leaders and headteachers to have control over. However, when local authorities view teachers as numbers that can be moved around from school to school, they are not always thinking about what is best for the leadership in that school, for the teachers' professional development or for the young people.

We have resources at a national level and we have the headteachers charter, but the answer to Michelle Thomson's substantive point must come from the new relationship with local government in the Verity house agreement, and it must be about encouraging a spirit of empowerment across the country rather than only in pockets. We know that, where empowerment does happen, it works well, staff feel valued and outcomes improve.

The Convener: Cabinet secretary, you have spoken a lot about different aspects of education reform and how you are looking to feed back some of your thoughts about that. On the subject of how you are going about your business now, how are implementation and evaluation being embedded into your thinking and the approach that you are taking? We are looking at a quite complex future as you juggle all the on-going reform.

Jenny Gilruth: As I said in my opening statement, when I was first appointed, I was struck first by the number of reports that landed on my desk in quick succession and then by the reality of

what my former colleagues were experiencing in our classrooms. Some of that experience, including the changes in behaviour and attendance, has been raised in the chamber in recent months. Proponents of curriculum reform sometimes suggest that it can solve some or all of those challenges. I am not necessarily sure that I would accept that, but I think that there are opportunities to provide a more engaging curriculum.

Regarding evaluation, we are listening to and engaging with the profession. We engaged with 1,000 teachers towards the end of last year. We also asked local authorities to build in time during the in-service days in August, although some did it in October, to look at the changes proposed by the Hayward review and at the national discussion, which sometimes gets lost in the mix but did, in itself, set out a vision for reform. We will capture those views and ensure that they help to inform some of our thinking about the legislative changes that will be required for both bodies. The legislation is imminent, so I do not want to talk about the specifics of that, because it has not yet been laid before Parliament.

The Convener: Pam Duncan-Glancy has some questions.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I will take the theme of support for teachers a bit further and talk about empowerment and a bottom-up approach. I am sure that, during your engagement with teachers, you will have heard about their concern that decisions are outwith their control and are taken far away from them, rather than on the front line, but they are then expected to deliver on those decisions in difficult circumstances. How is the Government balancing top-down leadership with a more bottom-up approach to curriculum reform?

Jenny Gilruth: That is a very good question, if I may say so, Ms Duncan-Glancy.

Earlier today, we talked about the pay dispute. The committee knows pretty well how that frayed relationships between Government, the teaching unions and the profession. I have been trying to make things a bit better in the past eight months, but we will have to work differently and work together. The professional associations want to be part of the solution to educational reform.

Ms Duncan-Glancy talks about bottom-up decision making, which I suppose speaks to some of the challenges that I rehearsed in my response to Ms Thomson. Decisions can be taken for people in education that leave them feeling disempowered by the process.

Headteachers have a degree of flexibility, but they can exercise that only if they are empowered to do so by their local authorities. For example, a local authority might make a decision about

closing a building and, although a headteacher might have carried out a risk assessment and be happy to have the building open, they might be overruled by their local authority. Those things are demoralising and can be quite challenging for leaders in schools.

On the subject of things being taken out of classroom teachers' control, it would be helpful to hear a little more from Ms Duncan-Glancy. Certain things are taken out of a classroom teacher's control. They might not have control of their timetable or of the classes that present in front of them. I am speaking as a secondary school specialist, but primary teachers will talk about the year group that they might be planning for. Some of those things are not in their gift.

If Ms Duncan-Glancy has ideas about how we can build that into the reform agenda, I would be happy to hear them. To some extent, the empowerment agenda was a creation of the previous Parliament and we must not forget about that work, because it has to support education reform in the here and now. Returning to that work to refresh people's understanding, particularly local authorities' understanding, would be helpful.

On the point about the teaching workforce, we resolved the pay dispute but we did not talk about the other challenges that the profession faces. That speaks to the challenges that Ms Duncan-Glancy has illustrated, whether in regard to workload, additional support needs or behaviour, which I am sure we will come on to talk about this afternoon, if not now. We need to resolve that relationship around conditions, and I do not think that where we got to last year did that.

11:45

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

As you will be aware, part of the concern is about having the time to engage with reform. This is paraphrasing, and I am sure that you will set me right if I am wrong, but you said that support for the reforms among the teaching profession could be waning—that might be the most polite way to say it—from the eager appetite for radical reform that maybe existed in 2021. Might that have something to do with the fact that teachers are facing immediate challenges in the classroom?

Jenny Gilruth: Yes, absolutely. Post-pandemic, our schools are being expected to mop up quite a lot of society's challenges. We have heard from Mr Rennie about the poverty-related attainment gap. That gap exists and, although it is not all of schools' creation, we expect schools to mop up all of the challenge. We need a much more holistic approach, and part of that relates to how we budget across the Scottish Government. We need

a much more holistic understanding of the inputs that we, as a Government, are putting in to try to disrupt the attainment gap, because we cannot expect our schools to do everything.

I joked earlier about my being a lightning rod for political challenge. In part, that is because schools are now expected to do so much more, even compared to when Ms Duncan-Glancy and I were at school. When I go into schools and see the extra things that they are doing for our young people, I am blown away. Yes, part of that is funded by the additionality from PEF and SAC, but part of it is a societal expectation that, as a teacher put it to me a few weeks ago, schools will step into the breach where other services can step back. School is a constant in a child's life.

