



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Education, Children and Young People Committee

Wednesday 4 December 2024

Session 6



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EDUCATION, CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE COMMITTEE

32nd Meeting 2024, Session 6

CONVENER

*Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*George Adam (Paisley) (SNP)

*Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con)

*Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab)

*Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green)

*Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)

*John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind)

*Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD)

*Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Alison Bavidge (Scottish Association of Social Work)

Claire Burns (CELCIS)

Laura Caven (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities)

Fiona Duncan

Ben Farrugia (Social Work Scotland)

Jenny Gilruth (Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills)

Clare Hicks (Scottish Government)

Professor Trish McCulloch (University of Dundee)

Fraser McKinlay (The Promise Scotland)

Fiona Robertson (Scottish Qualifications Authority)

Stephen Smellie (Unison)

Martyn Ware (Scottish Qualifications Authority)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Pauline McIntyre

LOCATION

Committee Room 1

Scottish Parliament

Education, Children and Young People Committee

Wednesday 4 December 2024

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:00]

The Promise (Staff Recruitment and Retention)

The Convener (Douglas Ross): Good morning and welcome to the 32nd meeting in 2024 of the Education, Children and Young People Committee.

Our first agenda item is an evidence session on the Promise and staff recruitment and retention. I welcome our first panel of witnesses: Claire Burns, director, CELCIS; Fraser McKinlay, chief executive, The Promise Scotland; Fiona Duncan, independent strategic adviser; and Professor Trish McCulloch, professor of social work and deputy dean, school of humanities, social sciences and law, University of Dundee.

Given that we have a panel of four and a big committee, please feel free not to answer every question if you will simply repeat what you have heard. We have to get through a lot of crucial evidence today. We are very grateful to you all for your time.

I will start by asking about the importance of the workforce to achieving the Promise. What assessment of the workforce do panel members make individually in their respective areas at the moment? What challenges arise from workforce problems in relation to achieving the Promise? Does anyone want to start?

Claire Burns (CELCIS): I will start. Good morning, everybody. [Interruption.] I am sorry that I have a bit of a cough; I hope that that was it.

The fundamental issue is that any improvement that we want to make, such as the Promise, is about services for people, delivered by people. That sounds like a really basic statement, but unless we have workforces that can deliver the improvements that we want, we will not be able to realise them, and we are not in a good place at the moment—[Interruption.]

The Convener: Can you just put your mic down a little bit?

Claire Burns: I am sorry. Is that better?

The Convener: That is perfect, yes.

Claire Burns: Those first couple of sentences were really good stuff, by the way, so I hope that you caught it. [Laughter.]

The Convener: It will be on the record in the *Official Report*.

Claire Burns: I will not go on too long, because I want other people to speak, but I note that we have a perfect storm at the moment. We have a recruitment and retention crisis in some of our key workforces and, at the same time, we have significant increased need and complexity within the families that are looking for services. If we do not have workforces that can respond to that need, it will be really challenging. At the same time, the workforces are telling us that we have a really cluttered policy landscape, with lots of duties and entitlements being constantly layered on to them.

That perfect storm of a recruitment and retention crisis, increased need and complexity within families, and increased duties and responsibilities for a smaller workforce will make the implementation of the Promise really challenging.

Fiona Duncan: Claire Burns has beautifully articulated the perfect storm. One point that she touched on, which I am sure that the committee will be interested in, is the range of workforces. I know that the committee has a particular interest in social work, but teachers, health visitors and general practitioners also come into contact with children all the time. A broad workforce is responsible for making sure that Scotland keeps the Promise.

As Claire said, this is about people. It is about recruitment, and it is about the gap between recruitment and retention. What is happening to the workforce? Do they feel bogged down with bureaucracy and unable to do the job that they came into the profession to do? Do they feel that they have the resources and time to develop relationships? Do they feel that they are supported to take the types of decisions and risks that they want to take? The issue is complex and broad, and there are challenges.

I am of the view that if Scotland does what it has always done, not much will change. For the Promise to be kept, we have to do something different, and there is significant opportunity to do so. During the independent care review, I endeavoured not to admire the problem, but instead to pose solutions. We already know what a lot of the solutions are, in terms of what the workforce is looking for and what the workforce tells us. We now have to start to implement them.

The Convener: Should we have started before now? The Promise was launched some time ago, and it has been high on the political agenda. Former First Ministers and others have prioritised

it, and yet still you come to us, at the end of 2024, with these challenges. Understandably, none of you has a magic wand to solve things overnight, so are we coming at this too late?

Fiona Duncan: From my engagement with the workforce—at the breadth that I outlined and further, and at some depth—I am of the view that the work has started. Folk have been getting out of their bed to keep the Promise since 5 February 2020, when the care review concluded. However, every local authority also took part in the care review before that; they took part in a stop-go programme that was about trying to stop the things that should have stopped already and do the things that should have been done already. We have been working on this for a long time.

My response to your question is that we now need to do something different, and we know what we need to do. Claire beautifully articulated the perfect storm, and we need to take a different approach in order to weather that perfect storm and get through to the other side.

Professor Trish McCulloch (University of Dundee): My first response, to the opening question, is that workforce is an expansive topic. Others have already identified that we are not talking about a single workforce, but about a wide range of professionals who intersect with the lives of children and families. The first challenge is that we need to respect the complexity of the Promise and its different component parts, and of the workforce that is delivering it.

You asked whether we are too late, convener. I have a particular expertise around social work, and we have been working on workforce issues in social work for several years. However, we have been doing so among competing agendas, and when a new policy initiative enters, the focus often shifts.

For me, the first thing is to get a hold of what we are talking about when it comes to workforce, and we seem to be talking about a capable, confident and committed workforce. It is then about asking what we know about what works in delivering that and what the obstacles and barriers are, and we have research evidence that speaks to that.

When I look across the evidence, I am looking to see a clear and integrated strategy that addresses those three points—confident, capable and committed—from entry, at the point of education, right through to exit. We have had lots of initiatives. People talk about a cluttered landscape, which is true. I still do not see a coherent and integrated strategy that addresses workforce issues in relation to not only numbers but the kind of quality workforce that we need around these particular frames.

Fraser McKinlay (The Promise Scotland): I am conscious of the convener's steer to not just repeat everything that everyone else has said, so I will be very brief. I absolutely agree with that last point, and with all the points that have been made.

We have been talking about such workforce challenges in social work, and more broadly, for a long time. I promise that I will not bore members with my previous life in Audit Scotland, but we did a report about social work in Audit Scotland more than 10 years ago, and it signalled a lot of these challenges coming down the road.

My perspective is that the vision that the Promise sets out is absolutely in line with the vision that the social work profession has for itself. We are absolutely committed to the same things.

I am sure that we will come on to this, but I think that some of the debate around the national care service is probably—I hesitate to say this—getting in the way, because people have been waiting for a national care service and a national social work agency.

Partly because of—in fact, particularly because of—the research that Claire Burns and the team at CELCIS did last year, we are really clear about what the challenges and issues are. The question now is how we solve them. As we get towards five years since the care review was published—as the convener said—that is pretty critical. The challenges around workforce, and the opportunity for social work and social workers to be right in the middle of the change that everyone is looking for in order to keep the Promise, are now really urgent.

The Convener: Who does that burden fall on? Is it Government? Is it local authorities? Is it about society encouraging people to take up the role, to study and then to become social workers?

Professor McCulloch: It falls on all of those groups and on all of us, as do all of our pressing societal challenges. However, we know that we need leadership around that and an infrastructure that allows ideas to translate into policy and then practice. We do not currently have all those things; for example, we do not have integration of the different bodies working in those spaces.

In 2014, we did a review of social work education that grappled with the things that the Promise needs in order to be delivered. Many of those things have not been actioned. As I said, it is about following the journey from ideas through to policy and implementation. We know how challenging that is, and so it needs leadership right through to implementation. Critically, it is about addressing the things that matter to the workforce that delivers at the front line.

The Convener: What about the retention element? We are losing too many people; some stay only a few years after going through a lot of training and investment. What more can be done to keep people?

Claire Burns: We have good evidence on that now.

However, to go back to the previous point, because it is so important, I note that we need everyone to take part in this at different levels. One point that came out really clearly in the research is that we make more impact when there is an alignment between what national Government is doing, what we are doing regionally and what we are doing locally. If we want to support things such as recruitment and retention, we therefore need a Government strategy that is funded and supported regionally and is then also supported at practice level. If we try and do it at only one of those levels, we are not likely to be successful.

A lot of local authorities are trying things at the moment. For example, they are much more focused on support for newly qualified social workers, because we realise that we need to retain them. They are also thinking about buddy systems for people and how they get people back into the workforce after Covid. However, these things are piecemeal and they are not being done equally across local authorities.

The evidence tells us that we need to pay attention to a number of things, including the public perception of working in children's services—particularly in social work, which has a very negative public perception. We also need to pay attention to the increasing workload, and to pay and pay scales across children's services. It is also about asking whether we really understand what wellbeing is. We are doing some work just now to better understand wellbeing and work-life balance. It is about putting all of those things in.

There is also good evidence around the fact that, because the work that social workers and others do is really challenging and can be traumatic at times, the supervision and reflective practice elements are fundamental. However, those are often the things that go when things are so pressured.

We know some of the things that we need to put in place, but they need to be supported at all levels.

The Convener: The latest figures show that, since 2019, there has been a 48 per cent rise in the number of senior children's social workers, which compares with a 2 per cent fall in the number of main children's social workers. Is that the wrong way round? Do we have too many people in senior roles, and not enough at the main

level? What is the reason for that disparity in the figures?

Professor McCulloch: I am afraid that I do not know the reasons. I was surprised when I saw the evidence on the 48 per cent rise. I know that some local authorities have invested in senior practitioners, which is exactly what the research evidence tells us that we need to do.

The Convener: Are they needed to do the supervision element that Ms Burns spoke about?

Professor McCulloch: Some will be doing that. However, it is also about having experienced practitioners working with children and families and supporting newly qualified and early-career social workers. It is about not simply doing the supervision and being one step removed, but being that experienced voice within new teams. We know that children and families teams often have a high turnover and are very imbalanced in terms of newly qualified or early-career members. It is therefore important that senior practitioners remain in practice. I think that some of the figures reflect the initiatives that speak to what social workers and the research evidence tell us. However, we need to understand the fuller picture, and we need research to tell us what statistics mean.

Fraser McKinlay: I suspect that your next witnesses might know a bit more about that issue, convener. My only other observation is that, as well as investing in social work and social workers, part of the answer to the conundrum has to be investing in community-based services. It has to be about ensuring that families have more access to early help and support, and it has to be about mental health services in communities. Those are the things that help to provide the infrastructure and scaffolding that will support families, which, in turn, should give social work and social workers more space to begin to look at caseload and focus on the community-based social work that everyone wants to achieve.

There is no single approach to this. As well as investing in social work and social workers, we need to look broadly at what community-based support there is for families, children and young people in communities.

09:15

Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): Good morning, and thank you for your answers.

You have said that we are dealing with various challenges. What can the Scottish Government do, right now, to help with the situation?

Professor McCulloch: I want to answer that question because it also relates to the question

about retention, which is central to the workforce issues that we are talking about today.

I will summarise headlines from research that we did with early-career social workers. We followed them from year 1 of their practice through to year 5. Across the cohort and the five years, they consistently identified four things. The first thing that they asked us to do was protect purposeful work. Social workers experience significant value and reward, and take pride in their work when they are allowed to do purposeful and worthwhile work. That is all about care, support and protection—all the things that the Promise is committed to delivering. I therefore ask the Government to protect that purposeful and worthwhile work, from which admin and bureaucracy sometimes distract.

The second thing that they asked us to do was design in quality and nurturing relationships, and a supportive environment that supports learning and learning through practice. Rather than our leaving those things to chance, or to the senior practitioner or peer who is in the office that day, they want us to think about how the environments that we work in supports the capable and competent workforce that we need. Fraser McKinlay has already made the point about re-investing in community-based services, and social workers can deliver those things only if those services exist.

The fourth point was about value, respect and reward. There needs to be a sense that social work, which is meaningful and purposeful, is valued by wider society. We have research evidence that tells us that the public values such things, but that is not something that social workers perceive in their day-to-day work.

Those are, therefore, some core things that we can do that relate directly to retention, even at the early-career stage around years 3, 4 and 5.

Fraser McKinlay: That is a comprehensive response. From the Scottish Government's perspective, I was struck by what Claire Burns said earlier about action at different levels. Local authorities and third sector employers have a job to do in doing everything that they can do to ensure that there is a nurturing environment, while recognising that it is sometimes difficult to manage that.

I was reflecting on the fact that, when we were here just over a year ago, we expected a lot of that work to have progressed through the proposed national care service—in particular, the creation of a national social work agency. The intention was that the national social work agency would pick up a lot of the national issues that have been mentioned. We are 12 months on and we know that that has not progressed. People have been waiting for it to happen: we are a year on, but if we

look at some of the evidence that we presented to the committee last year, we can see that not an awful lot has changed, which is unfortunate.

If a national social work agency is still in the plan, it needs to be progressed quite quickly. If we think that it will take a while, some of the things that Professor McCulloch has mentioned will need to be progressed anyway. We cannot continue to wait for something to come down the road that will somehow fix it all.

Fiona Duncan: Trish McCulloch gave an excellent summary.

I would like to see an integrated strategy, as opposed to a cluster of tactics, although what we have at the moment is a cluster of really good tactics. Claire Burns has talked about some of the things that are happening at the local level that we know make a difference to people's lives, to social workers' lives and to the lives of children, their families and care-experienced adults if relationships are nurtured, and so on.

However, we need something that is cohesive, planned, organised and time bound. We need to know what we can expect by a certain time, which would mean that we would know what changes will happen and when. That is what I would like to happen.

Claire Burns: I want to pick up on two critical points. As part of our research, we looked at international examples of transformational reform and what aspects had made a difference. To pick up on Fraser McKinlay's point, I note that one element that is needed for such change is a settled landscape. However, we have workers who are uncertain about whether there will be a national care service and, if there is one, whether it will include children.

We do not quite know what has happened with the national social work agency, either. We are asking people to carry out a massive change programme without having a settled landscape. One thing that the Government could do is make decisions on those things and provide a more settled landscape for people.

The other thing that I will say relates to the point about the amount of duties, responsibilities, policy and legislation. We hear loud and clear all the time about the need to declutter: the national Government could do that. People are telling us that if we can declutter, focus on two or three priorities—addressing poverty is one of them, and it is really positive to see the focus on that in the programme for government, because tackling it is fundamental—and take some of the other burden off them, they could start to do longer-term relationship-based work with families.

However, people tell us that they cannot do that currently because of the number of demands that are placed on them. An example is reporting by staff. Lots of different funding pots come from various parts of Government. People spend their time managing that, reporting on it and managing short-term funding. The more of the burden we can take off people, the more time they will have to do the work with families that they want to do.

I was really struck by the report “Setting the Bar for Social Work in Scotland”, which says that that is what social workers want to do. They want to do the work that is set out in the Promise, which Fiona Duncan mentioned. That is what they are committed to, but they do not feel able to do it.

Evelyn Tweed: The Independent Care Review’s “Evidence Framework” report highlighted the lack of available evidence from non-social work areas of the care system workforce. How might the issues that are faced by those who are in non-social work roles be better understood?

Fiona Duncan: There has been work since the care review concluded to understand that, and all the other witnesses have touched on that. That is to do with what a community looks like for children and families, and how families can access a bit of support when they need it, which will help them to nurture the love that they have and keep their children safe with them. There is also the question about what happens when children cannot live at home and what support they need in order to flourish, thrive and go on to become happy and healthy adults.

The care review was very deliberately expansive in order to cover a person’s whole life—what happens on the edge of care, what happens in care and what happens once somebody has left the care system. The “Evidence Framework” report was quite deliberately organised in a way that did not narrow the lens in order to focus just on social work. The care review totally respected the critical role that social work plays, but some of the things that I think you are asking about are still absent. Good youth work is an example—its budgets have been reduced. Another example is the support that children get with mental health and accessing specialist services. A further example is support for parents who might be struggling with their own mental health or struggling with substance use.

There is a simple answer, but I cannot boil it down to one thing that is missing. However, a lot of work has happened. The convener asked whether we should have started before now. We did start before now, and now we know what we might need to do next.

Professor McCulloch: I would like to take the opportunity to highlight that we in Scotland need a

research infrastructure for social services and social care that allows us to answer those questions. There is far too little knowledge on core issues. In other parts of the UK, we have answers to those questions—there is a research infrastructure for social services in other parts of the UK. Again, in Scotland that has been on pause while we wait for a national care service or a national social work agency, but the absence and fragmented nature of research evidence supporting the workforce and practice have been highlighted over decades.

Fraser McKinlay: I will add one brief point. As you know, the care review used a very broad definition of workforce that covered paid and unpaid care. A critical part of that, and of the whole debate, is the role that foster carers and kinship carers play in the wider system. We know that the crisis in recruitment around foster care is challenging: the number of foster carers is going down, the number of new households becoming foster carers is lower than it has been in the preceding four years and the number of deregistrations is increasing. That is another part of the scaffolding that helps to support the paid workforce in social work and other professions.

The Scottish Government’s current consultation on a future for foster care is welcome, and there is a lot in it that has the potential to shift the dial a little in foster care, but that is not a short-term fix. People are recognising that the normal approaches to recruiting foster carers is too often not working in local communities. That is another part of the jigsaw that we need to focus on in order to help to free up the wider system.

Claire Burns: I was going to make the point that Fraser McKinlay just made about seeing our kinship carers, foster carers and adoptive families as part of our workforces. It was great that we got the recommended allowance for foster care and kinship care, and that it is being reviewed. Our plea is that the allowance must keep pace with the cost of living and that we have to see what we pay foster carers and kinship carers as being part of our anti-poverty strategy.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): Good morning, and thank you for the information that we have had so far.

One thing that strikes me is that, out there in the real world, we still have significantly poorer outcomes for care-experienced young people, especially in areas such as education, with less than half of them leaving school with a national 5 qualification. We really need to move on that—not because we have all said that we will do it, but because outcomes are progressing in the wrong direction.

When the committee spoke to young people, one young person asked what the point is of calling it “the Promise”, because they felt that it is not being delivered. We also heard that there is too much in the Promise, so young people cannot see change in any of the particular areas. On the workforce, one person said:

“I’ve had 12 social workers over 4 years; 14 years and at least 15 social workers.”

That sort of situation makes it very difficult to deliver on many aspects of the Promise—especially relationship building.

I want to ask about the evidence from CELCIS that social work staff are only really getting to work on the top of their priority list and are not getting any further than that. Can you tell me a bit about what that looks like in reality?

Claire Burns: What that looks like in reality is that social workers feel that they can really focus only on their statutory responsibilities, which means that families wait quite a long time before they reach the threshold for engagement with services, so things have become more challenging and difficult.

The services that would have picked up those issues earlier have been cut. Families ask us all the time, “Why are you letting me wait until I’m in crisis before you help?” However, social workers would say that, because of the increase in demand and the recruitment and retention issues, they have to focus on their statutory responsibilities, such as on child protection. That means that they are working in an environment that is about risk and about being reactive, rather than doing the work that they can do.