I understand and agree with Ms Duncan-Glancy's point. We need to reconsider how we can pull other services into supporting schools, because they cannot do it alone, and we are expecting more and more from them.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I agree with the cabinet secretary on that. Being in the position that she is in, what does she intend to do about it?

Jenny Gilruth: As I outlined in my response to Ms Thomson, part of it is about the Verity house agreement. It has to be about local authorities and Government working in a new way. To go back to Walter Humes's point, that will mean challenge between Government and local authorities, but it will also mean accountability and honesty about where the responsibility rests.

We need to disrupt the poverty-related attainment gap. That has to be about a funded and well-supported education system, but it is not just about the education system; it is about everything in the round. For example, a number of schools have shared services, whether that is with social work or support services from the third sector, for example. That approach can be beneficial to schools, because they are trying to wear so many hats and respond to so many challenges, and they just cannot do all of it on their own. There needs to be greater recognition of that at a local level.

My response to Ms Duncan-Glancy's question about what I am going to do about it would be that, through the reform process, we can look to give a bit more clarity and a bit more of a steer on the ways in which schools can be supported. It is not just about thinking narrowly, as we are understandably doing today, about the education budget; we need to think about the other parts of the budget—says she, during the budget negotiation process—that can help to disrupt some of the challenge.

I cannot recall who referred to the health secretary earlier—it might have been you, convener—but the health secretary could make

interventions from his budget that would help to close the poverty-related attainment gap, and vice versa, I am sure. We have the opportunity to refocus on how we think about the role of education through reform.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Thank you.

The Convener: It was Michelle Thomson who made that reference to the health secretary.

Jenny Gilruth: Sorry.

The Convener: Have you concluded, Ms Duncan-Glancy?

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Can I ask one final question?

The Convener: Briefly.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Those conversations across Government will be very interesting, particularly those on local government budgets.

Finally, given what we have just discussed, is the cabinet secretary concerned, as I am, that there is a reduction of about £7.7 million in the support for teachers budget this year?

Jenny Gilruth: As I understand it, that reduction relates to a demand-led budget line in the main. It is to do with initial teacher education places that were not filled—there was an oversupply of places this year. That calculation is set out by the SFC, I think. That is where that reduction has come from, so there should not be an adverse impact in that regard. Those places were simply not filled.

The Convener: The detail of the demand-led budget lines is all coming out in the wash as the conversation progresses.

We move on to questions from Stephanie Callaghan.

Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): I want to ask about curriculum content. We heard from Professor Stobart about the fact that we do not learn in a vacuum. He told us:

"We need to have mastery of information, facts and basics in order to be able to think about them and use them."—[*Official Report, Education, Children and Young People Committee*, 8 November 2023; c 9.]

Is it the intention of the reviews that more explicit guidance will be provided on the content of the curriculum in the broad general education? What is the role of the Government and its agencies in providing guidance on curriculum content?

Jenny Gilruth: Under curriculum for excellence, we do not have a prescriptive curriculum. We might come on to talk about some of the challenge in relation to what that means for particular subjects. However, there is flexibility in the broad

general education because, essentially, the theory of CFE allows teachers and local decision makers—headteachers—to decide on the curriculum content for their local context.

You asked about specific guidance. Education Scotland has a role to play in providing such guidance. Sometimes, the challenge for Government is not that we need more guidance but that we need more prescription. Towards the end of last year, I was listening to some of the critique around PISA. Some people advocate bringing much more prescription back to the curriculum in Scotland and some say that there has been too much flexibility.

We need to balance that very carefully. That is why I have committed to the curriculum improvement cycle, starting with maths education. The fact that we are starting with maths is predicated on the PISA results, but it also relates to consideration of some of last year's national 5 maths examination results. We need to improve the delivery of the maths curriculum. We will then move on to look at English and literacy more broadly.

Education Scotland can provide explicit guidance, but my question to the committee—and this is an issue for us to consider in the wider debate about qualifications reform—is whether that is what the system is looking for. Is the system looking for explicit guidance or is it looking for prescription? The way in which we deliver CFE is such that we do not prescribe curriculum content, but some people advocate that we should have a level of prescription.

There is a tension between the founding principles of curriculum for excellence and how it operates as a curriculum, but perhaps we need to consider those issues in the context of the broader mix of qualifications reform. I am keen to hear views on that, because some people in the system say that we have gone too far in relation to flexibility, and that what teachers are looking for is a bit more prescription and direction to help them to set out the learning outcomes for their young people.

Stephanie Callaghan: It is good to hear that you are looking at that balance. You are absolutely right in what you said.

Will the curriculum review include an on-going focus on wellbeing and, specifically, anxiety? I am interested in whether we can look at imparting knowledge on why young people continue to feel anxious and giving them a deeper understanding of what is going on in their brain that is making them feel anxious, as well as effective tools for tackling that. I suppose that I am talking about early intervention to prevent that from progressing into something more serious.

Jenny Gilruth: I thank Ms Callaghan for her question. She will know that we prioritise support for wellbeing in our schools through the provision of counsellors in every secondary school and through the expectation in curriculum for excellence that wellbeing is a responsibility for all. All teachers have a responsibility to ensure the wellbeing of their young people.

Ms Callaghan spoke about anxiety, particularly among our young people. I am always struck by the fact that, although the pandemic had an impact on us all, our young people were particularly affected. Their brain development has been impacted by a change in how they consume information. We have had great debates in the chamber in recent times about the use of mobile phones; I saw some members on their phones earlier on, during the budget discussion.

We need to be mindful of the fact that the way in which our young people consume information—indeed, the way in which we all consume information—has changed, which can lead to an increase in anxiety. We need to look at the issue in a bit more detail. Part of the challenge in relation to behaviour and changes in behaviour is informed by an increasing sense of anxiety and worry. Last year, some evidence was published that showed that our young people felt safe returning to school after the pandemic—was that in PISA?

Clare Hicks (Scottish Government): It was in PISA.

Jenny Gilruth: That showed that most pupils were enjoying being back at school and the stability that it brought, which was heartening to see.

We want our young people to enjoy coming to school, and we do not want them to be anxious about going out into the world without those supports. It is a responsibility for all of us. Teachers should—and do—support their young people in relation to their wellbeing, but, more broadly, we need to consider anxiety in our response to changes to behaviour and how we can offer better support.

I do not know whether Clare wants to say more on that.

Clare Hicks: No—you have covered it.

Stephanie Callaghan: I am happy with that, and it is good that you are going to look at that in more detail.

Ruth Maguire: Good morning again, cabinet secretary. With regard to the curriculum, I would like to talk about the breadth of choice in secondary education. The committee heard last year about the research from Dr Marina Shapira

and Professor Mark Priestley. Dr Shapira told the committee:

“We found some absolutely appalling practices such as channelling young people into higher-performing subjects, discouraging them from taking up subjects in which they were not predicted to perform well and abandoning whole subjects that were deemed to be low performing but that might have been very important for providing a holistic, well-rounded education. For us, the culture of performativity was one of the main issues standing in the way of the successful implementation of curriculum for excellence.”—*[Official Report, Education, Children and Young People Committee, 8 November 2023; c 3-4.]*

When I was listening to some of your previous interactions, perhaps particularly with Willie Rennie, it struck me that the first part of that quote could have been plucked from any time in education, because it is not necessarily specific to curriculum for excellence. There is perhaps a bit of a challenge in that. You will be aware of that research, and I am interested in hearing your reflections on it.

The report on the research spoke about a reduction in the number of national qualifications entries at S4 compared with the period prior to the introduction of curriculum for excellence. It also spoke about

“significant curricular fragmentation in many schools”,
with pupils having a large number of teachers.

To go back to what was said about prescription versus an open-ended approach, could it be the case that, without having prescription, there is a temptation to steer pupils into subjects that perform well for the schools?

Jenny Gilruth: That could be the case. I am trying to recall—and Mr Greer might recall—the name of the academic from whom we took evidence on that exact topic at this exact table in 2018-19. He was a former headteacher. Do you recall, Mr Greer?

Ross Greer: Yes—he had printed out his spreadsheet and brought it with him. However, I cannot remember his name—sorry.

Jenny Gilruth: He did bring a spreadsheet. I think that he was a friend of Iain Gray, so I was suspicious of him. *[Laughter.]* Anyway, I will set that aside.

At that point in 2018-19, we already had the evidence that talked about the number of subjects reducing in S4, the counter-argument to which would be that we now have a broader curriculum up to the end of S3. I will go back to the point that I made to Willie Rennie, who asked me what was wrong with Scottish education. Nothing is wrong with it, and we have a strong education system, but we did not fix the break between the BGE and the senior phase. That is part of the challenge in relation to course choice, because it is about

practical delivery. Therefore, in my response to Professor Hayward’s review, I am thinking very carefully about how that will work in schools.

When Ms Maguire and I were at school, pupils would sit maybe seven or eight standard grades. In some schools, pupils would sit nine, but, across the country, the number was in the region of seven or eight. Now, you could walk into a school down the road and pupils might be sitting for five qualifications, but another school might have adhered to the traditional two-plus-two-plus-two model and not have moved much away from the theory of thinking about the curriculum, because that school wants to stick to the point, which Ms Maguire made, about performativity and believes that that is the best way to deliver results for our young people. There is a challenge in that, which goes back to the points that I made about whether we have a prescriptive curriculum with regard to entitlements.

However, I think that part of the response to curriculum changes and updating and responding to some of the curriculum improvement cycle work has to address the gap between the BGE and the senior phase. If I can be really niche-orientated, given that I had to write a timetable in a previous life, the hours that the SQA currently ascribes to national qualifications mean that schools cannot timetable more than—I think, but Mr Greer will keep me right—five subjects in S4 unless they start the delivery of the national qualifications in S3, which breaks the BGE. We need to have an answer to that.

12:00

Most schools start to deliver their national qualification subjects a bit earlier, in S3, to account for the delivery associated with the qualification. However, our new qualifications organisation must talk to the folk who write timetables in schools. In the past, there has been a disconnect—never the two shall meet. We need to think about the practicalities. If we unpick the qualifications, those are the things to which teachers will be responding. On Ms Maguire’s point about S4 entries, that is how we try to provide a bit more equality across the provision. That relates to Professor Hayward’s challenge around entitlements.

Through reform, there is the opportunity to fix some of the challenges in the system without necessarily unpicking all of it. That will involve fixing where we get to between the broad general education and the implementation of the senior phase. There are lots of ways in which we can avoid the two-term dash, as it is often referred to. We can deliver qualifications across two years, as many schools already do because they think that that delivers better outcomes for their young

people. That will move us away from a system that involves three years of exams. As the committee will know, because it will have taken evidence on this, we like a test in Scotland. There is an argument that we need to broaden what constitutes assessment and how we measure outcomes for young people.