I will give an example that comes from work that we have been doing through the whole family wellbeing fund in one local authority. Families were saying to us that we needed to help them with income maximisation, and we were mostly working with social work staff on that, but they said that if income maximisation is what needed, let us fund it and allow health visitors to do the work, because families are saying to them that they want it to be done more universally and with people with whom they have relationships. They want it to be done in a less stigmatising way. We set up that approach, but then there was a cut to health visitors, so we had to go back to using social workers. There is a complete tension in the system between people trying really hard to meet the policy objectives and the current financial climate, which is pushing against that all the time.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: What do we need to change to improve the conditions for staff in that respect, so that they can deliver the change that is needed?

09:30

Claire Burns: There are a number of things to do. We need to reduce the number of priorities that we put on local areas. We often flip between different focuses and different attention.

Our research says that addressing poverty is fundamental. We know that there is a link between poverty and the people who come to the attention of services. We then need to focus on alignment between what is funded, what is supported at a regional level and what is supported locally, and we should not ask for a huge number of priorities to be dealt with over the next two or three years.

Another thing that is difficult for local areas, and with which we have tried to deal through the whole family wellbeing funding, is that we cannot build a new system and keep responding to need at the same time. You need to give us some bridging funding to enable us to get there.

Fiona Duncan and Fraser McKinlay often say that the money is in the system, and they will know what I am about to say. Often, that is not accurate: the money is in the system, but it is locked. It will be years before that system is fixed, so we have to be careful about saying that the money is in the system. We have to provide more investment for earlier intervention.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Thank you. Do Fiona Duncan and Fraser McKinlay wish to respond?

Fiona Duncan: What Claire Burns has articulated is right. The care review deliberately looked at everything: it was not a partial review. It did not say, “Let’s just lift this one part out of this thing that we call the care system, take it over here, polish it and drop it back in.” That is because we know from previous reviews that the systems would just consume it.

You have heard today about the breadth and depth of work that needs to happen—which is why, at the end of the care review, the report called the plan that was set out a 10-year timeframe for transformational change, with the first year being about getting a detailed understanding of what needs to move first, what needs to move most, and what has furthest to go. We did not anticipate Covid, a proposed national care service or a proposed national social work agency. The lack of stability that was mentioned in Claire Burns’s points has meant that we have been planning in flux.

As I said a moment ago, the care review sought to identify solutions, not to admire the problem. That is really important—in particular, for the young people whom you heard from, who talked about what “good” looks like and what is not happening. Again, therefore, we know some of the things that we have to do.

The care review deliberately asked what the root causes of care are. What happens that brings families to the attention of this thing that we call the care system but which is not, as Claire said, a care system but a cluttered and complex bureaucracy? What are experiences like for children and young people in care? What are the effects of care?

There are recurring issues in terms of cause and effect, including poverty, substance use, engagement with the justice system and homelessness. An understanding of the fact that a number of people experience multiple systems at any one time—that sense of intersectionality—and of the struggles that families are dealing with and which ones can be alleviated most quickly, in order to ease the pressure and prevent those families from having to engage with the care system, is how we came to the conclusion that there is already a lot of money in the system. Claire Burns is right to say that it is locked—it is in the wrong place—but the money is there. A shift would be required from crisis spend to preventative spend. That challenge of how we can respond to immediate crises while introducing preventative spend is one that probably every committee—for example, on health or justice—has struggled with.

That comes back to the point that I made a moment ago: if we carry on doing the same things, nothing will change. We have to do something different and we have to take a different approach. I hope that the Promise still provides us with an opportunity to do that because, right now, people who are not watching this committee meeting—as hard as it might be to believe that they are not—are instead working really hard to keep the Promise, whether they work in schools, social work teams, the police or health. There is real determination to do it, but we have to start doing different things.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I do not doubt that. I believe that many people across the entire system are trying their very best, but it all still feels a bit like pinning jelly to a wall. It does not feel as though a tangible difference has been made or that the reality for children and young people will improve. I find it hard to put my finger on what I would say if a young person were to ask me what the Government is doing today to improve the experience of children and young people. We can talk about strategies and about unlocking the money that is in the system, but from what I am hearing, I still cannot get what real difference that will that make to children and young people across Scotland.

Fiona Duncan: I do not entirely agree with you. The independent care review listened to more than 5,500 experiences, and I am determined to

continue to ensure that I listen to the experiences of people in the care community.

Two things are going on, and quite often at the same time. First, the system is not good enough yet—we know that and you have heard that. Secondly, things are improving, although they are not improving fast enough. Every day that we do not get it right for a child is a day in which their childhood is being lost. I do not think that any of us find that acceptable. Change is happening, but there is an argument about the pace and quality of change.

I do not think that holding individual workforces or sections of the workforce responsible or blaming them is necessarily the right approach, because I have never met anyone who is not trying to do their best. The committee has heard from people who are very close to social work that the Promise outlines what they want to do. If we focus wholly on front-end system service delivery, but we do not deal with the deep-rooted systemic problems, we will have a cluster of tactics, rather than transformational change, as has been beautifully articulated by fellow witnesses.

We need to look at the money and the legislation. There has been a commitment to introduce a Promise bill next year. A lot of things will have to happen in the next couple of years if we are to be confident that Scotland will keep the Promise by 2030, and that we will never go back to the old ways.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): Fiona, I have a problem. Claire Burns's description matches what I witness in my constituency case work. Just as she has described, I have come across several examples of families and individuals in crisis and social workers who are on their knees and cannot cope. The question has been put to you and you have spoken in high-level, vague terms about substantial progress and fantastic work, all while there is a fire in the basement. I have a problem with that. Are you really speaking as clearly as you should be about the crisis in the system?

Fiona Duncan: I am not naive about the crisis. I think that only you can decide whether I am speaking clearly enough or not. During the independent care review, I spent three years deeply listening to people who were experiencing the system and the people who were the custodians of multiple systems, rather than a single system, to understand what needed to change. My focus was absolutely on building solutions. For the past four, almost five, years, I have been facing into the system to push it to make the changes that it has to make.

The experiences that Claire Burns described and that you have come across in your

constituency are absolutely true, but it is also true that we have great big systemic barriers. If we do not tackle them, all that we will do is have a cluster of tactics, rather than transformational change. The social workers and the children and families who you engage with need both/and. They need changes to be made right now at the front end—whether that is more resources, purposeful work, or having more support in the community—and they also need legislative change and money to be unlocked from parts of the system that are a cause or effect of care, but are not considered to be part of this thing that we call the care system. Either of those things in isolation will not drive the change that we need.

Willie Rennie: There is a disconnect. When I met the care-experienced young people who came into the Parliament a few months ago, they were incandescent with rage. They thought that what was being said was all mumbo-jumbo and did not mean anything and that nothing was really changing, because their experiences were just the same as they were before. They felt let down and betrayed. However, the briefing that you have provided says that there has been “fantastic work” and “substantial progress”. That is a different world from what those people are experiencing.

We can take the whole family wellbeing fund as an example. Yes, £500 million is there, but it has been delayed—the money has not been able to get out the door. Why is that? Why has there not been a peep from you this morning about why the money has been delayed and why local authorities are not spending the money? Why have you not said, “This is what we’ve found, and we’re calling it out”? Why has there been nothing about that?

Fraser McKinlay: I was hoping that we would get on to the whole family wellbeing fund, because it is a classic example of something that was a very good idea. It touches on Claire Burns’s point about investment for change, which was the whole point of the exercise, but the system has got in the way of itself. I think that we have been quite vocal about that and I am happy to say that to the committee today.

You can absolutely disagree with this, but my view is that both things can be true. I believe that there has been progress. I hear all the time from care-experienced young people and, importantly, from care-experienced adults, who are able to compare their experiences 20 years ago with what experiences are like today. They say that the experiences are different and, in lots of cases, better. There are objective things that we can point to, such as the higher education bursary, that have made a difference. There are now things in place for the care-experienced community that did not exist 20 years ago.

At the same time, the testimony that you heard from those young people is absolutely true. That is what gets me up in the morning and continues to motivate Fiona Duncan to make those young people’s experiences as good as those of my kids. We are miles away from that, which is why we are continuing to work.

Willie Rennie: Say that, and say it again, because it is not being said clearly. I am not getting that at all.

Fraser McKinlay: In relation to some of the workforce challenges that we are talking about—I am reminding myself of some of the work that has been done—that has been said a million times. We know what the problems are, so I am interested in how we move on.

Willie Rennie: But we then get a briefing that says that there has been “fantastic work” and “substantial progress”.

Fraser McKinlay: You can disagree with that—

Willie Rennie: That is the headline; it is the only thing that I see from the briefing.

Fraser McKinlay: It also says in bold that there needs to be

“a step change in the pace”

and depth of improvement. I believe that both things can be true. I do not agree with the assessment that nothing has happened in the past five years—I just do not think that that is right—but I also believe it to be true that we are not as far on as we want to be and that there is still a very long way to go. I believe both those things to be true.

Willie Rennie: Okay.

Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP): Fiona Duncan mentioned preventative spend. The committee has heard evidence on the impact of preventative spend in Glasgow. Are there other examples of moving from crisis spend to preventative spend? How effective is that, particularly for the workforce?

Professor McCulloch: There are examples of that kind of move, with local authorities and third sector organisations taking hold of such initiatives. It is exactly the point that has just been made.

I go back to the research with early-career social workers, because it is good to ground our discussion in what the workforce is telling us. We found a three-thirds pattern. A third of early-career social workers spoke about the kind of things that we want to see, such as being able to do that kind of work, having protected case loads, having space to connect to the research and evidence and having time to build relationships with children and young people; a third described awful experiences, such as those that you hear about in

your constituency, Mr Rennie; and there was a middle group, who were teetering along. The conclusion that we draw from that is that we do not see consistent implementation of our good initiatives, best practice and evidence-based work. That is why we need to talk about plans, because we need to make sure that it is not a postcode lottery, depending on which local authority someone happens to live in. We are seeing the things that we want, and we are not seeing them. We need to sort that out, because it is not fair.

09:45

We should ground policy in the reality of people's lives. Even if the situation is improved, if someone still does not have a safe and secure home and feel like they belong, the improvement does not matter. It does not matter that they have had two workers rather than eight. It matters that they still do not feel secure. Doing a little bit is not enough. It does not mean that we are not seeing different parts of the story.

Bill Kidd: Does that mean that there is preventative spend but simply not enough of it and that we need to think about how we can increase prevention?

Professor McCulloch: Yes, absolutely. Thank you for bringing me back to the specifics. In social services and social care, an initiative will come in, the people who do that work will get around that initiative and say, "Let's do that," and will keep doing it until something else comes along. Then they say, "Oh, actually, we now need to do that," and decide that they need to move budget from one thing to another. Again, we do not have longevity. We see rapid movement and then a destabilised environment and a workforce that does not deliver on best practice.

Fraser McKinlay: As I mentioned, I spent a long time writing reports about how we move public money around the system and get it into more prevention. We have grappled with that for loads of reasons and one of the reasons why I came into this job was to help to facilitate the shift that we are talking about because, in the end, that is what will make the difference.

I will not get into a discussion about definitions, but preventative spend in relation to the care system means investing in anti-poverty measures, housing and homelessness services. To give you a concrete example, there is a UK-wide charity called the National House Project. There are three local house projects in Scotland. Mr Rennie might know of one, because there is one in Fife; there is also one in East Dunbartonshire and one in Midlothian. The local house project is all about taking cohorts of care-experienced young people

and supporting them for about 12 months or so before they get their first tenancies.

The results are phenomenal. I think that I am right in saying that, across those cohorts and areas, the projects have not had a failed tenancy yet. That is better for those young people, because it gives them a secure home. It is better for the councils, because they have tenants and tenancies that stick. It gives those young people a sense of community. The outcomes are much better, which allows the young people a bit of stability to get jobs and live their lives. It is a really good investment. For what the projects spend up front, we avoid all sorts of costs that traditionally come with that cohort of people as they go through the system.

That is just one example of preventative spend, Mr Kidd, but it is specific preventative spend on housing. There are other examples, too. There is no doubt that some of the investment in the whole family wellbeing fund has not yet reached the places that it needs to reach. Too often, we have spent it on things that matter to the system and not to the families that are supposed to feel the difference. We still have a very long way to go.

Another brief example relates to the fact that the work around the Promise is clear that care-experienced children and young people should not be excluded from school. The numbers of such exclusions went back up last year, as Ms Duncan-Glancy said. I am hopeful that they might be coming back down again, because we can see some brilliant practice in some places. There are now local authorities that have not excluded a care-experienced young person for 18 months. That work has been intentional and I call it preventative because if those young people are in school and part of the school community, they are more likely to go on and thrive. We need to do much more on prevention and not be too narrow in how we define it.

Claire Burns: I have seen some really good examples. You gave the example of Glasgow. Glasgow City Council has done a good job on preventative spend, but we cannot compare that authority with some of our small local authorities, because it can pool a more significant amount of money. It is critical that we look at how we can support our smaller local authorities.

One of the issues that we need to focus more attention on is the pooling of budgets. An agreement was reached on that in Glasgow, but it can sometimes take months or even years to get such an agreement. In some local authorities, we might not get such an agreement. We need to work with strategic leaders, because those are tricky conversations to have, as there are winners and losers. It is critical that we talk about what it

means to pool budgets and that we agree on priorities.

We are doing work in East Lothian, where East Lothian Council picked up on the increased need for support in families with children who require additional support for learning. That was where the need was. East Lothian Council moved resources into responding to that so that families did not need to wait for a diagnosis before they got support. In the previous system, it was necessary to have a diagnosis in order to get support. However, some of that has been funded through the whole family wellbeing fund and there is no guarantee that that money will continue.

Even when we get a bit of momentum in the system and we start shifting in the right direction, we do not have the other things that we need to maintain and sustain that shift, such as longer-term funding. Again, we come back to the tension that always exists in the system because of the lack of investment and lack of funding—the tension between the aspirations of the policy direction, which people agree with, and the reality of where we are.

I want to pick up on Fraser McKinlay's point; I know that he will not mind my disagreeing with him. I do not agree that the issue is to do with things that matter to the system and not to families. Some of the funding is going to areas where there have previously been gaps in funding. In other words, we are almost having to use preventative spend simply to keep things afloat. It is important to make that point. I can see that Fraser is nodding.

Bill Kidd: Thank you very much for that.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): I will follow up on that point. The financial context, especially over the past three years, has been one in which there have been significant in-year cuts to budgets. Money that has been allocated at the start of the financial year has not been distributed. Willie Rennie mentioned the whole family wellbeing fund. I imagine that the answer to this question is relatively obvious, but it is important to get it on the record. What impact is the current public finance situation having, in particular on our ability to deliver effective preventative spend?

Professor McCulloch: I will start, and others will be able to provide specifics.

When we talk to the workforce, they describe being a social worker—I am talking about social workers here—as being a mix of strength and struggle. The strength that they talk about is the meaningful, purposeful, worthwhile work that we all want to see. The struggle that they talk about begins with the fact that it is difficult work that can be challenging and emotional, but that is not the real struggle. The real struggle that they talk about

is the context of budget cuts, diminishing services and promising things that they cannot deliver on.

My answer to your question is that the context of the enduring nature of budget cuts is everything. It is what makes people feel, “What am I doing here? I can't do this,” and it has a significant impact on retention. It is the most significant factor, because it impacts on levels of admin, on workload, on peer support and on seniors being there to provide support. In our research, that context of cuts emerged as the most significant dimension. Essentially, there is a sense that the only thing that seems to matter now is money, whereas what people want to be doing is providing care, support, protection and empowerment.

Ross Greer: To follow up on the issue of expectation, is it an issue that budgets are often set in the knowledge, almost from day 1, that the money that has been allocated is never going to be distributed? Let us say that a promise is made that £10 million will be provided for project X, but, realistically, only £6 million is ever going to be available. Would it be more helpful to say from the start that it is going to be £6 million, not £10 million, or is there something helpful in encouraging the system to be ambitious? What would you require to make the kind of change that is needed? What would you do with £10 million if you had it?

Part of my frustration with a lot of this is that it appears that a huge amount of time is wasted and morale is drained when people expect to be given resources to deliver something and they are either not given them at all or they are given something far less and they have to rewrite a plan that they have spent time developing.

Professor McCulloch: I know that others will come in with the detail, but, very simply, our ambition is for investment in social services needs to match our promise. The conversation that we are having, which people are frustrated with, is about the investment not matching that promise. I am not just talking about the Promise here, but about the promises that social services make. If the investment does not match those promises, then let us not make them. It is not just about addressing investment. In all our plans, there needs to be congruence between what we put in and what we expect social services to deliver. What is happening is that the focus is on, “Why are you not delivering those outcomes?” Unsurprisingly, we have a demoralised workforce.

Ross Greer: Does anyone else want to come in on the point about resources and expectation management?

Fraser McKinlay: The point that I would make in addition is that—to use Ross Greer's model—I suspect that a lot of people would prefer to have

£3 million a year forever than £10 million over a shorter period of time. We hear all the time that the lack of consistency and stability in funding is problematic because people do not know what they will have. To come back to what Pam Duncan-Glancy said, that inconsistency is particularly problematic when you are trying to build relationships and communities. People are reluctant to step into that work if they think that the people who are doing that work will have to retreat and will not be able to sustain it after 12 months.

It is a well-known problem. The third sector talks about it all the time and it has long been used to working in an environment in which it has to deal with the short-term funding cycle. That is also increasingly the case in the statutory sector. To use the perfect storm analogy, there being less money and cuts is absolutely problematic. The headwinds against doing some of this stuff have probably never been stronger than they are now. Secondly, the funding is by nature still very siloed and short term. The combination of those things makes it difficult for people on the ground to do the work that they want to do.

My only other observation—this does not in any way underestimate the size of the difficulty caused by the fiscal environment—is that, even when the Parliament had more money and that money increased year on year, we did not do prevention very well. There is something else at play in the discussion that is about where power sits, how systems work and accountability. Reducing finances in the way that we are at the moment is absolutely a problem for doing some of this stuff, and that makes it even more important that we figure it out.

Ross Greer: The Scottish Government would agree with you on the challenge of annual funding settlements, which is also a significant challenge for it.

Do Fiona Duncan or Claire Burns have any final comments on resources before I move on?

Claire Burns: The issue is the biggest challenge that we face in implementing the Promise.

I will pick up on one other thing that Fraser McKinlay said and which Mr Rennie picked up. On getting money out, I do not want to be an apologist for saying that, if money goes to local authorities, it is not getting to where it is needed, but if we want people to invest in prevention and early help, they need the time and space to plan for that. There is therefore an argument for being able to hold on to money at times to do that planning. Often, local leaders get a pot of money and it has to go out almost immediately. If it has to go out immediately, you do not have a huge choice about where it goes.