Ruth Maguire: You were very generous in indicating that we might have been at school at the same time—I think that I was a tiny bit ahead of you, but thank you.

Jenny Gilruth: I shall not comment, Ms Maguire.

Ruth Maguire: That is very polite.

Jenny Gilruth: Of course, I commented on Mr Rennie. [*Laughter.*]

Ruth Maguire: When I was at school, people studied one of the sciences and a language for a number of years, but that does not happen now. Yesterday's members' business debate was about modern languages at the University of Aberdeen. If young people are being funnelled towards subjects in which they are likely to perform well—it might be hard to study modern languages in schools if there is no demand for such subjects—could the breadth and the less prescriptive approach actually narrow things for young people?

Jenny Gilruth: The counter-argument is that, in the past, we compelled young people to take subjects that they absolutely hated.

Ruth Maguire: Chemistry.

Jenny Gilruth: Indeed—I have flashbacks to standard grade chemistry.

If you speak to secondary school teachers, they will tell you stories about teaching S4 classes that included pupils who hated the subject and did not want to be there. We need to be a bit careful, because some young people do not necessarily want to study physics and chemistry until the end of S4, but the way in which their timetable offer is constructed might funnel them in that direction.

Some schools are really good at building a timetable around pupil choice. Some schools ask their young people what they want to study and the timetable is then built according to pupil choice. That is a much more democratic way of building a timetable. Other schools use a more traditional method that involves creating a timetable according to how many staff and teachers they have.

Ruth Maguire: It is good to hear you say that. We hear quite a lot about what teachers are looking for—I do not want to diminish teachers' experiences or their importance in this regard—but we should also consider what children and young people are looking for.

Jenny Gilruth: The point about demand is important. When I was teaching, in 2015, two or three young people in my school wanted to study advanced higher modern studies. There is a question about whether a school should run a course with three people and one well-paid middle leader. Another school in the town in which I taught at the time delivered an advanced higher modern studies course, so the young people went to that school to study for that qualification. Demand has a role to play, and we should be mindful of that.

Ms Maguire's other point related to discouraging young people from taking second subjects in which they might not do well. When I taught in Edinburgh, we had a whole-school policy that, if a pupil did not attain 33.33 per cent in their prelim, they could not sit the final exam. I remember that, in about 2011, headteachers came to an all-staff meeting to talk about moving away from that policy because the city had a policy, informed by Scottish Government policy, to close the attainment gap, which meant that young people should have the opportunity to sit a final exam. There was a need for a real culture shift among the staff in the school, including me, because we had thought that, if young people had not attained a certain percentage, they should not be allowed the opportunity to sit the exam. We have moved so far beyond that, and we are now presenting those young people for qualifications.

A counter-argument to that, Ms Maguire, is that some of those young people might not be ready for qualifications, but the answer to that is continuous assessment. Indeed, that is one of the recommendations flowing from Hayward. It is all about tracking, monitoring and supporting our young people throughout the year to ensure that they are ready for any final examinations.

We must also think about the percentages associated with the final examination. At the moment, for most qualifications, the final exam has a high weighting, which puts a lot of pressure on young people. I would argue that we need to look more generally at how we allocate marks throughout the year through continuous assessment, and we should be mindful of the opportunities that that would provide us with, too.

Ruth Maguire: We have covered a number of the factors that might make it challenging for schools to provide a broad offer in the senior phase. I know that you have partly addressed this already, but is there any more that you want to say about what the Government might do to mitigate the barriers or challenges that schools are facing?

Jenny Gilruth: Some of the barriers that schools face go back to the challenge that arises with regard to prescription and flexibility. We have an extremely flexible curriculum—some say that it

is too flexible—with only maths and English mandated until the end of S4 and everything else optional. I am keen to hear from the committee on this, but perhaps that is something that we should reconsider. It is not in one of the many reports on my desk at the current time, and I do not think there is a direct recommendation on prescription in the Hayward report. It would kind of fly in the face of CFE. However, the argument for flexibility also has to meet learners' needs, and sometimes a challenge can arise in that respect.

I know from experience that the running of courses depends on the staff that a school has, and that does not necessarily meet the needs of learners. In that respect, we need to think through reform and how we deliver on the entitlements that Professor Hayward talked about, which might mean looking at some of the thorny issues around prescription. It will be challenging—indeed, I think again of that fourth-year class and having a number of young people in front of you who do not want to be there and do not want to study your subject—but there is something to be said for having a breadth of offer in our curriculum, and CFE gives, or is meant to give, such breadth until the end of S3. The question is about how we ensure that the same thing happens with qualifications.

Ruth Maguire: Thank you.

The Convener: We have a number of supplementaries on the same theme. I must ask that they be kept brief.

Ross Greer: This is not a supplementary, convener. For the sake of the *Official Report*, I have found the name that I was looking for. It was Professor Jim Scott, from the University of Dundee, who gave the evidence that the cabinet secretary and I heard in the previous parliamentary session. He found that just over half of schools in Scotland were offering six courses in S4, that about a third were offering seven, that about one in 11 were offering eight and that three or four—presumably those doing a two-year higher—were offering five.

The Convener: Thank you for that. I call Liam Kerr.

Liam Kerr: I will be very brief. I think that Ruth Maguire made a very important point about last night's debate on modern languages. A number of contributors highlighted the importance of modern languages not only to the young people involved but to our global ambitions and our economy. In that context, 1,500 fewer pupils are studying languages at nat 5 and more than 1,000 fewer are taking them at higher level. Does the cabinet secretary recognise the importance of modern languages? If so, what is she doing about those figures?