The problem is further reinforced by the local authority saying that it would like us to report on that money within a short timescale and say how it has impacted on outcomes. We have to get real about what we are asking people to report on and where we expect short-term funding to impact on outcomes. We are not going to report on outcomes in six months or a year—that will happen 10 years down the line—but we need those intermediate progress markers if we are to be able to say that something has been working well. That is another tension in the system: money comes in and there is an expectation that it goes right out, but if it goes right out, we do not have time to plan for it.

Fiona Duncan: The only point that I would make is that, in talking about how difficult the financial situation is for the system, let us not forget how difficult it is for children and families and care-experienced adults. The relationship between those struggles and coming into contact with the care system and statutory services is significant, and we know that families are really struggling.

10:00

Ross Greer: I will turn to a different topic, with a question that is primarily for Fraser McKinlay—it is about the progress framework. On the Plan 24-30 website, the last line on the relevant page says that the framework will be available

“by the end of 2024.”

Is that still the expected timescale? Will we see it in the next fortnight?

Fraser McKinlay: Yes. Laura Caven might give me a row for this, because I am not sure whether I am technically allowed to announce it, but I will do so, anyway. Our planned date for putting the progress framework on the website is 18 December.

Very briefly, the progress framework is the first stage of a longer-term project. The first thing that we will launch, in a couple of weeks' time, focuses very much on a range of data that can indicate progress on keeping the Promise at national level. That is all existing data, and it draws on a much broader range of data than anything that has existed in the past. It looks at poverty, mental health and what we think are critically important contextual factors in keeping the Promise, as well as the factors that you would expect to see on the number of so-called looked-after children in the system. That is the first stage, which represents a big step forward compared with what we have had in the past.

The most important bit of the work, which will happen from the start of next year, is our

beginning to properly understand and measure the extent to which change is being felt in people's lives. We have a lot of evidence about that already, and the committee heard some of that from the group of young people you spoke to earlier in the year. That work, which we will focus on next year, is about trying to build that information into the system in a more systematic and coherent way.

That was a long answer to your question but, yes, the framework will be available in the next couple of weeks.

Ross Greer: That is really positive and helpful. I am sure that we all look forward to seeing that. The committee is well used to people coming to us to apologise for delays, so it is positive to hear that that is on track. We will probably want to follow that up in the new year, once we have had a chance to look at the framework.

Fraser McKinlay: You can remind me of that if something terrible happens in the next two weeks, but hopefully it will not.

Ross Greer: Yes—hostage to fortune and all that.

Fraser McKinlay: I think that we are just about there.

Ross Greer: Excellent—thank you.

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): I think that there was somebody behind you doing the “Cut” sign at that point, Fraser. You must be pretty confident if you are committing to that here today.

I want to ask about future workforce development. We have all heard about the challenges. Fraser mentioned the Audit Scotland report that he was involved in all those years ago—in fact, I think that I was on the committee that went through that report at the time. The challenges today are very similar to what they were then, in that many people who are involved in social work are going to third sector organisations, because those actually deliver services, which is what people want to do. They are not caught up in the statutory part of being in a local authority, which always makes things a wee bit more challenging for individuals.

Looking at the challenges, we see that there are insufficient applicant numbers, an experience gap in relation to candidates, pay competitiveness issues and the usual rural recruitment challenges, which apply across the board and not just to this issue. As we look to the future, how will we encourage people to come into the profession? There is always a stack of people who want to come in and help people by being social workers but, in the cold light of day, the challenges are there and it becomes difficult for them. How do we pitch the idea that the role is a way forward so that

we get the type of people who we want to be involved and can deliver the Promise?

Professor McCulloch: I have asked that we consider that problem from the point of entry, which is often the point of education. In terms of encouraging people into social work specifically, to select one group, I would highlight three things. We need to promote the meaningful work that social work and social care services do. There are wonderful stories to tell there—it is not something that we cannot get behind. We need national campaigns to promote the value of social work and an understanding of what social work and social care are. There is a promotion piece, but it should not just be a one-off. We need to think about a longer-term piece of work.

We also need to address the issue of financial support. Applicant numbers are down and we expect that to trend to continue. The data shows that that is specifically due to the cost of living crisis and the cost of studying. For social workers, that issue is particularly acute, because they have extended placement periods when they cannot work. Almost all our students are working while they study—committee members will know that from their own areas.

The bursary for social work has been stagnant since 2003—it used to match the fees. The bursary is for post-graduate programmes, through which we attract a really high calibre of people into the profession. Those people have a degree and want to practise social work. Therefore, we need to address financial support and the bursary deficit, and we need to think about how we provide financial support when students cannot work. We do that in other professions—we do it wonderfully well in nursing, and we see the dividends of that in retention. Getting those things right at the early stage pays dividends in retention, because one of the things that matters for retention is the feeling of being prepared. If people do not feel prepared at that early stage, we can expect them not to survive a career.

We absolutely need to solve some of the basics, such as access to statutory placements, particularly when other initiatives are introduced and distract attention from that. We also need to address the basics of good education, good preparedness and supporting readiness for practice as well as innovation. Sometimes when we hit struggles in recruitment and enrolment, we jump to a very innovative product and we ignore some of the core work that needs to continue. That is a request for care as we think about innovation. For example, we are thinking about innovation in graduate apprenticeships—that is included in the papers—and we need to be really clear about the evidence for that innovation, what it will deliver, what some of the unintended

impacts might be and how we can progress that as part of a coherent workforce strategy.

George Adam: When you are looking at different ways of working, you need to consider the bare bones of things. When a social worker turns up to support a family and says, “I’m from the council—I’m here to help”, the idea that they are there to help is not the person’s first thought. However, if the social worker says that they are from a third sector or other organisation, the person might automatically say what their problem is and be more open. Are there other ways that we can work to ensure that families actually engage? I am not saying that social workers are not professionals or that they are not doing their job to the best of their ability. All I am saying is that families always put up a barrier when someone says, “I’m here from the council—I’m here to help”, because that is not something that people often hear.

Professor McCulloch: Yes, and I am speaking to you as a social worker and as someone who has stood at those thresholds. We know that people respond to people, which is why relationship-based practice is incredibly important, and it is not only social workers who can do that great work.

George Adam: Yes, I get that.

Professor McCulloch: The point that I am making is that there is a broad workforce, which is why I am talking about social work and social care. However, the obstacles that arise when someone turns up at the door and says, “I’m here from the social work” are obstacles that social workers and social care workers come across, and thresholds that they cross, every day. Again, they can do that when they feel confident in who they are and supported to be on that doorstep—when they can go back to the office after a really difficult encounter and offload that and process the emotions, and when they can go into supervision with an experienced senior who is doing more than workload management. Those are the core things that we know that workers need to cross those difficult thresholds and have those difficult encounters. When you distil it, there are four or five things that are needed at the local level, and, if we can get those into a national plan that is as ambitious as our Promise, we will be able to deliver on those things.

Addressing the retention issues will address the recruitment issues. Recruitment is down because people hear all the time how difficult the work is that social workers are engaged in. Our early-career social worker research demonstrated the pride and passion that social workers spoke about during those five years. However, those are not the stories that people in schools are hearing. Many people who go into social work do so

because they have had a personal encounter with social work and they know the value of the work. We need to do a much better job on that, which goes back to what I said about the work that is needed on promotion.

George Adam: You mentioned the graduate apprenticeship programme. Do you see that as a way forward? Would people be working in local communities and delivering from day 1? It is not a case of having your qualification, turning up and chapping at the door along with someone who is more senior, is it?

Professor McCulloch: We would talk about that as a kind of practice pedagogy. That commitment to rooting education in practice is at the heart of social work education and has been since its beginning.

My first response is that that is at the heart of all our programmes, and if it is taking too long to get people across the threshold, we need to look at that. For example, our students are out in year 1. It does not matter whether they are doing the graduate apprenticeship or not—they are out in year 1. They are not on a placement, but they are in communities. They are crossing the threshold and understanding what it means to work and support people in the community. They are shadowing. They are in agencies and in third sector settings.

There is a lot of debate about the graduate apprenticeship. I want to see it as part of that coherent workforce strategy, not as a new shiny thing. We have had new shiny things in the past, such as the fast-track scheme, which delivered a number of positives and created a number of challenges. For me, it is about the need that it is looking to respond to, the impact that it will have, what the unintended consequences will be and how it will fit with the coherent and integrated strategy that sits alongside it.

I am for it in so far as it supports the practice that has long been at the core of social work. Sometimes we are not delivering on that as well as we could, because some of the fundamentals of social work education are compromised by all the things that we have been talking about today around funding, investment and the fragmented landscape.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (Ind): To build on that, is the training, especially at university and so on, closely aligned to what people will experience when they go out to work, or do they get a shock? We had a comment from somebody that, when they started working as a social worker, it was a lot better than they thought it was going to be. I ask Professor McCulloch first.

Professor McCulloch: In answering that question, I start by reminding everyone of the

findings of the early-career social worker study, which followed people from their point of entry into practice through their first five years. We found that there was, again, a pattern of thirds. A third reported a really positive experience, and that they felt prepared in education and supported through the transition, and the work that they found themselves doing aligned with their expectations. We found that around a third did not have a positive experience, and that carried through into their transition and into practice, and there was an in-between group.

I would say that graduates are prepared and not prepared, because the picture is not consistent. Whether someone is prepared is contingent on a number of factors. My sense is that the work that we have done on standards in social work education is broadly fit for purpose. There is always innovation, and there is always a need for agility in how we apply the standards, but the opportunities that students get to learn in practice during education are not consistent.

Some students get excellent, outstanding practice experiences that reflect the kinds of teams and environments that we all want to see, and some students do not have excellent experiences, because the agencies that we want them to be in cannot offer placements because they do not have enough staff.

Again, we have a very mixed picture, and we need to improve on that.

John Mason: I will press you on the pattern of thirds. Is that primarily down to whether a student ends up in a big council such as Glasgow or a small one such as Clackmannanshire or the Western Isles, or is it down to the individual person or something else?

Professor McCulloch: In practice, it is typically about the student's perception of the support that they have to learn through practice. Every graduate social worker will tell you that they are learning in practice, and that the learning that they take from university is a significant foundation. Critically, the learning continues during those first few years, because that is when they get into the depth and breadth of working with people.

The support that they experience in those teams is very inconsistent. Sometimes it is very good and sometimes it is quite poor.

John Mason: I will ask the other three witnesses my next question. You look at this from the other angle and see people coming through the system. Is the preparation that new and young social workers get appropriate for where they will end up?

10:15

Fiona Duncan: It is exactly as Professor McCulloch has said. Some of the social workers whom I spoke to during the care review and have listened to since then said that the job did not feel like anything that they expected; others said that it was the job that they wanted to do; and there were all shades in between. I do not think that I can add much to her assessment.

John Mason: Okay. Ms Burns, do you want to come in?

Claire Burns: I do not think that I have anything. I will come back to you if something comes to me.

John Mason: That is fine.

I am also on the Finance and Public Administration Committee, where we are always being told that we need to improve productivity in business, the health service and, presumably, social work as well. How could we do that in social work? We mentioned that we could if we had more finance. Let us assume that that will not happen—that we will not have any more, or that it will be 1 per cent or something like that. Could we use social workers better? I am thinking about the bureaucracy in particular. Could we use information technology or artificial intelligence to help people? I was struck by the phrase “purposeful work”—I think that Professor McCulloch used it. I get that we are all frustrated—we, too, must do stuff that we do not like doing—but could we make better use of the resources and the people that we have?

Claire Burns: Yes, I think that we could. The financial context is absolutely critical but our research tells us that a number of other things are really significant, too, such as the policy and legislative landscape. There are too many demands on our workforces and we need to do a better job of saying where the priorities lie. Social workers are saying that the current size of the workforce means that they cannot respond to the number of entitlements and duties that have been put on them—some correctly so—over the past few years. They are in that cycle of assessment and they often feel that people must meet a certain threshold.

The question of productivity lies in whether we can invest in earlier help and prevention, and how we can do that. Things such as IT systems will help. We have information customisation systems across children's planning that do not talk to one another. We do not have a single set of objectives—

John Mason: Is that between councils?

Claire Burns: Between services. Better IT systems would support better collaboration and

communication so, if we had them, that would help. It is about those things—setting priorities and having better IT systems.

Sometimes, there is work that we consider hidden. For example, how do we encourage better multidisciplinary working for families? Our research found that the hub model, where a number of agencies are based together and families can get support in one location, which is the model that we had in sure start, is the other way that we can increase productivity.

John Mason: Is the general data protection regulation a problem, in that people cannot share what they might want to?

Claire Burns: Yes, the landscape around data sharing is complicated at the moment.

John Mason: Okay, thanks. Mr McKinlay, do you want to come in on that point?

Fraser McKinlay: On that last point, data sharing is always a challenge in this area, although my sense is that sometimes more is made of that than is needed. We are working with the Data for Children Collaborative at the University of Edinburgh on a project to consider exactly how information can be better owned by care-experienced people and better shared, rather than having multiple agencies with lots of different information about one person. That piece of work is now under way and we will come up with a blueprint for how to fix the situation in the next 12 months or so.

I found myself slightly wincing at the term “productivity”. I know what we mean—it is obviously a big debate at the moment in the NHS and other places, and it has been for a long time. I suppose that the term is okay as long as we are crystal clear that it is not about throughput and whether we can make cases more efficient, because that would not be helpful. Productive, purposeful work is about everything that we have been talking about today already—about freeing up opportunities for social workers and for all the other people who work with children and families to do more of that relationship-based work.

John Mason: On that point, we have an ageing population and fewer people will be available to work in the coming years, so each person will have to do more.

Fraser McKinlay: Or do things differently, I guess—

John Mason: Exactly.

Fraser McKinlay: Just piling more stuff on folk will not work, because people will fall over—so, that is not the answer. As you have said, the broader demographic, which we know about, is important.

I have one final point. Over many years, there has been an understandable tendency to protect the “front line” wherever it has been possible to do so. I get why we do that, but the reality on the ground is that business support roles in social work and in loads of other professions have basically disappeared.

That work still has to be done. We have got rid of the people who were doing that work, but we have not actually changed what the ask is, which means—Professor McCulloch and Social Work Scotland’s research both say this—that the people who are on the “front line” are picking up all of that work, too. We need to be really clear and mindful of the unintended consequences of deciding where to disinvest and where to invest.

John Mason: Thank you.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): Good morning. CELCIS research has identified areas for national collaboration. Can you tell me a bit more about those areas and how you think they can be taken forward?

Claire Burns: I come back to my point that some of the research’s key findings were that we need more, and better, strategies to address poverty. There is the child poverty pathfinder, but there needs to be a much more coherent approach to the issue and a greater focus on how, across children’s planning, we can work to address poverty.

One of the points that people made was that the focus of the national care service was on structure. They were saying, “Actually, can we focus not on structures but on supporting multi-agency practice?” I have talked a bit about how we bring services together in a particular location—as we did with sure start—and work to build the level of collaboration, because it means that families can just come to one point instead of having to engage with several different agencies.

The other critical point around collaboration is the need for strategic leadership. I sometimes hear people say that we need leadership at all levels, but the research clearly shows that we need to get the leadership right at a strategic level from the get-go, because they are the people who set the time, resources and permissions needed to work in different ways. That work is sometimes hidden. Strategic leaders in local areas need more opportunities to talk more openly about the barriers to implementation and what it will mean to set and stick to priorities across children’s planning and pool budgets in those areas.

Those are some of the key points.

Jackie Dunbar: Earlier, you spoke about decluttering the landscape. Can you explain what you mean by that? If you had a magic wand, what

is the number 1 thing that you would do to declutter the landscape?

Claire Burns: There is a range of legislation and policies, but people do not know where those sit in relation to each other. Is getting it right for every child our main driver? Is the Promise our main driver? Is the Promise a way of getting GIRFEC implemented, or is it the other way round? It can be quite confusing and difficult to say what is the key driver.

There is new child protection guidance, but if you are a child protection worker, you are governed by about 20 or 30 other pieces of legislation, which relate to areas like addiction and violence against women and children. That is another reason why the landscape is cluttered. You have to meet the demands that are set by a lot of different policies. That is partly because, as a country—this is not unusual, and it applies not just to the Government but also to the sector—we are absolutely convinced that, if we get something into legislation, it will see itself through to practice. There are too many pieces of legislation. People often feel that it leads to starting and stopping, because people start going in one direction and then there is a new policy and they change.

You asked me what I would do. For me, the policy landscape around GIRFEC is still the right one. If we get that right, we will get the Promise right. What we have with GIRFEC—this is the implementation challenge that we have with many things—is aspirations and policies. We can talk about what GIRFEC will mean, but we need to take the time and space to consider the behaviours that we need to see from different workforces; how we support them on learning, development, coaching and feedback; and how we report on those things.

A lot of information in the implementation literature says that if we want to change the practice on the ground, we will have to put the effort in to those things.

For example, work is being done in Glasgow around relationship-based practice. They are saying that they will commit to doing much more strengths-based relationship work with families, but they have realised that they need to spend time asking what that practice should look like and being really explicit about what it should mean and what it should look like when a social worker goes to someone's door or visits a family. How can we support that practice? How will the rest of the system need to be amended to support it?

We need to be able to do those things and to take our time over them. For me, the issue is about going back to the fundamentals of GIRFEC and seeing what it will take to implement them.

Jackie Dunbar: Is your priority to ensure that our children and young folk are better supported?

Claire Burns: Yes.

Jackie Dunbar: Okay. I will go on to my next question, which I will open up to the witnesses. What further action can be taken at a national level to help the workforce deliver the Promise? Also, as a general question, what would you like to see in the bill to help improve things?

Fiona Duncan: As Claire Burns just said, there is a cluttered landscape. At the end of the care review, there were 44 pieces of legislation, 19 pieces of secondary legislation and three international conventions governing the thing that we call a care system—because children and families do not live in individual silos. Since then, those numbers have gone up, not down.

Cohesive legislation is essential, because, as Claire said, each of those pieces of legislation comes with individual duties. Some of those duties have been enacted and some have not, either because of the level of resource or time available or because they conflict with one another. The situation not only drains the resources of the workforce but makes children and families feel like they pinball around all the individual systems and do not get anything supportive from them.

We must have clear legislation that enables the workforce to do the job that it wants to do. It must make it clear for children and families what GIRFEC, the Promise or the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child will mean for them, and what they can expect, so that they are confident that they can get the support that they need when they need it. That will enable us to ensure that more children and families flourish together, whenever it is safe for them to do so, and that the children and young people who need the care of the state get the very best care that the state can offer them and go on to live happy adulthoods. We need to tidy it all up and make sure that there is enough support in place for the bill to be enacted properly. That will require sequencing.

We know, from engaging with the workforce, what is getting in their way and what the barriers are. There are a bunch of areas where legislation is needed in order to get rid of those barriers. We also know what is helping. For some of those things, there may need to be legislation to ensure that there is not a postcode lottery—so that they are helping not just here or there, but everywhere. I have quite a big wish list.

Jackie Dunbar: I have finished with my questions, convener, unless someone else would like to answer.