Jenny Gilruth: I am not going to use my rusty higher French to respond to Mr Kerr—

Liam Kerr: Quel dommage. [*Laughter.*]

Jenny Gilruth: Oh, mon ami—okay.

At the end of last year, there were a number of different reports about the provision of language courses at the University of Aberdeen. I also met the principal to discuss that very subject towards the end of last year—I should say that it is a matter for the university, which is independent of Government—and I understand that the issue is one of footfall: the university does not have the numbers to drive the availability of courses.

Nevertheless, I accept that there is a challenge around languages. I have asked to engage with Education Scotland on the point, and I met officials last week to look again at our languages policy and how we are supporting it. We have done a lot of work in our primary schools on the one-plus-two model to support the delivery of language learning, with our young people learning two languages, and I think that we could look to support more in that space.

Liam Kerr's substantive point goes back to Ruth Maguire's point about whether we should prescribe in the curriculum that language learning should happen until the end of S4. That is not in our current curriculum. If that is a view that Mr Kerr would like to explore with me when it comes to qualifications reform, I will be happy to hear it.

Both Liam Kerr and I have a qualification in languages. I have found mine very helpful in conversing with Mairi Gougeon's husband, who is from France. However, in seriousness, having a second language is helpful, including with a person's development. A friend of mine who is a former German teacher spoke to me recently about the joy of learning languages.

We need to be mindful of some changes to curriculum for excellence. Going back to Mr Rennie's question about what is wrong with Scottish education, we need to consider the link between the BGE and the senior phase but also the role of subjects. In secondary schools, subject specialists with degrees and teaching qualifications to deliver them need to be part of the solution. We need to be mindful of changes to CFE that might drive changes in the uptake of courses, whereby we will have less language learning than we had in the past.

When Liam Kerr and I were at school—although, obviously, he is older than I am—we had to study a language until the end of S4. Probably all of us in this room—maybe not Ross Greer—have an S4 qualification in a language, but the generations who followed us may not, because

they were not compelled to learn a language by their curriculum, which was flexible.

The counter-argument to that is that we should prescribe. Such a curriculum would be very different from the one that we currently have. However, if the committee holds that view, I am happy to hear it. Obviously, we will have a wider debate about qualifications in the next few weeks.

The Convener: In your remarks to Ruth Maguire, you spoke about how some schools timetable. In one of our sessions, prior to Christmas, we heard about the role of artificial intelligence in education. Might there be scope to investigate ways in which AI can help with the timetabling dilemma? Are we looking for solutions? Something might be available.

Jenny Gilruth: Yes. AI gives us a number of opportunities. The committee has written to me specifically on that and I will provide a substantive response in my written reply.

In her review, Professor Hayward made a number of recommendations about AI. In my conversations with Graham Donaldson during the summer, we spoke about how AI could be used in the future to reduce teacher workload. We need to explore such things through reform. Timetabling is an extremely political subject for any secondary school teacher that the committee may speak to. In a school that I worked in formerly, we used to joke that a depute was locked in a cupboard for a week to write the timetable, because it was such a stressful job to pull all of that information together. I am keen to explore any opportunities for using AI, particularly in relation to reducing teacher workload.

I see a role for Education Scotland in that. I know that the committee took evidence from Ollie Bray on AI. Education Scotland should have a key role to play in developing guidance that can help to reduce teacher workload, whether that is timetabling or other work that AI might be able to support.

I feel as though we are at the beginning of our journey with AI, and it changes every day. Qualifications reform will need to be developed in response to some of that change, because it is so fast paced. We can learn a lot from the university sector, too. I will be happy to give a substantive response to the committee on AI specifically.

The Convener: That would be helpful.

In our previous session, we talked about teacher contact time, and there was a bit of pressure from one of the members. It is a spend-to-save agenda item: investment in the technology could make a significant impact. As you have said, the pace of change in that sphere is mind-blowing.

I call Bill Kidd.

Bill Kidd: When I was at school, the cabinet secretary was a senior teacher. *[Laughter.]*

How should the performance of schools be measured? In many places, there is a culture of performativity in which how the school performs is what matters most. Could that be removed so that decisions about pupils' learning and certification are focused on what is best for the pupil rather than on how successful the school registers as being? It more important that schools provide the very best for the community and the pupils who attend than that they are marked up as being the place to go.

12:15

Jenny Gilruth: But that is the reality at the current time, is it not?

Bill Kidd: Well, it is.

Jenny Gilruth: I think that we all accept that, and we can see it. I may pass over to Clare Hicks on this, but part of the challenge is around how we measure performance. The national improvement framework that we have in Government considers a broader range of measures than local authorities consider. The framework will take into account the five highers measure, I think. There is a bit of a disconnect there, which we are working to resolve. I will pass to Clare on the specific point about the variation.

Clare Hicks: The basket of measures that are contained in the national improvement framework cover a broad range spanning the entirety of performance. The purpose of having the national improvement framework is to have a golden thread from the classroom up to Scottish education's performance and improvement journey at a national level. We are working closely with colleagues in local government and COSLA around the different measure that local authorities use—the local government benchmark framework—to see how much we can pull things together. A rounded measure that was not just about five highers or any one particular measure could be used to really assess a school's performance. We are examining that closely at the minute.