The Convener: It looks as though nobody has anything to add. Our final questions will come from Miles Briggs.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): I will continue on the same theme. Back in 2003, Angela Constance, the minister at the time, told the Scottish Association of Social Work conference that the Government aimed to establish a national agency and that it would be operational by 2025. Fraser McKinlay, you have said that you think that systemic barriers are getting in the way of delivery. If we are being completely honest, halfway through delivering the Promise, the necessary scaffolding of the workforce is not there, is it?

Fraser McKinlay: There is no doubt that, when we were here a year ago, the expectation was that the national care service legislation would progress and that it would involve a national social work agency. For reasons that you all know much more about than I do, that has not happened. The absence of that legislation, and the lack of progress on it, has meant that people have been waiting for the agency to be created down the line, and it has not appeared. Some of the things that were talked about a year ago have not progressed as much as we would have liked, for sure.

So, I agree in part with your assessment, Mr Briggs. We do not have things such as the integrated strategy that Professor McCulloch has described very clearly, yet we need it. People are doing good work day in, day out to support staff as best they can and to recruit locally, but we know that that is not enough. It is about having a collection of tactics.

10:30

One slightly brighter spot on the landscape is the work that Scotland has been doing on trauma and the workforce being more trauma informed. In the past few years, there has been a lot of focus on ensuring that the entire workforce that is in contact with children and families is more trauma informed and trauma aware. That is positive, but, as you say, it is not what will fix the fundamentals of the size and shape of the workforce. There is absolutely no doubt that this is one of the most pressing challenges that we have as we look towards 2030.

Miles Briggs: The plan to deliver the Promise keeps referencing the national care service, but, three weeks ago in the Parliament, the minister could not rule out ditching the care service, and I do not think that there will be a functioning NCS bill before the end of this parliamentary session. What is your view on that, with regard to all the promises around the workforce?

Fiona Duncan: During the consultation on the national care service, I wrote a series of blogs that

focused on one question and one question only—whether the shape of the national care service, as it was envisaged, would keep the Promise to children and families. Throughout the conversations during that period, there was no conclusive evidence that it would. Therefore, my position remains that, with the absence of evidence of a national care service that will keep the Promise, work must continue to keep the Promise.

However, the committee has heard from everybody here today that the prospect of a national care service on the horizon and the period of time that the workforce has waited for it or not understood whether or not it was coming has created delays. It has made progress slow down or, indeed, stagnate. Claire Burns has articulated really well the challenge of multiple initiatives and policies that prevent progress, consistency, stability and clarity about where we have started and stopped and what we will do in the meantime. As long as there are other things on the horizon or other distractions, we are not laser focused on what we need to be laser focused on. That has been a really significant barrier.

Professor McCulloch: I want to acknowledge that things have not been stagnant while we have been waiting for progress on the national social work agency. Over the period, we have had a review and actions from the review of social work education, a supported year has been introduced for newly qualified social workers, and there is on-going work on the post-qualifying framework. Later this morning or this afternoon, witnesses will talk to the many initiatives that are going on, driven by the things that we have been talking about and the recognition of people's right to excellent services from a committed workforce.

That work is going on amid uncertainty about how it will be enabled and rolled out, so we need to address that uncertainty. It takes me back to the question that we were asked about whose job this is. It is really easy to say, "They should have done this," or, "They should have done that." It is incredibly frustrating, because we know that it needs to be done. Actually, it is everyone's job. It is our business to get these things progressed into a framework that actually does that thing, from entry to exit, and is coherent.

My view is that we have not seen the progress on workforce development that we would want to have seen, but a lot of things are happening, and we need everyone to continue to drive and push that forward.

Miles Briggs: I am hearing mixed opinions about whether we are stuck in a vacuum until the legislation is sorted. The Government might decide that legislation to establish a national social work agency could be part of the Promise bill.

However, I looked at the Government's web page on that today, and there are just a couple of photos about what it will look like and what work will be done.

The national social work agency is what is meant to be driving change. It is meant to set standards and then monitor how councils take forward the work. Are you saying that we do not really need that agency and that that work has been happening, or has it not been happening?

Professor McCulloch: I am saying that we need national leadership and national governance with regard to workforce development. I am also saying that, while we wait for that, work is going on. It is my observation that both of those things are happening, and I personally believe that we need national leadership and governance for that to be consistent across the country instead of patchy, as it is at the moment.

Claire Burns: We are supporters of a national social work agency. We need one for the status and profile of social work and for all the workforce planning issues that we have been talking about—we do not have great workforce data, for example. It is unfortunate that the NSWA is attached to the NCS bill, because the agency is affected every time that there is a delay with the bill and questions about that.

The point that you are hearing is that we desperately need these things to happen now: we need workforce planning, better workforce data and understanding about what we will need in 10 years' time. If a decision is made not to have a national social work agency, how else can we deliver those desperately needed functions?

The Convener: I thank all the witnesses on today's first panel. It has been a helpful session, and I thank you for your time and answers.

I suspend the meeting for 10 to 15 minutes, for a break and a changeover of witnesses.

10:36

Meeting suspended.

10:49

On resuming—

The Convener: Welcome back, members, ladies and gentlemen. I welcome our second panel of witnesses. Laura Caven is chief officer in the children and young people team and co-chair of the additional support for learning project board at the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, Alison Bavidge is national director of the Scottish Association of Social Work, Ben Farrugia is the director of Social Work Scotland and Stephen

Smellie is the chair of the social work issues group at Unison Scotland.

I know that some, if not all, of you were listening to the previous session, so you will have heard what our first witnesses said. My questions will be largely the same; you will have heard the responses to them. Those witnesses said that you might be better suited to answering some of my latter questions, but on the workforce issue, what are the challenges that are facing the workforce in delivering the Promise and the commitment that has been made?

Alison Bavidge (Scottish Association of Social Work): First, social workers enter the profession to build positive relationships and to work on human rights, agency and social justice, all of which are key elements of the Promise. Social workers do that across adult, children and justice services, so today I will keep coming back to the point that children do not sit on their own—they are part of families and communities.

You have heard this morning about the shift in the social work role towards organising care and crisis intervention, and the impact that that has had on relationships, social work's role in balancing tensions between families and the state and between needs and resources, and the impact of austerity and the issues that we now have with lack of early support and preventative work. Almost half of social workers are dissatisfied with their jobs, and 32 per cent report strong emotional responses, such as crying, at least once a week. We have some problems.

I want to say something about the relationship between national and local government, because it affects our profession profoundly. We are seen as a national profession, but our delivery is localised across 32 local authorities and then, of course, we have NHS Highland providing adult services. Consistency is therefore a recurring issue; I heard reference to a postcode lottery, earlier.

You have heard about the recruitment and retention challenge in social work. To fix that, we will require significant resources and real political commitment. There has been an 8 per cent drop in student numbers in the past two years. Bursaries were mentioned several times earlier this morning: I certainly want to talk about that.

Large case loads, lack of resources and insufficient support from employers are issues, but there are also issues that not everybody will agree about, including the localised approach to pay and conditions, professional development and poor salary increases. We have been looking at healthcare and teachers: teachers have had a 33 per cent rise since 2018. Interestingly, there is a surplus of new teachers, while social work has a

vacancy rate of about 10 per cent, so that is perhaps a reason why people are choosing teaching and not social work.

We heard earlier about the range of tactics and the need for a proper strategy and adequate resources, but we also need trust in professionals, rather than micromanaging them through lots of guidance, lots of legislation and small ring-fenced grants. A lot of ministers impact on the social work arena, and many complex policy areas affect a social work sector that has insufficient time, capacity and financial resource. There is therefore work to be done to ensure that the workforce is in a fit state to deliver the Promise, and social workers need to see themselves as being a valued and crucial part of the Promise and part of the solution.

That is a quick rundown of the fundamental issues.

Ben Farrugia (Social Work Scotland): Good morning, and thank you for having us. It is great to be here and it was really great to listen to the earlier witnesses.

If the committee will humour me, I have a list and will also run through some of the challenges—it is only four pages. [*Laughter.*]

Trish McCulloch mentioned keeping the focus on purposeful work. It is absolutely critical that social work is doing the relationship based and asset based strength-building work that it is trained to do.

Fiona Duncan spoke eloquently about the complexity of the issues that families face, and we have to hold that in mind. We are talking about poverty, drug and alcohol use and unemployment; we are talking about disparate families; and we are talking about the complexity for social workers of trying to manage children who are already in care and some who are still with families that are facing very challenging and complex situations.

On retention of experienced social workers, I have taken to just saying “retention, retention, retention”—to paraphrase someone else’s speech from a long time ago—but that really is the focus. We need to be absolutely laser focused on the issue.

Recruitment is important and, of course, also on my list is the preparation of incoming social workers, but ensuring that experienced social workers are staying in the system is the key to good recruitment. We heard that from a number of the previous witnesses. If we do not have experienced social workers who can provide support and learning opportunities for new ones, we burn through the new ones and they leave within a few years, as our research has shown.

To echo what others have said, I say that the legislative and policy agenda is too big and too incoherent. We have had activist change through policy for two decades or more. We now need a period of stasis—we need a stable policy and legislative environment so that we can get on with the core business of social work. That applies not only to children and families social work, but across the whole social work landscape.

Stephen Smellie (Unison): I agree with much of what has been said. As the voice of social workers, Unison welcomed the Promise. At the time, following a survey of our members, we produced a report. Although people were very positive about the Promise, they regularly made the point that we should not make promises to children if we cannot keep them. A few years down the road, we are at risk of delivering on that prediction.

There have been lots of issues that have cut across our ability to deliver on the Promise, but we said at the time that we would not be able to do it if we did not increase the levels of funding and address the issues of case load and workload management in the workforce. We have not been able to do that. We now have a workforce that is overworked and overstressed. Absence levels are higher and we have already heard about vacancy levels.

Earlier, a question was asked about productivity. Social workers, family support workers and others in the workforce have been addressing that issue by regularly working more than their 35 hours, in order to complete cases and to see families whom they have not been able to see in a particular week or month. We are asking more of and expecting more from a workforce that is under enormous pressure, and has been for a number of years. We are not talking about a new situation—it has been around for a number of years.

Funding is a critical issue. We know that local government funding has not kept pace with the Scottish Government’s overall funding. That is a repeated theme, as anyone in Unison will tell you. That impacts on social work and children’s services workforces as much as it does on other local government workforces.

We have had the temporary short-term funding that we have heard a little about this morning. Any funding is welcome, but Fraser McKinlay made the point that we would rather know that we will get money next year and the year after, rather than getting a big burst of money that we need to try to spend over the next year or two. That additional money has produced some very good projects and initiatives. When you have a gathering of a group of senior managers—some of us occasionally join them—they will talk about various really good projects, whether that is from the point of view of

the contribution from housing, health, police or social work. However, Mr Rennie made the point that they fail to look over their shoulders at the fire that is burning in the basement. That is the reality. A lot of good work has been done, but it has not addressed the fundamental issues.

There has been a failure to invest properly in the front line. When Fraser McKinlay spoke about the front line, he made the point that admin workers are being cut back. We now have social workers who have to cope with admin work which they never had to do before. Frankly, that is not what they have been trained to do, and they are sometimes not very good at it. It takes up a lot of time: they still have to fill in 10-page reports. They might spend half an hour talking to a family and four hours writing up the report, such is the bureaucracy that they have to contend with. That issue has not been addressed in any significant way.

One of the downsides of the funding streams that have come in, whereby councils have been able to set up special teams for special projects and initiatives, is that a lot of the experienced workers have gravitated towards those projects because they are more rewarding, in the sense that they achieve things, and it gets them out of the sharp crisis management stuff in areas such as child protection that everyone else has to deal with. That means that the crisis management teams are relying on newly qualified social workers more than they should. Those teams should include a balance of experienced and newly qualified social workers, but the experienced workers have either left the service altogether or have moved to other projects. That has weakened the front line, and that contributes to the early burnout that we have heard about.

Finally, we have heard a bit about workforce planning. We might come on to talk about that a bit more. We do not have genuine workforce planning across the country. That is one thing that, we hope, the national social work agency will address, should it ever arrive. However, it has been a long time coming. We are sitting waiting for it, and the need is there.

11:00

We have heard about the crisis. Staff are burning out and they are stressed. However, they are still doing lots of very good work. I would not want to make these comments without praising the efforts of social workers, family support workers and other parts of the workforce, who still get out of bed early in the morning to do what they can, work late at night to catch up, and even take work home at weekends. They do a great deal of work to try to protect children and deliver on the Promise, but they are weighed down by

bureaucracy and staff shortages and are having to cover their backs. That is the general situation.

The Convener: Thank you. I understand that that was a broad opening question, but we will have to keep things a little more concise, in order to get round all members.

Lastly from me, I made a point about the figures that show a big rise since 2019 in the number of senior children's social workers and a reduction—albeit that it is a little one—in the number of main children's social workers. Is that balance correct? Are you happy that senior worker numbers are going up and main worker numbers are falling? Alternatively, is there more to the figures than those headlines?

Ben Farrugia: First, I point out that you are comparing a big percentage of a small number with a decline—more than 2,000—

The Convener: But one figure is going up and one is going down, so the trend—

Ben Farrugia: One figure is going up, indeed. To me, the figures show, overall, a children and families social work profession that has remained static, in effect, over the past decade or more, during which our ask of the profession has increased, as Stephen Smellie and Alison Bavidge have said. There has been a decrease in the number who hold cases, so we are asking them to do more.

That does not even take into account our vacancy rate, which has been mentioned, or sickness absence rate, which does not feature in the vacancy rate and by which social work is particularly hard hit, partly because of the demography of the profession and also because the profession worked flat-out throughout the pandemic—as hard as any other—and has not stopped since. We have pretty high rates of sickness absence, and the cases and responsibilities fall on those who remain at work. I do not want to use the words “doom loop”, but we are trapped in a really difficult situation, in which we are asking more and more of fewer and fewer.

In effect, at best the rise in seniors just reflects the fact that people move through the profession, and they change. What we are really struggling to do is to hold on to those who provide the relationships with children and families. Again, that is where our focus has to be. We need to focus on retention and we need to be able to fill those vacancies and expand the profession—not dramatically, but the need exists and, as Stephen Smellie said, it extends beyond social workers. The Scottish Social Services Council keeps figures for all the necessary roles, and we see a squeeze across the piece.

The Convener: Will you clarify whether you think that it is correct that there are more seniors—a 48 per cent rise since 2019—but that you would prefer, I presume, that the number of main social workers had risen to the same extent?

Ben Farrugia: Absolutely.

Stephen Smellie: For a long time, we have argued that there needs to be a much better career structure for social workers, so that instead of their just aspiring to become a manager—a mover up and away from the front line—we have something at a lower level. Many councils have introduced senior practitioners, which I think is partly reflected in the figures that you talked about.

That is about keeping social workers on the front line but having them take on some additional responsibilities, such as specialist work. That is a good thing: we are keen on it. The problem has been that there has been no great additional money to enable that to be afforded, because those people need to be paid a bit more money.

What you have seen involves a number of areas. We have introduced senior practitioners. Those social workers are not disappearing into the management structure; they are still part of the local team. However, in order to pay for having those additional senior practitioners—because we have a standstill budget—we have had to reduce the numbers of actual social workers. I am not sure of the exact detail of the figures and whether they reflect that, but it has certainly happened. We are trying to keep people in social work, but we are losing the total number of people on the ground.

George Adam: Good morning. I will go down a similar route to that of my earlier questions. We keep hearing about the recruitment and retention of social workers and how we manage that.

I can understand that someone becomes a social worker for all the right reasons, including to help people and families. However, given the many challenges that you have outlined, there might be difficulties in continuing to deliver services. What would be the best way forward for us in dealing with recruitment and retention issues? I know that those are two separate aspects. First, there is a need to recruit people and, secondly, there is a need to retain them, once they are in post. How do we manage that and find a way forward?

Alison Bavidge: First of all, that is about training. It is about ensuring that people can get through the front door of training, then complete courses. The graduate apprenticeship scheme has been one alternative, but we have to make it easier for people, because they often come to social work later than they do to other professions. A lot of us do not come to it until our late 20s and

early 30s, by which time we often have caring responsibilities.

It is also a female-dominated occupation—84 per cent are women—and some of the students we have talked with who have had real difficulty finishing the courses are single parents, for example. We need bursaries. We need to find a way that enables people to commit to a four-year course or to a two-year postgraduate course that includes a lot of placement time, which is time when people cannot work.

We also need to look at pay. Local authorities pay different rates, and that is one reason that they sometimes cite for their difficulty in filling vacancies. There is a conversation to be had about that.

Professional conditions is another aspect. There is a need to ensure that there is employer support for the risk-management tension. The burnout that social workers can experience is in part about not feeling supported in taking decisions—especially ones that do not look like absolutely the safest decisions but which are about allowing families to grow and flourish, and to have their independence and be supported in that.

We need employer support, and it is really important that professional social workers are supervised by professional social workers. I do not think that there are many other professions that we would want to be supervised in a professional way by a different profession. However, that quite often happens in integrated social care, which is mainly for adults.

The work needs to be purposeful, meaningful and satisfying. That means being with people over a period. It is also about building trusting relationships with communities so that we are not seen as outsiders coming in to do something in a crisis; instead, the role should be understood and the community should support it, so that we are then able to help people and struggling families through difficult times.

In Germany, social workers are given a number of hours per week to spend with families. It might be three hours, six hours or 12 hours, but that is how their case load is managed. Here, social workers are, instead, given a number of tasks.

George Adam: One thing that Ben Farrugia mentioned was times—you might be able to help with this as well, Alison. I cannot remember the hours that he said that social workers are given—I think that it was two hours with a family and four hours for writing the report.

The Convener: It was 30 minutes with a family and four hours for the report.

George Adam: Okay, then.

The Convener: I just said that to make it clear.

George Adam: Basically, that is an issue. I know that councils and local authorities think this way when doing their budgets, but from a sheer management perspective, it costs a lot more for a social worker to do that reporting than it would for an administrator to do it. Surely councils should be looking at ways of having that administrative support in place. That makes sense to me. Having been a councillor, I know that there would be a budget line for that. It is one that I would look at and say no to.

Alison Bavidge: There are things that social workers have to do. They must complete their reports. They must be responsible for the analysis and for writing the reports, for the recommendations and for risk management. However, they could get help with other jobs that they do.

There are layers and layers to get through in some of our local authority financial systems in order to get resources for people. I think that it was mentioned in one of Social Work Scotland's reports from last year that somebody had to fill in 17 forms to get the resource that they needed for a family. That is exhausting, not satisfying. There are lots of tensions in that system. Think of the money that is being spent using that system.

Those are the kinds of things that we need to look at. There is definitely a role for administrative support in a lot of things. I know that we are looking into artificial intelligence and other things that can help, which we need to be thoughtful about.

I do not know whether that helps.

George Adam: Yes, that is helpful, particularly your mention of artificial intelligence, but that would be a whole different discussion.

Ben, do you have anything else to say on that?

Ben Farrugia: Alison Bavidge has answered the question well. I will try to respond on recruitment and retention together, in the interest of time.

A number of things need to happen at the same time. There should be the standardised career model that Stephen Smellie talked about, with meaningful opportunities to advance without having to move into management, which would help us to retain experienced staff. There should also be financial support for students and more innovative routes.

I will reflect on something that Professor McCulloch said earlier. There is some debate about the graduate scheme. That is an example of the distance that has grown between the operational profession and those who are

responsible for training and equipping our social workers—primarily, our universities. We have an opportunity in Scotland—

George Adam: What do you think of the graduate scheme?

Ben Farrugia: We are in favour of it. Scotland has a long history of successful grow-your-own schemes in local government, which are widely enjoyed by those who do them and are valued by those who bring in social workers through those models. We have been supportive of the Scottish Government building that model.

We understand why our universities are hesitant—they have legitimate concerns that need to be considered—but we want more innovative routes. Alison Bavidge mentioned the fact that we have unemployed teachers, so we should be actively talking about conversion courses for people who have been trained in very similar skills. There needs to be space for that.

That brings me to the national social work structures that are being discussed. The need to do a lot of these things simultaneously is the reason why Social Work Scotland was one of the original supporters of the idea and has been supportive of it for five-plus years now. A national social work agency or structure is a means to an end—it is a red herring to think that it is a solution to the workforce problems and will fix things in social work—but we need some national co-ordination to attend to these issues across the 32 local authorities. This is an opportunity for us to have a single national profession that is managed across the 32 local authorities, and that does not even include all those who work in the third sector.

The introduction of technology should be done appropriately, with confidence, across all 32 local authorities. We cannot have a situation, which is likely to happen under the current model, in which some areas run with artificial intelligence and others say, "We can't do anything for five years." The current workforce issues will be exacerbated if social workers can say, "In this area, I will get a tool that means that all my notes will be done for me, but, in that area, I will need to spend four hours typing up notes and preparing these things." We need to grapple with that issue. National structures are a means of doing so, but they are not a solution in themselves.

Stephen Smellie: I can sum up the crisis in recruitment by saying that, when you ask social workers whether they would recommend their children becoming social workers, quite a number of them say no, they should be teachers or do something else. We need to get it right on the job, so that social workers are advocates for their profession. That is part of the issue.

We very much welcome the graduate apprenticeship scheme. Lots of quality staff who work as family support workers, social work assistants and residential care workers would be ideal social workers, but, for the reasons that have been explained, they cannot afford to leave work to do a university course. The number of employers that are able to support people through such schemes is minimal, and there is a lot of competition for places. We welcome the scheme, but things need to be worked through properly and there needs to be proper support. The existing wider social workforce provides a pool for the recruitment of and training for social workers.

George Adam: Local authorities have a history of doing that, with people who have gone down one career path jumping to do something else, because they have the skill set from elsewhere. That was more a statement than a question. Thank you.

Bill Kidd: This is a fairly dramatic question. What action would you like the Scottish Government to take now to offer support for social work staff and trainees? What is your main call for something that you would like to happen as soon as possible?

Laura Caven (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities): It would be really helpful if we could consider the sequencing of all the different policy and legislative commitments that have been made in relation to what social workers and wider professions are being asked to deliver.

At the moment, as the previous witnesses said and as the CELSIS research shows, there is an incredibly complex landscape. Claire Burns asked how GIRFEC, the UNCRC and the Promise relate to one another. As well as the Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Act 2024, there are the wider commitments on the proposed Promise bill and the consultations that are out just now. There should be a bit of sequencing—some thought should go into what we need to do first to make the most impact and what needs to happen before the next thing happens in order for the next thing to be effective.

It would be really helpful for the Scottish Government, working with local government and wider stakeholders, to sit down and have a think about the planning and sequencing of those things. I hope that the Promise progress framework will help with that, because we will be able to look at the data that we have and see where we are making progress, where we are making less progress and where we need to focus more of our attention in a more immediate sense.

11:15

Bill Kidd: Basically, you are saying that you want more co-operation between all the bodies that work in this area. Is that correct?

Laura Caven: I do not think that “co-operation” is the right word for what is needed, because there is co-operation. We all work well together, and we work well with the Scottish Government, but we often have bits of policy or commitments, which perhaps come from different bits of the Scottish Government, that are not necessarily aligned. That is not necessarily a criticism. It just reflects the way in which the systems operate and the way in which things have emerged. It would be good if we could come together—I know that work is being done at a senior level across Government and local government to bring all these things together so that we can do a bit of planning. I would not say that what is needed is more co-operation; it is co-ordination rather than co-operation.

Alison Bavidge: As a point of interest, I note that, in our previous business year, we responded to 34 Government consultations that impacted on social work enough that we thought that we had to say something. That shows the amount of work that is hitting the sector across its child and adult work and justice, and that is in addition to the national care service stuff, which has sucked a lot of thinking, planning and implementation capacity out of the sector.

That is why it is important to have a national social work agency with real clout at Government level with regard to budgets and the phasing and prioritising of work. We were hit with those 34 different things over a period of a year, and that was just us as a professional association. Those things then move to implementation and to local authorities. People might think, “This is a simple bit of implementation—you just have to do it,” but when there are 33 other priorities, we are doing it 33 times, and the same applies in the third sector and the voluntary sector.

There needs to be recognition of the complexity of social work. It is a single profession, but it cannot operate without looking at all the other bits. In general, children do not exist on their own, fortunately, and if they do, we put grown-ups around them.

Stephen Smellie: I would get slaughtered if I did not respond to the question by saying that funding is a major issue. We need more funding in the system in order to shore up the crisis that exists and allow us the comfort and space to change. We talk about transformational change in the Promise, but we do not have transformational funding to achieve that. That is a fundamental issue that needs to be addressed.

It is budget day today, so we are all hopeful and fingers are crossed but, essentially, until we get more money into front-line social work delivery, we will not be able to make the transformational change that we want because we will have a workforce continuing in crisis, and a workforce in crisis cannot make transformational change. People become defensive and reactive and they deal with the crisis.

Ben Farrugia: I echo what Stephen Smellie said. We are not naive about the financial situation that Scotland faces and the challenge that is involved in what will be announced this afternoon. We are not sitting here holding out a huge amount of hope, but I agree with Stephen that a metric for the committee and for all of us in understanding whether we are going to deliver the Promise is whether we are investing the necessary resources to do so. If the pot is reducing, delivery of the Promise is less likely and not more likely.

In view of the fact that the Government's job is difficult, as it has to make choices across any number of equally important issues, and given the financial situation, it strikes me that something that is in the Government's control is the level of policy activity that it undertakes. Bill Kidd asked a bold question and I will give a bold answer. It is within the Government's power to pause all its relevant policy activity until the end of the current session of Parliament and say, "We have an enormous agenda of implementation in front of us. We will focus on that, and we commit to not doing any more consultations. Our job is to create an enabling environment for all the professions that are responsible for delivering the Promise." That would be driven by the evidence, including what we are feeding back, and the financial situation for the Government and for local government, and it would be a great step.

John Mason: To build on that, Mr Smellie said that there should be transformational funding, but I think that we can assume that there will not be. It is a question of what we can do with current funding. I do not know what the budget will contain, but it looks as though the NHS will continue to be the priority, which means that local government will not receive as much funding. Given that situation, how can we work better with the resources that we have? I am particularly thinking about professions other than social workers, which I assume would include teachers, the police, the third sector and youth workers. Do those professions factor into delivering the Promise?

Stephen Smellie: Of course they do—all of them do. Everyone in those professions is already extremely busy. I hear that when I speak to teachers, which I do daily, although it is fair to say that, fortunately, that is less of a problem for the

police. Teachers are up to their necks in it, so it would be a challenge to ask them to do more.

John Mason: Would it be a question of being more joined up?

Stephen Smellie: There is always scope for more co-ordination and sharing. Earlier, Claire Burns talked about the sure start work, where people are based in one place. More recently, we have had family hubs and places like that where people can access support. There is room for joined-up working, although it does not come cheap. In principle, those things would help.

Doing away with some of the bureaucracy should also be considered. Last week, I was speaking to a social work manager about work that they are doing with children's reporters to look at what I think is currently a 10-page report that they have to prepare before they go to hearings. They are working on reducing that to three pages, which would make a big difference. There is scope for improvement if we can reduce that kind of thing.

John Mason: That would be about working better, rather than having someone else doing the work.

Stephen Smellie: Yes—working better, and not having to constantly cut and paste and repeat what you have done before. There is work to be done on that. AI is a possibility. We have concerns about it, as does everyone else in the world, but it is worth exploring and we think that there could be scope for it. However, in my experience, when we start having those kinds of discussions, there is a risk of saying, "We have found a way to do something a wee bit better; therefore, we can cut the budget somewhere else." If there are going to be discussions about that kind of work, trade unions would want to have agreements with employers and the Government that budgets will be protected so that, if jobs are going to be better, we can have more of them, and can do and achieve more.

You have made a point about all the other people and professions that are involved. They all rely on social work. If you do not have a strong social work profession, although teachers and other professionals might be able to identify issues with kids, they will be limited in what they can do to address the issues in the Promise. Some research has been done—I cannot remember who by—to speak to teachers in a local authority; they said that there was no point in phoning the social work department, because the social workers did not have time and never got back to the teachers because they were too hard pressed.

John Mason: The independent care review talked about a lack of evidence and data on other

non-social work professions. Is there a lack of data on who does what?

Ben Farrugia: There is a lack of data. Some critical roles are not registered roles, so it is harder to have a clear understanding of them. Fiona Duncan is right to put parentheses around the care system, as it is a big, complex and multicomponent thing. Primarily, almost all aspects of the delivery of care are a partnership between the public sector and the third sector. Some aspects are very definitely the preserve of local government social work teams, but the third sector is critical in the care and the support that we provide to children and families. As Stephen Smellie has mentioned a few times, local government is a big employer of those in other critical workforces and professions—for example, family support workers span the public sector and other sectors. You started your question by asking about other professions, which are critical.

It is not possible to deliver the Promise by 2030 or 2035 without change and improvement in how some of those other settings and workforces approach care-experienced children and adults. That is essential. However, as Stephen Smellie said, the route to delivering the Promise runs through the social work workforce. They are the thread that runs through everything. On reflection, perhaps we have spent five years giving almost every workforce issue equal value and not acknowledging that, if we do not shore up and improve the social work workforce, any improvements that we can make in schools, health and other areas will be militated against and undermined by the fact that we are not concentrating on the core foundation of our care system, which is social work.

John Mason: Ms Caven, COSLA has oversight of all that councils do. Is the system joined up enough? Is there a balance or is the balance not right?

Laura Caven: In local government, we have a Promise programme board, which is chaired by a representative of the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers—Jim Savage, the chief executive of Aberdeenshire Council—and has representatives from across the professional associations in local government. We have, obviously, Social Work Scotland represented by a chief social work officer. We have the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland represented by a director of education. We have housing and youth work represented. We have directors of finance, local authority lawyers, heads of human resources and probably others that I am forgetting about.

We need to recognise that social work is at the core but it is not just about social work. We need leadership from chief exec level and from local

and national Government for the Promise to be delivered and for other parts of the workforce and local government to see their role in keeping the Promise. At that level, we absolutely have leadership.

Ben Farrugia and I have had regular conversations recently about the role of health in keeping the Promise. Specifically, we have discussed how we better involve our health partners in some of the work and discussions. There is a recognition and an understanding across the professions of their role in keeping the Promise, but, as Stephen Smellie said, everyone is under increasing pressure as budgets become tighter and demand and the circumstances that families are living in become more challenging.

John Mason: Where does the third sector fit in? Obviously, that is outwith councils. Does how the third sector gets involved vary around the country?

Laura Caven: That is a really good point. We do not have representation from the third sector within the local government Promise programme board but we have good relationships at a national level with third sector organisations. How the third sector gets involved will vary across the country because there are different third sector organisations, geographical needs and demographic needs across the country, but the sector is a core partner in the work. It is fundamental to how local authorities and their public sector partners work to keep the Promise.

We can probably do more through the Promise programme board to bring in the third sector. We can probably do a lot more to have those conversations at a national level. The conversations also happen within the children and families national leadership group, which is chaired by the Scottish Government and SOLACE and has representation across public sector and third sector partners. That is a clear space for better connections. Delivery happens at a local level, but that does not stop conversations happening at a national level about how delivery can be facilitated.

John Mason: That is very helpful.

Ms Bavidge, it sounds like things are quite joined up at a local level. Does the Scottish Government need to do more with the other professions that are involved with the Promise?

Alison Bavidge: That is difficult to answer directly, because there is a role for national Government, a relationship with local government and how local government delivers locally. You asked whether we could do more by involving more professions around the table. A lot of that work is done. People put a lot of effort into that locally.

I would like to talk about how social work itself could improve its efficacy. I have concerns about hyperspecialism, or the idea that you have to go into social work through a door marked “adult”, “justice” or “children”. Sure start is a good example of how things began to become much more integrated—there are models of community social work. However, a lot of those approaches now get into trouble because where budget lines and governance lines sit has become really difficult. That is one of the difficulties for social work as a holistic profession. As Fraser McKinlay said earlier, some families have multiple workers, which takes a lot of capacity out of the system and puts a lot of stress and tension into families. Instead, we need a holistic approach whereby the right profession holds the case and provides the support.

11:30

John Mason: Can that be fixed at a local level?

Alison Bavidge: With the right support, it should be possible to fix that at a local level. However, we are all aligned, and, partly because of integration, there are issues for social work when we talk about the satisfying work that has been done over the past 30 years—some of the work that we used to do in communities and the early preventative work—because that is now not seen as part of the statutory work and other people do that work.

Place-based neighbourhood working must be part of our answer, so that people know where to come. We need one front door so that older adults, children, and adults with substance use and mental health problems can get through the door simply and easily without having seven different workers attached to their families. There is something about a generalist approach—Mark Smith of Gateshead Council talks about this—through which people can deal with 75 to 80 per cent of the issues now and here without having to refer people on to other services. The capacity that is used up by re-referring people is immense—it is very expensive. Social workers are generically trained so, like GPs, they should be able to support and deal with a significant amount of the need that comes through the door 75 to 80 per cent of the time, and their own specialisms and those of their colleagues should fill the gaps for the more difficult specialist need.

Willie Rennie: Laura Caven, given that there is a programme board, why is there such wide variation in local authorities’ performance? The Who Cares? Scotland report that was published this year showed a pretty stark picture. Why does that variation exist?

Laura Caven: Variation will always exist, because we are dealing with complex families. Every family is complex, so different factors—

Willie Rennie: For clarity, there is a requirement—an intention—for independent advocacy to be available in every local authority, but it is not. Why is it not available?

Laura Caven: I do not actually have an answer to that. Perhaps I could follow that up in writing, once I have checked what is available in each local authority. Perhaps some of my colleagues could answer that.

To answer your question about why there is variation between local authorities, given that we have a programme board, the reason is that this is work in progress. I accept that it is almost five years since the Promise was published—we will be at the midway point in February—but it is still work in progress.

The programme board has been in place for just over a year and since the care review was published in February 2000, I think, there have been a number of unforeseen challenges. There is a whole range of factors that mean that we have not necessarily made the progress that we might have anticipated and wanted to have made and at the speed that we would have wanted, back in 2000. I absolutely accept that things are not where they need to be. That is why we have a programme board, it is why we are having these conversations, and it is why we are trying to improve things for families.

Willie Rennie: I had hoped that we would have a COSLA representative here who understood the landscape and the reason for the variation, because it is a major and really important player in the delivery of keeping the Promise. I do not know whether you were here for the earlier evidence session, but you have heard the frustration that care-experienced young people are expressing—they are incandescent with rage. I suggest that COSLA needs to be much more on top of this, if we are to deal with some of these issues. That is no criticism of you, but my concern is that the variation between authorities is a major part of the problem.

I have a follow-up question on the whole family wellbeing fund: why could we not get the money out the door?

Laura Caven: I can definitely answer that one. The money was delayed in coming out to local authorities in the first place. Also, it is short-term funding, which is difficult for local authorities to work with. An additional factor is that it was not for local authorities to decide how that money was to be spent. Authorities had to work with community or children’s services planning partnerships to decide what the best use of that funding would be

at a local level, and then for that funding to be used. However, because it is short-term funding and there is a timescale for getting it out and spent, it means that there is a delay.

You then have to think about things such as recruitment. You cannot simply recruit someone the day after funding is provided or distributed, so there are delays such as that. Even if you could recruit someone the next day, how many people would leave a post for a short-term post funded for a year or however long the funding extends? A variety of factors such as those mean that it is really quite difficult.

It is a new way of doing things, a new way of funding being distributed, and a new way of working in that it is a decision by the community or children's services planning partnerships, rather than it being about what local authorities themselves identify as a priority. The process should be much slicker, going forward, but it will need to be a long-term commitment in order for that to be the case.

Although £500 million does not sound like a small amount of money, it was given more than five or six years ago now, and it is a relatively small amount of money in terms of what we are expecting and asking of it in relation to supporting whole families in a way that meets their communities' needs.

Willie Rennie: There is not a long-term commitment to the funding; it is limited. Does that mean that you still have the same problem of people not wanting to take up a position because the money is not there for the long term?

Laura Caven: Yes.

Willie Rennie: Have you told the Government that, and if so, what has it said?

Laura Caven: Absolutely. We have fed that back. An evaluation was either just published or is on its way out and we fed that back.

The Scottish Government obviously also deals with short-term annual budgets. I accept that it is in that position, too. It has heard our concerns and it has heard the concerns of the wider community planning partners. That is the situation that we are in.

Willie Rennie: I have one final question. I know that others are keen to come in.

There are claims that this money is simply being used to patch up budget holes elsewhere. Can you guarantee that that is not happening?

Laura Caven: That is a really difficult question. Government keeps telling local government that these pots of money—whether it is this one, or about early adopters, or pupil equity funding, or whatever funding it is—have to be about

additionality; that is, about something new. At the same time, however, local authorities' budgets have been reduced and they have had to make savings elsewhere. If you are creating a new service by relying on a service or a group of professionals that were always there but now are not, because savings have been made such that those professionals or that service is not there anymore, then the thing that you were going to build on top of is not there anymore; there is nothing to build on.

I do not know whether—

Willie Rennie: No, I understand.

Laura Caven: For example, we might be talking about the delivery of a service from a community centre, but the community centre is now shut. You then have to redesign the service.

Willie Rennie: It is additional to the reduced service, but not additional to what was there before.

Laura Caven: Aye.

Willie Rennie: Sort of.

Mr Farrugia, do you want to come in?

Ben Farrugia: I want to go back to your first question about why there is variation. It is absolutely a legitimate question—there is variation. Laura Caven said it right. Areas are set up differently, the history of areas is different and—as committee members will know from representing their communities—the needs of communities are different. That is all then reflected in some degree of different set-up in each of those areas. There is a broader philosophical and constitutional question about whether that is right, but I will be parochial and talk about social work. Since the 1990s, when we moved from a regional structure to a 32 local authority structure—although, as Alison Bavidge pointed out, it is 33 because, in Highland, adult social workers are employed by the NHS—social work has been set up very differently across the 32 authorities, particularly now that we are 20 years plus on from that. The role and, I would say, the power of social work within those systems are very different.