Jenny Gilruth: There is a bit of a disconnect between some of the arguments around a culture of performativity and PISA scores. I have to be honest with the committee: PISA is a raw data set that tells the Government a very challenging story. If we are moving away from a culture of performativity, do I have to ignore PISA scores? I do not think so. That data set tells me a story that I need to respond to—and that is one of the reasons why we have rejoined other international surveys that we had previously not been part of for a number of years, which will give me more data.

I think that, during the previous education debate in the chamber, I mentioned the role of PISA and its history. An American President in the 1980s was looking for objective data from the states on education performance. That is the origin of PISA, which is about driving improvement. I do not think that we should necessarily ignore the culture of performativity. I hear about some of the challenge, but we need to improve and PISA gives us a data set to support improvement. That is why we are investing in the other surveys, and it is why we need to engage in the substantive detail—as do local authorities regarding their responsibilities for outcomes for young people.

Clare Hicks: There is a key difference between performativity—how a school responds to the measures that are thought to be about its performance—and improving the performance of Scottish education more broadly. That is what we need to focus on.

Jenny Gilruth: Yes.

Bill Kidd: As you say, it is important to remember the overall picture, which is that we want to improve Scottish education to as great a degree as possible. How does that all relate to what is best for the individual pupils who attend school and how their aims and aspirations can be improved on?

Jenny Gilruth: The best intervention or investment that a Government can make is in a high-quality teaching workforce—that is why we have the best-paid teachers in the UK. We want to work with the profession to support teachers; therefore, I think that the points that Ms Duncan-Glancy made earlier this morning, on class contact, were spot on, and I support her in that endeavour. That does not mean that I do not have challenges in relation to my budget, but, as I hope she heard from me, I think that reducing class contact is part of how we can improve the learner journey through the education system, supporting the workforce who educate the pupils.

That relates to why I made an announcement about the centre for teaching excellence. I see some opportunity, through that model, to support the profession in their professional development. I gave the example earlier—I think to Michelle Thomson, but it might have been in response to another member—of the role of Education Scotland in the past in allowing someone to come out of school and then refresh their knowledge. We have moved away from that model; I want the centre for excellence to provide opportunities for staff, to promote professional learning and to encourage and embed the spirit of professionalism that is already in the teaching profession. We support young people by investing in teachers.

Ben Macpherson: Before I ask my question, I want to say something—I note that it is anecdotal—in response to what the cabinet secretary said earlier about conditions and wanting to address some of the profession's concerns about them. Her points on that were really well made. During the pay dispute, the vast majority of the emails that I received as a constituency MSP were about conditions rather than about pay.

I agree that taking the teaching profession with us, so to speak, on reform is so important. I, too, was working in a school when curriculum for excellence was introduced. The anecdotal feedback then was that it had perhaps been slightly rushed, due mainly to political pressure. All of us would be well served, and would serve our constituents better, if we were to keep that in mind. I agree that we should work towards reform at a reasonable pace, but we should do so in a way that considers the pressures on the profession. Those were important points that you made, cabinet secretary.

I turn to the question that I originally wanted to ask, which relates to the fact that reform is not just about practicalities and processes but about approaches and attitudes. We have heard much about parity of esteem through the various reports that have been published and through our discussions and evidence sessions. Achieving such parity is so important in meeting 21st century needs and achieving wider reform in the area. How is the Government ensuring that parents, carers and family members have a better understanding of the various learning pathways and opportunities available for children and young people, such as going into apprenticeships or the workplace as an alternative to further and higher education? How can we change the unhelpfully prejudiced view in our society that some routes are better than others? We have done a lot in that space, but we need to do more.

Jenny Gilruth: I will respond first to Mr Macpherson's point about CFE being rushed. I think that Mr Russell was Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning when we implemented changes to curriculum qualifications. I was out of the classroom at the time, but I was writing resources to support the implementation of the qualifications. We delayed the changes by a couple of years in response to requests from the teaching profession. We then delayed the implementation of the new higher at the behest of the teaching unions.

However, I agree with Mr Macpherson about the premise behind how we implement qualifications reform. We must think carefully about how we deliver that on the ground. Sometimes there is a bit of a disconnect between what cabinet

secretaries or ministers might say in the chamber and the reality in our communities. Given that education is delivered locally, we must really think about how change is delivered and communicated, how staff are supported and how they are given time to develop. For example, I remember trying to write support materials for the new qualifications because the SQA had published only part of the documentation. We must think about the role of the new qualifications organisation in all that. I go back to Professor Louise Hayward's observations that reform will take time and that we must set out the trajectory and plan for the implementation of changes to qualifications in the future. It will be a big change for the profession if I accept all the recommendations in her report. I am keen to hear members' views on that when we have a wider debate.

The SCQF has a strong role to play in reform, approach and attitudes, and in establishing parity of esteem. I might have spoken about this in our discussion earlier this morning. Last week, I was in a school in Glasgow where young people were involved in the school ambassador programme. The SCQF's accreditation of qualifications is really important in setting out to parents and carers the value that qualifications have, so that they understand that, for example, a higher English might be benchmarked to something that has the same number of points attached to it. The young people at that school in Glasgow were telling me about their school's approach. It has careers fairs where teachers sit at different desks and tell them about qualifications that they might never have heard of. I am looking at Clare Hicks to see whether she can expand on that, but she was not at the visit; neither was Laura Murdoch. From memory, one of the young people told me that she is now going to university to study for a qualification in criminology, because she had an approach from one of her teachers who had told her how that qualification could be used and which careers it could lead to.

We sometimes prescribe too much. We have had a conversation about flexibility, but schools are doing that work anyway. Part of the reform agenda needs to involve pulling together a bit more consistency. Skills Development Scotland and the careers service, in particular, have a role to play in that.

I visited Glenrothes high school, in my constituency, before school started. There is an SDS careers officer embedded in the school community and he knows all the kids there—some kids who have left school still come back to him for advice. I know that not every careers adviser works in that way; Mr Dey spoke at the committee last week about the role of the careers service and how that might change in the future.

That is why, as I said in my opening comments, we cannot divorce what is happening in that space from wider school reform. Parity of esteem for careers has to be part of our response, too. I think that we now have a much better understanding of parity of esteem than we previously did when Mr Macpherson and I were at school—we were definitely at school at the same time, although he might be younger than me.

That understanding has changed, but we need to do more in that space. Nevertheless, when I go into schools, I am always blown away by the number of qualifications that they are now running and the breadth of the offer. We have talked to some extent about narrowing the curriculum, and there is perhaps some truth in that with regard to traditional subjects. However, we can see that subjects such as criminology and higher photography are now being delivered in schools. A range of qualifications are now being delivered, which speaks to Mr Macpherson's ask around parity of esteem and the value that schools place on such qualifications.

Ben Macpherson: As a society, we need to be more comfortable with different positive destinations. I go back to the earlier discussion around the number of university places, which has been part of the public discourse in the past few days. If more young people go into apprenticeships or directly into the workplace because that is the right route to enable them to flourish, we need to be comfortable with the fact that that may have an impact on the numbers of young people who go to university. That is not necessarily a negative thing.

We are at the beginning—well, we are not at the beginning; the situation has developed to a reasonable extent, but we have some way to go in order to get to a place where we, as a society, celebrate whatever a young person thinks is best for them and their abilities, and help them on their journey.

Jenny Gilruth: Absolutely—I recognise the member's point. There is still a hierarchy, and we have not yet got to where we should be on parity of esteem. James Withers made those points pretty vociferously in his report. We need to better understand that issue.

However, our schools are doing a really good job on pathways such as apprenticeships. I have visited a number of schools where colleges now come in to deliver some courses, or young people leave in the afternoon to go to a course. In Glenrothes high school, some pupils go to the nearby college in the afternoon to study a childcare course. In the past, those things might not have happened. There is now much greater connectivity across the education system than ever before.

Ben Macpherson: I agree with that and with your points about the need for consistency—the minister made the same points last week—and for young people to be aware of what is available to them. That is the crucial next step.

Jenny Gilruth: Absolutely. That is why the careers service and SDS have a key role to play in that endeavour, and it is also why we cannot divorce school reform from the wider skills agenda on which Mr Dey is leading.

The Convener: I am conscious of time—we still have quite a bit to go through, and I want to get it all covered today. I call Ross Greer.

Ross Greer: Cabinet secretary, I am interested in getting a sense of the direction of travel of the new bodies, specifically the new qualifications body and its governance arrangements. There has been a lot of criticism—I have been one of those making such criticisms—of the SQA's governance structure. For example, there are three management consultants on the board but only one current teacher.

I am interested in hearing your thoughts on the balance, in the governance arrangements, between appointing to the board individuals who have knowledge and experience of the area for which the public body in question is responsible—in this case, education—versus the need for corporate governance. Both are important, but I feel that we do not currently get the balance right.

What are your aspirations for the board and the governance arrangements for the new bodies?

Jenny Gilruth: On the face of it, Mr Greer's point about getting it right is important. We have a new chair of the SQA, and Shirley Rogers will be key to driving some of the cultural change that the organisation needs. We need to change our ways of working, and part of that is about embedding teacher voice in the governance arrangements. We will do so through having teacher expertise on the board in a way that might not have been prescribed previously; I have been keen to set that out in relation to our governance expectations.

Clare Hicks may want to say more on the role of teacher voice in that regard. As we move to a new qualifications organisation, teacher voice has to inform, in particular, how qualifications are developed and delivered. To be fair to the SQA, classroom teachers and promoted teachers are currently involved in writing examinations and marking exam scripts, and delivering the qualifications. Nevertheless, with regard to the governance challenge, Mr Greer identifies an opportunity. In the draft governance arrangements that we have been considering, there will be an opportunity to embed teacher voice more, as well as the voice of learners.

12:30

Clare Hicks: Just to add to that, there is a balance between the appropriate governance for a non-departmental public body and the ability, through legislation, to make some clear recommendations about appointments to the board in order to embed that teacher voice, as the cabinet secretary said.

Wider governance arrangements can be made through whatever new advisory council is put in place and through the committee structures that support the overarching board. Those can ensure that the voice of teachers and practitioners, and indeed the voice of learners, is embedded and is a clear part of that overarching governance. That is the aim.

Ross Greer: Learner voice, as well as teacher voice, is really important. There are other perspectives, such as those of parents and carers, that would also be valuable additions.

Cabinet secretary, you made a point about the model of staff secondment that Education Scotland used to use but has moved away from more recently. Do you see opportunities for that not only in the reformed Education Scotland but in the new qualifications body or in the inspectorate? There is not enough grit in the system at the moment. One criticism of the current inspection system is that many of those who inspect schools, professional as they are, have not themselves been in the classroom for quite some time. Is there a role for the secondment of classroom teachers, so that people who are constantly involved in our national education bodies have direct, personal and recent experience of the classroom?