Like Claire Burns and others on the previous panel, I have been close to the experience of Glasgow's transformation. The story there is important and valid, and there is lots to take from it, but one thing that is not pointed out enough is that, in that health and social care partnership, social work is very strong. Claire mentioned the ability to bring together budgets to hold on to money, which is in some part down to the fact that social work has a strong voice in that partnership, but that is not the case across the 32 areas.

Your question leads us back to the one about the role of national structures in social work. In Social Work Scotland, we talk about the minimum acceptable variation, taking account of geography and demography and all the other realities. We should be clear on what that minimum is. A national structure around social work will have value in that regard, although it will have an impact on local government—at Social Work Scotland we do not pretend otherwise—particularly when it comes to the ability to make certain decisions in the area. In our view, it needs to have that impact if it is to be effective. That is one of the areas where a national structure can really show its value.

Stephen Smellie: I am sorry to come back to funding and budgets, but it is worth making the point that local government budgets have been under a lot of pressure. For many years, councils protected the social work budget. Most councils would say, “We’ll try to make the cuts somewhere else, and we’ll protect social work.” Over the past few years, social work directors up and down the country have had to think about what is statutory and what is non-statutory and have said, “We’ll need to offer up the non-statutory stuff for savings.” A number of projects, teams and services have been trimmed, sliced or, indeed, removed over the years, because we need to protect the statutory.

Therefore, when additional money comes in, albeit on a temporary basis, you find that some of those things are recreated, maybe with a different name and a slightly different shape and colour and all the rest of it. Essentially, rather than trying to fill holes in what they have, social work directors are trying to fill in the stuff that they dug up a few years ago. That is part of what is happening here.

The other part, which goes back to a point that Laura Caven made, is that, because those things are temporary, it is largely only internal people who apply for the posts. To go back to a point that I made earlier, you then end up with the situation where people on the front line have to be told, “No, you can’t go because we can’t backfill for you,” so everything is delayed. There are issues about that.

Willie Rennie: I get all that, but that does not explain the variation.

Stephen Smellie: No. I was talking about the—

Willie Rennie: Why is there variation, do you think?

Stephen Smellie: I think that there is variation because people want to do things differently and there are different hold-ups. I could not comment on your specific point. There is a need for national standards and for a structure to monitor and check up on those standards. The national social work

agency, should we ever get one, would have responsibility for that.

Alison Bavidge: I very much agree with that. The ring-fencing of grants is interesting. We have social workers who cannot do what they want to do and what they have been trained to do, yet we then fund very specific short-term projects on top of that. Why are we not just funding social workers to do more of what they should be doing on individual, family and community wellbeing? Is there a lack of trust there?

This is a bit of a myth, but I heard earlier today that local authorities are somehow squirrelling away, misusing or mispurposing money. If that is happening, there are the means to find that out and expose it. However, in the current situation of financial austerity, it is far more likely that we are simply not able to do the things that we think are the basics and that we need to do. Therefore, I would really like to see an end to short-term grant funding. People have to apply for that funding, monitor it and report on it, and a third of it goes on doing that kind of stuff. Let us give the money as core grant funding for local authorities to do the work on wellbeing.

Inconsistency happens for the reasons that you have heard but also because there is a difference between national and local government—decisions go through a layer of local government and local democracy, which sometimes turns out slightly different answers to what are fundamentally the same questions. To go back to what I said at the beginning, it is about the layers and the importance of the relationship between national and local government, and the trust that comes through that and then comes to the professionals who work in the system.

11:45

Evelyn Tweed: It is clear that staff are working very hard to deliver on the Promise. You have told us about various things that you would like to see, but I would like each of you to give us one or two priorities that you absolutely want us to focus on. I have heard you talk about the need for more resources, less bureaucracy and an enabling environment, but could each of you give us one or two priorities, please?

Alison Bavidge: Unison and SASW both have campaigns at the moment, so you can go and look at our lists. Fundamentally, our asks are about getting the basics right for the profession. We need to look at pay levels. We need to look at what has happened to teachers and workers in the health sector over the past few years, and at what has happened to social workers. Why is social work not as attractive a profession? We also need to support people to get into social work, which

means that we must provide bursaries and other financial support to enable them to do that.

Those are my two priorities. We need to support people to come into the profession, and we need to get right the basic fundamentals of support, supervision, learning and development, and career pathways. That will enable us to have a healthy and thriving profession that will deliver on the Promise and beyond.

Laura Caven: I come back to what I said earlier about sequencing and policy coherence. We need to provide the workforce with clear messages on what the priorities are. Ben Farrugia said that it would be great if we could stop making policy and let people get on with implementation. As Alison Bavidge said, that would help people to keep the Promise. I will say that my point about policy coherence and sequencing counts as one priority.

Tackling poverty was one of the Verity house commitments that the Scottish Government and local government signed up to, so there needs to be a focus on that. In particular, there needs to be focus on tackling child poverty. Members of the previous panel emphasised the extent to which that could make a difference from the point of view of prevention.

Ben Farrugia: I think that I am the person who used the term “enabling environment”, so I will come back to it. A priority for us is to reduce the amount of noise that comes from Edinburgh in relation to the things that the Government wants people’s input on or that it wants people to focus on. It is constant. That is a reality not just for those of us who operate nationally, but for the people on the ground. That takes people away from the core task of supporting families and from the core task of delivering on the Promise, which involves a big change for social work. We need to change if we are to deliver on the Promise. We welcome and want such change.

It is a priority for us to have an enabling environment. That will involve having a reset so that the focus of the activity of national Government—and, to a significant degree, that of local government—is on asking what professions and workforces need in order to go about their jobs. That also applies to other professions that have a key role to play in this space. That will involve asking, “What bits of bureaucracy can we remove? What element of reporting is getting in the way?” We would love the conversation to be about how national and local government can enable the workforces to do the work for children and families, but it does not feel as though that is the case.

You invited me to add something different from what colleagues have said, all of which, I am sure, I would agree with. I would like to say something

about professional leadership and governance. That links to my previous answer. In that respect, we have not had a clear vision for the past 20 years, so the picture has become very fragmented. In addition, integration has made the situation very complicated. We do not have a consistent and coherent set of governance arrangements for our profession across the 32 employers of public sector social workers. That is another area that Social Work Scotland is particularly interested in.

Stephen Smellie: I will talk about two things that we would like the Government to do; there is a whole list of things that we would like employers to do.

There is one issue that we have not mentioned on which I would like some action to be taken. When the Promise was made, it was stated at the outset that there was no place for profit when it came to looked-after children, but there has been an increase in the use of private residential placements, the providers of which charge an arm and a leg. In fact, we have heard stories of organisations that were previously involved in the adult care sector withdrawing from that because they can make more money—more profit—by looking after children. Local authorities, because they have a shortage of spaces, have no choice other than to use those facilities.

I spoke to one of my colleagues, who said that the providers just cherry pick the kids who they can work with, and they will leave the hard ones to others. He was incandescent, because on the morning that I was speaking to him, he had received a phone call from one of those private agencies, which said that a 16-year-old needed to be out of a facility by Christmas because it did not want to keep him there any more.

There is no place for that kind of care—it is not care at all. One of the things that the Government should look at is how we prevent that kind of situation from arising. That means not putting children into situations where companies are looking to profit, which is what those providers primarily exist to do. That is one thing that I would want to do.

The other ask that I would have of the Government is that it should not ask us to do anything else without properly funding it. We have been asked to do a number of things over the years. Most of them are good things—extending the age that children can stay in care to 21 is a good thing—but they have not been fully funded.

In one of my local areas, there is one children’s home where all six children are now aged 18. They do not want to move out, because they are comfortable where they are, and they want to stay there. Anybody who has teenage kids will know

that there are other pressures when it comes to supporting 18-year-olds. It is the kind of thing where if they are told to be in at 10 o'clock at night, they might say, "I'm going for a pint after work." It is a different dynamic.

Do not ask us to do more things unless you are going to properly fund us to do them.

Ross Greer: This has been touched on quite a few times already, but I want to come back to the case load issues that social workers have. Stephen Smellie, you mentioned in your opening comments that the reality is that a lot of social workers do a huge amount of overtime, and many families do not get to see their social worker from week to week or, sometimes, for even longer periods of time.

I will ask this question in two parts. Would anybody like to expand on the comments that Stephen made at the start about the reality for social workers who have a case load beyond their capacity, and consider what the present system should be doing formally about that?

Given the reality, which is that caseworkers are working overtime and families are not getting to see them, what policies and processes are in place for when a case load is far beyond capacity? Is there nominally—at least on paper—a process for dealing with that? If so, is that process not working? Is there an assumption that case loads are always manageable?

Stephen Smellie: I will go first, as I raised the issue. Our assumption is that case loads are not manageable. Cases will come in and there is a reluctance not to allocate them. In some practices, cases are just allocated, so people end up getting more. In some areas, they have a better system and they sift cases and say about some of them, "Frankly, that is not a priority". Therefore, some of the early prevention work that we would want to do is just put aside, and the crisis stuff is prioritised. Complex cases keep being allocated to workers.

You can have 20 cases and be quite comfortable, or you can have one case and be completely overrun by it, because any case can explode at any time. Every employer will have a system for supervision and, in theory, case load management, but the reality is that a case needs to be allocated to someone when it comes in.

Earlier, we heard about the protected year for newly qualified workers. Notionally, that is designed so that they only have a small number of cases, but, frankly, three, four or five months in, they are told, "You are doing alright so far, so here, I will give you another one and, by the way, here is another one." The protected year gets eaten into very quickly. Some of that—some of the stuff that is less about crises—is diverted to special teams that have been set up. That helps—

I know of a number of examples of that—but it does not reduce the number of child protection referrals that the crisis team has to manage.

Ultimately, how well a person can manage their case load depends on the levels of stress that they can cope with. Can they work an extra hour or two every night? Can they take work home at weekend? It is stuff like that. One worker talked about having to choose between looking after her own kids and looking after somebody else's kids, and that is a pressure. Some workers sustain it for years, but they cannot sustain it forever, so it becomes a crisis management situation. To come back to the question, the way to reduce that pressure is to give us more staff.

Ross Greer: Does anyone else want to come in on case workload?

Alison Bavidge: Case loads are a significant problem, as is the issue of staff working unpaid overtime to keep people safe. We do not have a waiting-list system as there is in the health service, because when people present, they usually need help now.

We consider eligibility through the triaging system to which Stephen Smellie referred. In addition, there are other children's support systems such as child and adolescent mental health services, and there is mental health and substance use support for adults. All those things are important in ensuring that people get early support in order to reduce the level of risk and crisis on the children's side.

Where there are long waiting lists elsewhere, the level of crisis in families will be heightened, for a variety of reasons. As I said, social work cannot turn people away, and it cannot run a waiting list in the same way as the NHS, so prevention work is deprioritised. The lack of such work then leads to a downward spiral, with more and more crisis and less and less preventative work.

Ben Farrugia: I will concentrate on the second half of the question. I agree with Alison Bavidge—we do not have a waiting-list system, but in reality, we sort of do. People are waiting for assessment, and the reality—as the witnesses in the previous session described well—is that the system becomes risk responsive. If someone seeks support but there is not a crisis, we cannot get to them. We wait until they are in crisis, and then we have to respond to them, because we have a statutory obligation to keep that child safe. The actions that social work then has at its disposal in relation to the family and the child are—as the committee well knows—not the ones that we want and need in relation to the Promise, which is about keeping children safe within their family. That is the reality.

There is a greater use of non-social work staff, such as social work assistants and so forth, who are critical to the delivery of social work. Again, however, if we lift up the bonnet, we see that a greater degree of complex activity is being done by those staff. That is okay, as long as it is appropriate work for them, but there is a reason why we have the protected profession of social work with specific responsibilities that are held on behalf of the local authority.

Obviously, there is a reallocation of cases to others, such as senior children's social workers, to go back to the convener's earlier question. It is important to mention once again that some areas are looking at technology with regard to how we might strip bits out of what a social worker does so that they can do other things. Stephen Smellie's earlier point is important, however—if technology is simply used as a mechanism to give social workers more and more cases, it is just a Faustian pact; we will not actually make any progress. However, technology is probably part of the answer in enabling people to do their work well and better.

Ross Greer: Sticking with technology as an example of reform, I totally take on board Stephen Smellie's point that the key solution is more funding for more staff, but let us be pessimistic for a moment and say that this afternoon's budget announcement is not going to include a transformational additional settlement for local government that gets passed down to social work.

You have talked about a number of areas of potential reform that would make the system more productive and make it easier for social workers to cope with the workload. Are there any other areas of potential reform that have not been mentioned so far that you would like to raise with the committee?

Ben Farrugia: I suppose the first thing that comes to my mind, because it is prevalent in the conversations that I am part of with the bit of the profession that I represent, which is largely senior managers in local government social work, concerns the issue of their trying to fulfil their responsibilities, as leaders of the profession, in what is now an incredibly fragmented space. Local government reorganisation created that, and it has been exacerbated by integration. In that context, it is difficult to do the type of once-for-a-family work that Alison Bavidge spoke about, and it is now difficult for the leaders of the profession to reach across or have a coherent picture of what their profession actually is.

Chief social work officers are now responsible—although they are rarely directly operationally responsible—for all the social workers in their area. A family might be engaging with all the different services, as my colleagues on the panel

have articulated, so we are very interested in reform in that area. It is about trying to learn from the past, where there are lessons regarding coherence and how we get a coherent professional management structure across our 32 council areas.

Ross Greer: It says a lot about how we do governance reform in Scotland that multiple integration processes have led to more fragmentation.

Ben Farrugia: More fragmentation—exactly.

The Convener: I call Pam Duncan-Glancy.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: The point about fragmentation is really important.

My question was going to be on what would move us towards a more positive working environment for all the staff who are delivering the Promise. We have already heard some suggestions, most recently from Ben Farrugia, who talked about digital solutions and workload reduction mechanisms, and from Stephen Smellie, who mentioned more staff and other approaches. Is there anything that you have not covered that you think would improve the working environment for staff who are working to deliver the Promise across Scotland?

12:00

Stephen Smellie: I will send you our list of demands, although those matters are not necessarily for the Government. We recently had a conference, at which Ben and others spoke, during which we specifically addressed the working conditions of staff. Social workers find themselves hot desking in offices or working from home and so on. Although some of that came about through necessity during Covid, it also came about through cuts that reduced the number of offices and all the rest of it.

That does not work for social workers. As we heard earlier, if social workers have been visiting a family in a difficult situation, they need to go back to base and be able to sit down, relax, talk to colleagues and share that information—going back to sit at a computer and have a Teams discussion is not the same. There are issues such as that, and we need to provide the right kind of working conditions for social workers and for that team support to happen. I have been around social work for a very long time, and that was always part of it. I was not a social worker, but I was regularly sitting on the edge of my desk, offloading. That is really important—it is about people getting to share what happened to them.

We need to look at the estate that we are asking people to work in, because that so-called modern approach does not work. One of the concerns that

we have about AI is that some of that reflective practice could be taken away from colleagues and given to a computer to do. Not all our concerns are like that, but that would be one of them. We should not rush into that.

We also need time for actual training and reflection on practice. Although it is sometimes a budget issue, many times social workers get access to training and then do not turn up for it, because they are having to manage a case load. We need to have protected time for genuine training and for social workers to not just do it at home, which is what a lot of them must do—they read up on things and go online and search for stuff on their own. We need protected time for them to have proper training, share with colleagues and reflect on their practice. I would add those two things to what I said previously.

Ben Farrugia: They are great things to add, because we have not given them enough time on the panel yet. I will not repeat entirely what Stephen said, but I agree that physical proximity to colleagues is important, and I might extend that to physical proximity to your communities. Doing your social work from the front seat of your car outside someone's house is a reality and will always be a practical feature of the work, but I absolutely agree with Stephen about the need for social workers to have spaces where they can have private conversations with colleagues and with those whom they support.

I emphasise the point about protected time for learning and development, which very much features in the campaigns of Unison and SASW. I am underlining that point because it is critical. Fraser McKinlay rightly mentioned trauma work. If social workers do not have the time to engage with those good initiatives, we are throwing things at the profession and undermining its confidence. We are saying, "Look, here are opportunities that we are offering you, but we are not giving you any time to engage with them."

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Do the other witnesses want to add anything?

Laura Caven: Other professions' support of social work and what it does, and the multi-agency element of that, is important, as is leadership, from chief exec level down.

Alison Bavidge: I would also consider the role of social work employers in supporting the profession. Employers and local government—it basically comes down to local government—help to create the social work profession. A social worker's contract will say the hours that they will work, what they will get paid and what their holiday will be. In the governance structure, the employer sets the roles, duties and responsibilities of social workers, but there is little commitment on what it

will give them by way of professional development and little about its responsibility for them as a profession. It goes back to learning.

The advanced practice framework that the Scottish Government has been working on is really important, and that needs to be taken forward by the national social work agency.

Fundamentally, we need fewer vacancies. We need to sort that out. We need flexible and supportive working, and we need visibility in communities. We need to go where the people are. The people should not need to find us. We should be where the people are—we should be school based, not just for school-age children, but for communities.

We should be attached to general practices and available where there are still community centres. There should be normal front doors—non-stigmatising unitary front doors—so that people can get to us and get the support they need.

Ben Farrugia: If I may—because Alison prompted it, and it is in Stephen's charter of demands—I will say that the reality is that social workers are obligated to adhere to a code of practice. If they do not, their registration is at risk. We have a code for employers, which is not statutory, and which employers are not held to in some respects, so there is a tension there that perhaps we could look at in the future.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I want to build on the point about statutory codes of practice and move slightly to the point that Laura Caven made about other services. We have heard about the role of schools. COSLA's additional support for learning project board, which I think, Laura, you are a co-chair of, has highlighted the importance of refreshing the code of practice on learning for pupils with additional support needs, but action on that appears to be way down the line.

One area in the plan that has been identified as having zero actions completed is resources. Laura, could you talk a bit about whether you feel that there is enough pace of work in the additional support for learning project board to help to make the connections across the different agencies that you highlighted, and whether you think that the code of practice will be updated any time soon?

Laura Caven: I will start with the code of practice, if that is okay. I know that the ADES additional support needs network is closely involved in that, and I understand that that work is under way. I accept the point that pace is perhaps required there, and I am happy to pick that up.

Sorry, could you repeat the point that you made about resources?

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Resources is the one area of the progress report on the ASL action plan

where zero actions are complete. We have heard a lot about resources this morning. How important is it that that changes?

Laura Caven: That is really important, and we have picked up on that through the discussions, which I will not rehearse in detail here, that we have had with the Scottish Government about the fact that if there was more flexibility around teacher numbers, we might be able to use some of that funding to support children with additional support needs in other ways that are not necessarily about teachers. We have been having those conversations.

It was not possible to do everything in the ASL action plan at once, so the actions that have not been completed are planned to be progressed in the next few months. Through the project board we are looking at the actions that have not been progressed and are prioritising some of those. I come back to what I said earlier in a different context about prioritising what will have the most impact for the most people or what is the most pressing at this point in time.

It is hard to argue that resources are not the most pressing issue, but we are driven, as others have said, by often ring-fenced short-term pots of funding. That conversation is on-going.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: On the point about resources, we heard from care-experienced children and young people that when they move from children's services to adult services, there is a bit of a drop-off in support; in fact, they feel like there is a cliff edge. What are your organisations doing to improve that transition?

I was worried to hear the other day that, since the Parliament debated a bill on transitions, only £19,000 has been spent on transitions in Scotland. That worries me hugely, given the key role that transitions play in people's lives, particularly for care-experienced young people.

Laura Caven: I understand that the transitions strategy is under development and should be published early next year, but, as someone said earlier, strategies and legislation are not what make the change; implementation makes the change.

We often hear that transitions are not what they should be in relation to additional support needs and care-experienced children and young people.

Sorry—my mind has gone blank.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: If not strategies or legislation, what will change the dynamic?

Laura Caven: It is about time, relationships and multi-agency working. It is about staff having the adequate resource and there being enough of a workforce to spend that time with children and

young people. It is about young people being able to advocate for what they want and need and make decisions about how they want that transition and their future to look. It is about an individualised approach, which is what GIRFEC is all about.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Can I press you on that? We have also heard from other members of the panel that, if something is not statutory, it is not getting done.

Laura Caven: That is true.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: So, how does that square with what you just said?

Laura Caven: I was referring to what Claire Burns said about the fact that we think that legislation and policy are going to be the answer to things, but, if the resource is not behind the legislation and the policy, then that does not translate into action. Both things are true, and Fraser McKinlay said something about that earlier, as well.

I come back to the fact that we need the time, resource and workforce to do any of those things, regardless of whether we have legislation, policies or strategies.

Ben Farrugia: Social Work Scotland has been wrestling with the issue of transitions for a long time. Within the profession's management level, there is an awareness, which the committee's work has profiled, that much good work and support is undermined by that transition between child and adult services. We are, of course, big supporters of the principles of good transition.

As an organisation, we have been trying to bridge that fragmentation, because that is part of the problem. We have fragmented services and we have a fragmented leadership structure in social work. We have been trying to use our structure to attend to that. I cannot say that that has delivered dramatic change yet or will do so in the future, but that is something that we can do in that space.

Ms Duncan-Glancy is right that there is a tendency towards prioritising things that are statutory, but supporting families is a statutory function of social work. Often, we are talking about which bits of statute are really getting the attention and focus. We have pretty much made everything statutory now, but it is about what we, collectively, as Scotland, are saying is really important. The protection of children from harm is deemed to be more important in terms of risk behaviours than supporting them at an early stage is, even though I could easily say that that is a statutory function of social work. There is a hierarchy of statutory functions—it is not just that something is statutory or is not.

Jackie Dunbar: I have a couple of questions about the care-experienced young people we spoke to. They told the committee that they often do not manage to keep the same social worker, and that that has a negative impact on their care journeys. What is being done to ensure that as few care-experienced young folk as possible are impacted by that lack of continuity?

Ben, you are smiling at me, so I will go to you first.

Ben Farrugia: I am smiling, but it is a rueful smile. It is a smile of pain.

Jackie Dunbar: I just meant that you caught my attention.

Ben Farrugia: Absolutely—you are entirely justified in coming to me first.

You articulated the anguish of care-experienced people due to the lived reality of too much change and the inability to hold on to a relationship. It is exactly the same in reverse for social workers. One of the core jobs of children and family social work managers is to reduce that lack of continuity. They want to do that for their staff, because they know that the instrument through which we improve outcomes for children and families is for the social workers and other staff to deliver that consistency. However, if inexperienced staff are holding cases that are too big for them, they might choose to do another job that is less stressful, where they do not have to work 70 hours a week. We cannot stop them from making that choice.

That brings us back to the core reason for your wanting to hear from this panel of witnesses. Those are not things that a social work manager can do on their own. Some of them will take on cases to try to reduce the burden and to lighten the load for an individual social worker and get them to stay. We need to keep those relationships, because if we cannot, we are going to disrupt the relationships again.

What you have described is our core priority. We see that as how we will make a meaningful difference by delivering the Promise. However, if we do not do much else of what we have spoken about today, we are effectively fighting a losing battle.

12:15

Jackie Dunbar: How can we reduce the impact of that? I am sorry; I do not mean to put words in your mouth, but are you saying that social workers are just given a care-experienced person, or is there an in-depth look into the needs of that person and whether the social worker is equipped to deal with them?

Ben Farrugia: We try to do that, but again, that is a luxury of time. The system is incredibly time-poor, and that is true for placements with foster carers and so on. Stephen Smellie mentioned the use of the private sector, and one of the reasons for use of the private sector is that it will have a placement, and we are having to match at all levels to form a relationship because it is absolutely critical to success. Social work is a relational practice where the use of self is what you are deploying. As Trish McCulloch said earlier, social workers are trained and equipped to do that, but if we just have to allocate cases so that we can deal with risk, that becomes a luxury that is hard to do, however much we try to do it. Am I answering your question?

Jackie Dunbar: I do not think that I have heard how we are going to reduce the impact. If you ruled the world, what would you do to reduce it?

Ben Farrugia: Social workers need to have much smaller case loads and an appropriately sized management structure to allocate cases appropriately, to know the staff, to create opportunities for reflection and supervision and to ask whether there is a connection or a dynamic that is working. Stephen Smellie and Alison Bavidge will probably have lots to say on this. It is possible, but only if we attend to the fact that each individual worker in the workforce needs to be doing the appropriate amount, not what the system needs each individual worker to do so that we can allocate cases.

Stephen Smellie: What you are describing is a symptom of the crisis, and until we solve the crisis, I am afraid that that sort of thing will happen. Social workers will go off sick or go off to a different job; we cannot tie them down. We need to address the issues to retain the staff so that they want to stay in that particular field. Many of them do, but not in the current circumstances. That is the difficulty.

I do not know what the answer is in the short term. I do not think that there is any manager who can say to a worker that they will not change that care, because the worker can choose to go somewhere else.

On the point that I raised about placements in the private sector, we want to ensure that, whatever kind of placement a young person goes to, it is not a short-term fix and that they will be looked after, cared for and loved in that situation. Where we have organisations and companies who can pick and choose whether they take a young person, or say that a young person is too much and that they want to move them on, effectively just handing them back to the social worker with a few weeks' notice, we need to address that issue. That is why I raised the point about using the private sector in that way. We need a more stable

environment for that kind of placement, as well as a more stable workforce for social workers. However, we need to address all the other issues first—funding, the number of staff, case loads, and so on.

Alison Bavidge: I will be quick. The question about why we are burning through social workers is a good one. Some of them move around the system into different teams to get a break from the particular stresses that they are under. We have a problem with local pay differentials, so some people will move because that differential can be up to £6,000 or £7,000 across Scotland, and that is significant.

The other thing that we are not doing, which the Promise is really about, is valuing the relationship. If we really value relationships, we need to enable people to stay. Instead of measuring tasks and time, we need to look at the long-term value of relationships with communities and families and the children and young people who need our support. Instead of task efficiency, if you like, we need to look at efficacy and what works for people in a much longer-term frame.

Jackie Dunbar: The care-experienced young folk also told the committee that they feel that there is a lack of support for those who seem to be making good progress. Once they leave care, they are left to it. How can we address that, both in the short term and as the reforms progress?

Alison Bavidge: We need more people. As we have said several—

Jackie Dunbar: It is just a lack of staff.

Alison Bavidge: It is a lack of staff, to put it bluntly. If we had more people, we could not only deal with crises as they happen, but take on people when they come to us, rather than saying, “Go away until you are worse”. In effect, we are saying to people, “Go away until you are having a crisis”. That is what happens. If you have a case load in which some things need a lot of your attention and some things seem to be going smoothly, where do you focus? We simply do not have time to do everything. We need to make capacity in the system.

Laura Caven: On the second part of your question, there is something about the relationships with other parts of the workforce. For example, youth work is key, but it is one of the areas that are increasingly at risk when local authorities’ budgets are under significant pressure. This is not to undermine or undervalue the role of social workers but, if things are going smoothly and well for a young person, a consistent relationship with a supportive youth worker or another supporter, whether they are in the local authority, the third sector or wherever, can be really beneficial in enhancing their opportunities

and their life in general. It is about looking more widely at how we, social work and others facilitate the building of relationships with other adults who can support them.

Miles Briggs: You have answered a lot of the questions that I was going to ask about workforce planning and so on, but I want to return to some of the issues that Jackie Dunbar raised in her line of questioning. Ben, you touched on the principles of good transition. In your opinion, how much of the Promise—you might want to give a percentage—is now being delivered?

I ask that because, as Willie Rennie said in the previous evidence session, we met young people back in 2020 who thought that it was a really good piece of work. We are now halfway through the time and they are becoming cynical about what it means. I am concerned that lessons have not been learned. For example, we have heard from young people about the removal of compulsory supervision orders at 16 to manage casework, which is still happening today. There still seem to be bad decisions and a lack of advocacy in the system. In relation to the Promise and the transition, how much is, in reality, now being delivered on the ground?

Ben, as I mentioned you, I will bring you in first. I know that it is a difficult question, but it is an important one.

Ben Farrugia: Yes. It is a great question, and it is one that we should all be asking ourselves. I will give a personal answer rather than an organisational one. The Promise strikes me as being something at which we will have not have arrived until we have arrived. I appreciate that, for care-experienced young people, it is all going to be an aspiration until we have delivered the Promise.

To try to answer your question less esoterically than that, I note that it does not feel as if we are making the progress that we could or should be making. I absolutely take on board what Fiona Duncan said about the pandemic and the conversations about the national care service, but I hope that my input today has shown that, from our point of view, some real core attention is needed on some of the foundations that the Promise identifies, such as the workforce. Five years on, the situation for the workforce is worse than it was in 2020. If we cannot get that foundation right, the rest of it will always remain beyond our reach.

There is no doubt that some care-experienced people will experience improvement in their areas. My confidence about whether that can be sustained is a separate matter. We see pockets of improvement everywhere, but can it be sustained? Is it becoming business as usual? That is a real

challenge of implementation. I do not want to take away from those pockets of good practice but, overall, collectively, I do not think that we are making the progress that we can and should make on our Promise for care-experienced children and young people.

Laura Caven: I will not give you a percentage; I do not think that that is possible. The commitment absolutely remains, and part of the rationale behind the progress framework, which is a joint Scottish Government, local government and Promise Scotland framework, is so that, for the first time, we can see in one place how all the different indicators that we already have demonstrate how well we are keeping the Promise. I think that, at best, it will be a mixed news story, and its purpose will then be to show us where to direct our attention, actions and next steps.

We are almost at the midway point, and the timing of the progress framework is helpful, because we can now look at how much we have done, how much we still have to do, where we should direct our actions based on the evidence that we have now and what evidence we still need in order to know what to do next.

Alison Bavidge: We have defined two sets of churn: churn in projects and short-term funding, and churn in workers, and those things are going on at the same time. The system is really unstable and it is not helpful to the people who need support and who will need support over some years.

We need to return from projects to core work. We always have to look at what other professions can do to help social workers but, if we cut off all the good bits—the preventative work and community work that social workers want to do—we will simply give them child protection, child protection, which is not what social workers come into social work to do. We have to be very thoughtful about the kind of profession that we create nationally and locally. We have a responsibility in that.

I think that my members would say that, although they see some projects delivering, they do not see why those should not be part of core work. In addition, it is about resources, their time and additional supports from, often, the third sector. It is also about the resources that communities and families have, and health and youth work and all those other things that are required to work together and be solid and not in churn to deliver the Promise.

Stephen Smellie: When the Promise first came out, one of my colleagues said to me, “There’s nothing radical in that; that’s just good social work that they’re describing”. That is the truth.

People have said that we are making progress but that it is not going fast enough. The key question is whether we can continue to make progress; otherwise, we will start going backwards, and, if we do not have the resources, we will go backwards. That is my concern.

The Convener: Thank you for your evidence. We have overrun a little bit, which just shows the interest from committee members, who are very grateful for your time and answers.

I suspend the meeting for five to 10 minutes.

12:27

Meeting suspended.

12:34

On resuming—

Scottish Qualifications Authority: “Higher History Review 2024”

The Convener: Welcome back. The next item of business is evidence on the Scottish Qualifications Authority’s “Higher History Review 2024”. I welcome Jenny Gilruth, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, and Clare Hicks, the director for education reform at the Scottish Government. Fiona Robertson, chief executive; and Martyn Ware, director of policy, analysis and standards, join us from the Scottish Qualifications Authority.

You have been called to the committee to answer a number of questions. The cabinet secretary and Ms Robertson have both asked to make opening statements. If you are happy to forgo them, that will allow us to proceed straight to members’ questions. If not, I will be extremely strict on the time limits.

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (Jenny Gilruth): I am happy to forgo, if that is helpful to the committee.

The Convener: Excellent, as we have a lot to get through.

Cabinet secretary, I will start with you. Given everything that you know about this year’s higher history exam and the concerns from students, teachers and markers, and having looked at the review, do you have full confidence in Fiona Robertson and the way that she and the SQA have handled the matter?

Jenny Gilruth: Yes, I do. I know that I have not had the time to give an opening statement, but I think that it is worth my while to put on the record how seriously I take the matter as cabinet secretary. The issue has been on-going for a number of months, and I recognise the concerns that have been raised by history teachers. It was quite right and proper that the SQA interrogated the evidence and that it conducted a fulsome review, which I am sure committee members have looked at and read in detail. The review makes a number of recommendations about next steps, but it also looks at the process that was adhered to this year. I will be very careful not to stray into operational matters, which are for the SQA, but I recognise that challenges were presented, and I think that it was right that it investigated them. The report has a fulsome body of findings on the approach that the SQA has applied.

I have also looked at the exam paper. I was an SQA marker previously, although I was not a history marker, and I recognise some of the

concerns that have been raised by the teaching profession. However, I hope that the committee has looked at the report’s findings. I will bring in Fiona Robertson to talk to some of the evidence.

The Convener: We will get to Ms Robertson in a moment. You accept that the situation has been on-going for months, and that the feedback from students, teachers and markers, and from some whistleblowers in the SQA, is that there is dismay with the SQA’s report. However, you are content that the report is the end of the matter and that you have full confidence in the way that it has been handled by Ms Robertson and the SQA.

Jenny Gilruth: Which part of the report do you not agree with, Mr Ross?

The Convener: I am saying very clearly, cabinet secretary—

Jenny Gilruth: I would like to know the detail.

The Convener: Cabinet secretary, I will ask the question and you will answer it.

I am saying very clearly that concerns have been raised with me as an MSP and with others by students, teachers, markers and people within the SQA who are unhappy with the matter. I am giving their view, not my personal opinion. Given all of that, are you still content that the review is the end of the matter and that Fiona Robertson has your full and 100 per cent confidence?

Jenny Gilruth: We need to look at the outcome of this year’s examination results for higher history, which is that the pass rate dropped by 13 per cent. Notable drops in the pass rate happen every year, and in a range of subject areas. Fiona Robertson can provide detail on other areas in which that has happened. It is the responsibility of the SQA, first of all, to consider complaints, which is what it has done. It has conducted an investigation—I am not going to talk to the detail and methodology of it, as it is quite right that the SQA does that. Its report was independently peer reviewed by the director the Welsh qualifications authority—I am sure that we will come on to that.

The Convener: Do you believe that the report is the end of the matter, and that there is nothing further for you to do? I know that a study with the Scottish Association of the Teachers of History will conclude at the end of the week. At the moment, are you telling the committee that you are content with the findings of the report and the way in which the matter has been handled by Ms Robertson and the SQA?

Jenny Gilruth: I am content with the report, Mr Ross.

The Convener: Okay. Thank you.

Jenny Gilruth: I will follow up the point that you made about the Scottish Association of the

Teachers of History. I have had correspondence from a number of history teachers that referenced SATH and I was very keen to hear the association's views. Although the Government accepts the findings of the SQA's review, I am keen to work with the history teaching profession and to hear its feedback. It is hugely important that it is part of the process and of what comes next.

The Convener: How has that information been disseminated to the profession? Since it was announced that you and Ms Robertson were going to be appearing before the committee today, history teachers have said that they had no knowledge of it. There are some concerns that that has not been disseminated as widely as it could have been.

Jenny Gilruth: SATH is the professional association that represents history teachers in Scotland, although not all history teachers will be a member of it. The reason that I have sought to engage with it is purely based on the correspondence that I have received from history teachers. I asked my officials to engage to that end last week—I may bring in Clare Hicks on that point. I am happy to engage more widely with the history teaching profession to hear its views. It is also important for you, as convener, to reflect that not all history teachers have the same view as those that you have just espoused.

The Convener: Of course.

Jenny Gilruth: I hope that committee members have refreshed themselves with the publication of an article that appeared in *The Times Educational Supplement* yesterday.

The Convener: I am keen to come on to that. Ms Hicks, do you want to add anything?

Clare Hicks (Scottish Government): The survey that SATH is undertaking is a matter for SATH, obviously, but both the SQA and the Scottish Government will be keen to speak to it once it has considered that survey and concluded, just as we would normally engage with—

The Convener: Can that be shared with the committee?

Clare Hicks: That is entirely for SATH to take forward; it is SATH's survey.

The Convener: But you have asked for it, so—

Clare Hicks: No, that is absolutely not the case.

The Convener: Is the feedback coming to you? I was told that the survey will close by 6 December and that the feedback will come to you.

Jenny Gilruth: My understanding is that the organisation has undertaken its own survey. I did not commission that, but we have asked for feedback.

The Convener: Will you be happy to share that feedback with the committee?

Jenny Gilruth: I will be happy to do so.

The Convener: Thank you.

Ms Robertson, after all that pupils and staff have been through, are you content, ultimately, to lay the blame on students' falling standards? Is that where you think the blame lies? Is no blame at all allocated to you or the SQA?

Fiona Robertson (Scottish Qualifications Authority): I do not think that the report or the work that we have done seeks to lay blame anywhere.

The Convener: It does.

Fiona Robertson: Our responsibilities as an awarding body, and my responsibilities as chief examiner—

The Convener: I am sorry, but paragraph 8, on page 2 of the report states that

"overwhelmingly ... the poor standard of responses provided by learners in this year's examinations"

led to a 13.1 per cent drop. Please do not come to this committee and say that your report does not say that, when it is on page 2, in paragraph 8.

Fiona Robertson: What I was trying to say was that the report and the review into higher history sought to be evidence based. As an awarding body, we have a responsibility to award qualifications on the basis of the performance of learners. The evidence that we laid out in the report reflects the evidence that we gained through the awarding process. It includes the feedback of markers, who are teachers working in schools across Scotland and who provided feedback on the standard that they saw through the marking process.

On results day, for graded courses, we award around 140 national qualifications. Every one of those courses reflects the performance of individual learners. If individual learners meet the standard of our qualifications, they achieve those qualifications. If they do not meet that standard, they do not achieve the qualifications. That is not laying blame but seeking to ensure that our qualifications system is based on an understanding of the national standard and the fact that we award qualifications on merit.

Very serious questions were raised in relation to higher history this year, and I have treated them very seriously. That is why I commissioned the review. The review was commissioned by me and undertaken by my colleagues within our existing structures and responsibilities. It was the right thing for us to do, given the questions that were raised.

The Convener: Why did you not launch the review straight away? Why did it take you until 11 September? I am sure that the cabinet secretary looked at the figures that were coming in. Surely you looked at them and thought, “Why has there been a 13.1 per cent drop in higher history this year?” You knew that there were complaints, but you seem to have launched the review because there was a bit of backlash, both politically here in the Parliament and on social media. Why not launch the review on the day you saw the figures that were coming in?

Fiona Robertson: There are a couple of things in there. There is a general point about variability, and then I will talk about—

The Convener: Well, no. I am keen to get to members’ questions. Why did you not launch the review when you saw the figures?

Fiona Robertson: First, variability in attainment is not unusual. We do not have a fixed A to C attainment rate across our courses. There is variation. For example, this year, in higher applications of maths, there was a 13.3 per cent decline in A to C grades, and, in higher religious, moral and philosophical studies, there was a 7.1 per cent increase in A to C grades. There is variability—

The Convener: For the migration and empire option, the marks were down by 26.9 per cent compared with 2019. That is a huge drop. Surely you, as the head of the SQA, thought, “Minus 26 per cent? Someone’s got to look into this.” However, you did not do that. You waited until the controversy was raised in this building by parliamentarians and teachers were speaking up on social media before you launched a review. I do not understand what took you so long.

12:45

Fiona Robertson: I have highlighted that there are variabilities—

The Convener: I know, yes.

Fiona Robertson: —in attainment. That is important for the committee to understand. In relation to higher history itself, you are right that there were changes in marking—there were changes in the marks that learners achieved between years. As part of our awarding processes, we consider those issues. During the grade boundary process, for example—

The Convener: We will come on to that in a moment. You still have not—

Fiona Robertson: I think—

The Convener: I am sorry, but I am asking a very simple question. Why was there a gap between you getting the results—and knowing

that, on one of the papers, the marks allocated had dropped by 26 per cent—and 11 September, when you launched a review that lasted two months? Can you answer that? If not, we will move on to other members’ questions.

Fiona Robertson: I was confident on results day, and I remain confident, about the results that we published.

The Convener: Wow. Okay.

Fiona Robertson: However, I recognise the importance, as I am sure that the committee does, of the integrity of our qualifications and public confidence in our qualifications. Therefore, given the sustained criticism in relation to higher history, I took the view that it was important, and that I had a responsibility, to undertake a review. That is what we did. The reason that it took the length of time that it did is that the authors of the report and I felt that it was important that we considered it in the context of our end-to-end awarding processes.

That is what I have been trying to outline in answer to your questions. We have checks and balances in our awarding processes, from the start of devising qualifications and devising exam papers, right through to results day, the publication of course reports, which provide feedback to teachers, and our understanding standards events. We have a—rightly—complex process in place to provide confidence in the integrity of our qualifications. Therefore, it was right that we undertook this review and that we that we considered it in the context—

The Convener: Okay. That is fine. I do not know why it was not right to do it the day that the exam results came out. That is the bit that I am struggling to understand.

Finally—because a lot of other members want to come in—the cabinet secretary mentioned the article in the *TES* last night, authored by the SQA’s principal assessor for higher history and senior team leader for higher history. It is a great defence of you, Ms Robertson. Is it only a coincidence that it came out the night before you were appearing before this committee?

Fiona Robertson: It is not a coincidence—

The Convener: It is not a coincidence. So, it was an orchestrated effort to get it into the public domain before you came here today to answer questions from MSPs. Yes or no?

Fiona Robertson: The timing of the publication of the article was not down to me. The precise timing—

The Convener: You just said that it was coordinated ahead of you coming to committee.

Fiona Robertson: Following the publication of the report, there had been anonymous

commentary in relation to teachers and others, commenting on the report. In discussions with the principal assessor and the team leader, they were keen to put the record straight—

The Convener: Hours before you came to committee—

Fiona Robertson: —and on that basis, they were happy to set that out.

The Convener: Interesting. Okay.

I turn to Pam Duncan-Glancy.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Good morning, and thank you for the responses that we have had so far. As all of you will be aware, I am concerned about the issue, not least because of the impact that it has had on some students, but also because of the long-term implications that it might have for trust in the system.

We have heard from some teachers and pupils about the results of the report that has come out. I will quote some: they have said that it was a “gut punch”; it was “insulting”; they felt that people had “suffered injustice”; and it means that there is a “lack of trust”. One teacher said:

“I can’t help but feel completely let down by the results of this report, which although disappointing is not surprising ... Having taught higher for 8 years, I was, until this year, confident in my ability to teach to the standard required ... This year has not been the same, as consistent mixed messages from colleagues who are markers, the SQA and Understanding Standards materials, has meant that I am no longer feeling this way and unable to instil confidence in my students”.

Those comments are why we are here, and they are why it is really important that we put on the record what has happened.

Cabinet secretary, did you instruct the review, and did you ask that it be independent?

Jenny Gilruth: No, I did not instruct the review.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Why not?

Jenny Gilruth: As I think that the chief examiner has explained, the matter is one for the qualifications body in the first instance. The review is now complete. Is it now your view that I should instruct an independent inquiry into the report?

Pam Duncan-Glancy: It was always my view that the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills should intervene when there is a 26 per cent drop in attainment in one subject, yes.

Jenny Gilruth: That is fine. In that case, I presume that you have looked in detail at the content of the report, Ms Duncan-Glancy, because I have not yet been presented with an evidence base to substantiate my instructing the chief examiner to lead an independent review. If you have that evidence base, I am happy to consider

it. I have also asked SATH for further follow-up information. However, from my reading of the report, I have not been presented with that evidence.

I go back to the point that the convener made about the variation in pass rates. Is the committee trying to make the point that, if the pass rate varies by 13 per cent in one year, we should automatically have reviews into every subject area?

Pam Duncan-Glancy: With respect, cabinet secretary, I think that you are really missing the point—

Jenny Gilruth: No, I do not believe that I am.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I am sorry but I have to say that I think that you are. The issue is not so much whether, if there is a particular rate, we do X. The disconnect in what is happening between pupils and teachers and the SQA is ever growing and the gulf of distrust is widening. That is the problem here, and it does not surprise me, unfortunately, that it continues when you cannot accept that that is the case.

You asked me whether I am now asking you to instruct an independent review. My question was whether, when you noticed the change in rate and started to hear that there were concerns, you asked the qualifications body to look into it.

Jenny Gilruth: Yes.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Are you happy that the SQA used its own staff and spoke to its own teachers, who are markers, to do that, and that it has produced a report that you think does not protect the system as it was?

Jenny Gilruth: You asked whether I had instructed the review itself. I did not, and the chief examiner can answer for herself on that point. I met with the chief examiner on three occasions during the review because I was concerned. I was concerned because, as members around the table know, I was receiving the same correspondence as other MSPs were receiving. Therefore, I was concerned at the outset and I wanted to understand what had happened.

We can talk about variation in the round. Variation in pass marks happens every year, and it happens in a variety of subjects. However, what I was hearing from the profession and from some parents was that there was an issue specifically with higher history and paper 2 this year, and I wanted to be absolutely certain that that was not the case. It is quite right that the SQA investigated the matter. You asked about the SQA using its own staff to do that investigation. The staff you are talking about are practising teachers, many of whom are markers for the SQA—

Pam Duncan-Glancy: All of them are working for the SQA as part of that process. They might work in schools, but they are also part of the SQA process. Was anyone who was not part of the process—

Jenny Gilruth: Is the point that you are making that they therefore cannot be objective?

Pam Duncan-Glancy: It is a question to be asked.

Jenny Gilruth: That question is probably best directed to Ms Robertson in the first instance, although I am happy to come back to the point about independence and how we can provide objectivity, because it is a fair point.

The Convener: Can you answer the question on independence before we go to Ms Robertson, or do you want to hear from Ms Robertson first?

Jenny Gilruth: I think that Ms Robertson should provide the context first.

The Convener: Okay, if you need to hear from Ms Robertson first, we will do that.

Fiona Robertson: The SQA has a directorate of policy analysis and standards, whose director, Martyn Ware, is with me. We also have a head of standards. We have a responsibility to ensure that standards are maintained over time. The work that was done in the SQA was undertaken independently within the SQA. The review was not undertaken by individuals who had been involved in the awarding process, which is important. We have a functional responsibility to undertake that work, which is what we did. However, it was important that we were also able to stress test and to seek an element of external review, which is why we involved the Welsh Joint Education Committee in the work.

A lot of the debate around the issue has been a debate between teachers, and I absolutely acknowledge that there is a strength of view among teachers—among all teachers, in fact. However, there is a variety of views on the issue, including the very strongly held views, which have integrity, of the principal assessor and the senior marker.

I was aware that, whatever conclusions the report reached, there would not be unanimity of view among teachers, regardless of whether they worked for the SQA as markers or appointees. It is important that we not seek to divide teachers into those who mark for the SQA and those who do not. A significant number of teachers mark for the SQA. Most teachers mark for the SQA during their careers, and I would like to see more of them do that.

At its heart, the review was about marking. Therefore, the focus of our energies was,

unsurprisingly, on seeking to ensure that we understood the evidence base and the complexity of the issues that are contained in the report in relation to the marking process. That is why our focus was very much on marking and markers. It was important that we did that.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I understand that. At any point in the review, should you have spoken to people who have not been part of the marking process that you oversee? You said that the review was undertaken internally by the SQA. Would it not have been helpful to speak with people who were not already part of the SQA?

Fiona Robertson: Obviously, we were aware of some of the commentary. There are two points to make in response to that question. One is that I commissioned the review. I asked colleagues to carry out a thorough evidence-led review and it was important that they did so without fear or favour. The head of standards and Martyn Ware had whatever conversations they needed to have to fulfil the commission.

Martyn can talk a little bit more about the methodology, but we sought the views of the WJEC and reviewed all the commentary that markers and others had provided as part of the review. There were no strictures on the methodology. It was important that, at its heart, the review was about marking because the central criticism was that the marking standard had changed. Therefore, it was right and proper that the review considered issues in relation to the marking standard.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Do you accept that teachers have said that they think that there was a change and that there was a lack of communication from your body to them on what that change would mean?

Fiona Robertson: I accept that teachers have said what you said.

As you would expect, the marking instructions for our assessments are not released before the examination. We need to ensure that our assessments are set within the context of the content of each course and the course specification—that is the key thing—and that the marking instructions that markers are provided with, along with our processes, which are laid out in some detail in the report, are sufficient to ensure the integrity and consistency of our marking.

The report says that there are challenges not only for history but for other subjects that involve extended pieces of writing and that are perhaps considered to be more subjective. That is not just an SQA challenge; other exam boards face it, as well. Therefore, we have checks and balances in the process to ensure integrity.

We would legitimately be criticised if we provided less rather than more detail in the marking instructions. We want to provide our markers with as much information as possible to ensure the integrity of our marking, so the marking instructions are detailed. They are not exhaustive, but they are detailed.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: But teachers have said that that is not clear and, whether you call it blame or otherwise, the explanation that the report has given for the drop is that learners did not perform. How do you explain that problem?

13:00

Fiona Robertson: That is where the course report, which was published recently, is helpful, because it sets out how learners responded to the questions that were asked. I am happy to talk the committee through that.

We publish a course specification, which is the blueprint—the framework, if you like—for how learning and teaching are considered in that course. The examination needs to be set in the context of that course specification. We provide marking instructions to assist markers. Those instructions are subject to debate and review with markers and the senior team, and that debate can be robust—

The Convener: Was it robust this year?

Fiona Robertson: Yes.

The Convener: More robust than normal?

Fiona Robertson: It was as robust as it should be.

The Convener: More robust than normal?

Last night, I spoke to a marker who wanted me to know that concerns were raised, after the exams had been sat but before a single paper had been marked, that markers were being asked to seek a higher standard this year. The marker said that that was made clear and that the meeting was very uncomfortable for members of the SQA. Is that fair?

Fiona Robertson: I do not think that that is reflected in the report—

The Convener: I am less concerned about the report. I am asking you a question about that meeting and any feedback that you, as head of the SQA, received about it. Are you saying that it was a normal meeting at which the matter was discussed and that there was nothing extraordinary about it this year—yes or no?

Fiona Robertson: We have sought feedback on the marker meetings. I was not at the marker meeting, and I do not think that anyone in this room was at that meeting—

The Convener: No, but you are the head of the SQA, and if there are concerns about a marker meeting, I would expect you to know about them. Are you saying that no concerns were ever raised at any point that were above the normal standard?

Fiona Robertson: No concerns were raised that were above—

The Convener: No concerns were raised.

Fiona Robertson: Those meetings involve—as they should—a healthy debate. Martyn Ware can set this out. We set the assessment and develop the marking instructions, but we also need to see that working live, when we get scripts through. That is a normal part of the process. There are discussions among the marking team to refine the marking instructions and ensure that we get it right.

I would see a healthy debate among teachers as a good thing, and I would not consider that to be unusual. Nonetheless, we did not get feedback that was anything out of the ordinary. Martyn Ware can say a little bit more about what is—

The Convener: I am okay. If the head of the SQA tells me that, I will accept that evidence, although it is contrary to everything that I heard last night.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: On that point about the meeting, I have heard that there were two meetings about the matter. At the first meeting, it was decided that there would not be a lowering of the grade to take into consideration the difference, but, four days later, it was decided that there would be. What changed in the process in those four days?

Fiona Robertson: For clarity, there were two different meetings—

The Convener: There were three different meetings—the one that I was speaking about was at the pre-marking stage. I have seen the same email as Pam Duncan-Glancy has seen; she is speaking about a separate meeting at which legitimate concerns were raised. We have got as far as we are going to get with the meeting before any papers were marked. I am very suspicious about the evidence, but I take it at face value.

Pam Duncan-Glancy would like to know about the changing of the gradings and what was discussed before, four days later, the SQA's position changed.

Fiona Robertson: For clarity, you are talking about the markers meeting—

The Convener: I have explained that, yes.

Fiona Robertson: Pam Duncan-Glancy is referring to the grade boundary discussion.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Yes.

Fiona Robertson: I will be happy to talk about that.

I oversee the grade boundary process, but I do not chair every grade boundary meeting, because I cannot physically do that in the time that we have. We have a narrow window between the conclusion of the exam diet and the certification process. I am supported by two senior directors, one of whom is sitting to my right. As a team, we discuss the decisions that we are making on grade boundaries. To be clear, this is not about marking; it is about grade boundaries, which are something different—

The Convener: We have cleared that up; we did that a couple of minutes ago.

Fiona Robertson: We have discussions about the decisions at individual grade boundary meetings, bearing in mind that, on some days, there are 15 such meetings, with three panels all running concurrently. We need to take consistent decisions on grade boundaries across those meetings.

This year, in our policy for awarding, we were clear that the return of the inclusion of coursework in the assessment process for many of our courses might have some consequences on attainment. On that basis, the policy sets out that we might need to make some modest grade boundary adjustments in favour of learners. That involves lowering the boundary at which a learner has either a C pass or an A pass.

The first grade boundary meeting for higher history concluded, after discussing many of the issues that have been discussed today around the performance of the assessments, the performance of learners and so on, that there would be no changes to the grade boundaries. The following morning, I asked whether sufficient consideration had been given to the return of coursework for higher history, being mindful of the fact that we had seen quite a shift in learner performance, which had been fully discussed at the grade boundary meeting, which was not chaired by me. I asked that we consider whether modest adjustments should be made on the basis of the return of coursework, in a way that, crucially, would be consistent with the way that we were treating other courses.

I hope that that gives the committee some assurance that we were looking across courses as well as within courses. It was on that basis that the grade boundary meeting was pulled together for a second time, and a modest adjustment was made to the grade boundaries—I think that it was minus 2 at A and C.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: That is helpful.

The Convener: Cabinet secretary, you said that you might want to come back in on the independent review of the report. Two SNP members want to ask about that.

Jackie Dunbar: My question is about the independence of the review. Has the SQA report been reviewed by an independent person? If so, who?

Jenny Gilruth: As the committee will be aware, Richard Harry, the executive director of qualifications and assessment in the Welsh exam board, carried out an independent peer review of the report. Fiona Robertson can speak about the detail of the methodology that was applied, because the methodology for the independent peer review was decided by the SQA, not by the Scottish Government.

George Adam: I would like to bring the discussion back to the people who are important in all this: the young people and the parents who support them as they go through what is, as we all know, a traumatic time in their lives.

I have been an elected official for more years than I care to remember, at local and national levels, and I know that, when anything happens with exams, parents and the students themselves get on to their elected officials right away. With that in mind, I note that, unlike the convener, I have not had a Santa's sack load of mail regarding this issue. Fiona Robertson, has the SQA received any complaints from pupils and parents since the appeals process was closed and completed?

Fiona Robertson: I believe not. I have had some correspondence from members of this Parliament, but not from learners or parents.

George Adam: Cabinet secretary, have you received any complaints on the issue? I ask because, obviously, in this situation, if parents are not contacting their local member, they will contact you.

Jenny Gilruth: I think that we have received one such complaint since the appeals process closed.

George Adam: I have no further questions.

The Convener: Cabinet secretary, would you like to say anything on the independence of the review?

Jenny Gilruth: I have nothing further to add.

The Convener: You asked to come back in on the issue.

Jenny Gilruth: I do not think that I have anything further to add to my reply to Ms Dunbar in relation to the involvement of the Welsh qualifications body. Fiona Robertson might want to

speaking about the methodology and the commissioning.

The Convener: We have not really had any questions on that yet.

Jackie Dunbar wants to come in on a separate point.

Jackie Dunbar: This follows on from Pam Duncan-Glancy's point that teachers have said that there was a change. What were the differences between this year's higher history paper and the previous year's? What was the change? Has there been one?

Fiona Robertson: Obviously, our exams change every year, but they are set within the context of the course specification. We seek to ensure that we ask valid questions that learners and their teachers might anticipate, in the context of the course specification.

Jackie Dunbar: I am trying to figure out whether there was a difference in the level of the questions.

Fiona Robertson: As the convener highlighted, the focus has been particularly on the different performance on paper 2, which is Scottish history, and in particular on the most popular choice, which is migration and empire. There are quite a lot of choices in the higher history paper, and it is quite a complex paper to set. In particular, for the paper on world and European history, learners can choose almost any period of history, so there is a lot of choice for learners and their teachers in how they engage with the assessments.

Paper 2, which is the Scottish history paper, has been the focus, and in particular that focus has been on the questions on empire and migration. I am confident that the questions that were asked this year were absolutely consistent with the course specification and were, therefore, valid questions to ask.

The Convener: Surely the point is less about the questions than it is about what you allocate marks for. Is