Jenny Gilruth: Undoubtedly. To be fair to the inspectorate side of Education Scotland, there is already a well developed associate inspector programme, which sees headteachers and senior leaders being seconded to take part in school inspections. For example, they might accompany an inspectorate team on a secondary school inspection, which is hugely important in informing policy and is also important for their own development.

Regarding Mr Greer's point, when I was at Education Scotland, which is more than 10 years ago now, there were a number of people who might not have been in school for some time and who had not delivered curriculum for excellence. It is quite challenging to inspect a school if you have not yourself delivered the current qualifications.

There is a really important opportunity to give staff better professional development opportunities. I spoke about that when Mr Greer and I were both members of this committee. One of the best pieces of professional development that I undertook was to be an SQA marker for five

years, because having an understanding of the national standard made me a better teacher. Not everyone has the opportunity to mark for the examining organisation. Teachers need to be let out of school, their headteacher needs to find cover and that can be challenging at a time when budgets are tight. We must think again about the opportunities that the qualifications body gives to the profession. That body is not just a service that runs qualifications; it must work better with the profession.

I was not in post during the pandemic, but I think that much of the frustration in the system came from that disconnect between the qualifications organisation and the profession. That did not come about only as a result of Covid; it had built up over many years.

Ross Greer: You have pre-empted my final question, which was going to be about exactly that point. A teacher should not have to be an SQA marker to truly understand the grading system, but we have heard a lot of feedback about that and you have made exactly that point.

Convener, given the time, I am happy to finish there.

The Convener: We move to some final questions from Liam Kerr.

Liam Kerr: On a similar note, the consultation on the education bill that will abolish and replace the SQA closed in December. The Scottish Government previously announced that an SQA replacement would be in place by 2025. Is the work on curriculum and assessment reform that we have discussed today dependent on reform of the SQA? If so, what are the timescales?

Jenny Gilruth: No, it is not. The curriculum improvement work that I committed to in December is starting now. We are already getting going with the maths element of curriculum improvement. I expect to have recommendations with me towards the middle of the year and we will go out and test those with the profession in October. That must be part of informing improvement.

The fact that I have delayed one aspect of reform, the legislation for the new bodies, does not mean that we cannot get going on curriculum improvement. To speak bluntly, given the PISA results at the end of last year, we have to do that.

Liam Kerr: Sticking with the SQA, what does the cabinet secretary define as the improved outcomes from having a new qualifications agency?

Jenny Gilruth: I am not sure whether I will be able to give Mr Kerr a definitive list of outcomes, but a new qualifications agency—I refer to the point that I made to Mr Greer—must work better

with the teaching profession. In my experience in school and on the committee, that was a major barrier, in many instances, to improving outcomes for our young people.

One of the best meetings that I have had recently—I think that I referred to this in the chamber in December—was with the Scottish Association of Geography Teachers. It came to me with a plan. It said that we do not need to throw out the whole qualification, and it suggested some changes that it thought would make the geography qualification more relevant. It talked me through it. I confess that I am not a geographer, but the suggestions that it put forward were eminently sensible. You could go to any professional association from any subject area in the secondary curriculum and get exactly the same feedback. In my experience, the missing link is that the profession is not as engaged as it should be in the development of the qualifications. To go back to Ken Muir's report, those are the things that we need to fix in relation to the outcomes from the new qualifications organisation.

Liam Kerr: Indeed, and noting that, does the SQA as currently constituted have a role in developing the future operating model of a new qualifications agency?

Jenny Gilruth: Of itself, at the current time?

Liam Kerr: Yes—does the SQA take a role in what the future will look like?

Jenny Gilruth: Of itself, as an organisation, or the qualifications?

Liam Kerr: Forgive me, cabinet secretary. There are various bodies and various people involved in developing what the operating model of a new qualifications agency might look like. Is the SQA also involved in developing that new model?

Jenny Gilruth: Do you mean the current model?

Liam Kerr: The new one that will replace it.

Jenny Gilruth: Yes, the SQA is feeding in to that. On the member's point—he can correct me if I am wrong—when I assumed post, I wanted to introduce an element of objectivity into the process, because the previous critique of the Government was that we should not allow organisations to reform themselves, which I accept. That is why we have made changes to the governance approach, including by bringing some of Mr Dey's work into the same space and my chairing a board in which the organisations that have to reform all come together. That may give some answer to the member's question.

The organisation will not disappear, because there will still need to be a qualifications organisation, and we will still need a body to run

and administer our qualifications, so it has to feed into the process. However, on the wider point—and, I suppose, the cultural shift—the organisation needs to become more fleet of foot, from my experience. That is why we will embed teacher voice and learner voice in the governance structures, because the organisation needs to listen to the profession. I am keen to work with the organisation on how we take that forward.

The Convener: I thank the cabinet secretary and her officials for their evidence this morning. That concludes the public part of our proceedings. The committee will move into private session to consider the final agenda item.

12:38

Meeting continued in private until 12:57.

This is the final edition of the *Official Report* of this meeting. It is part of the Scottish Parliament *Official Report* archive and has been sent for legal deposit.

Published in Edinburgh by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, the Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP

All documents are available on
the Scottish Parliament website at:

www.parliament.scot

Information on non-endorsed print suppliers
is available here:

www.parliament.scot/documents

For information on the Scottish Parliament contact
Public Information on:

Telephone: 0131 348 5000

Textphone: 0800 092 7100

Email: sp.info@parliament.scot



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba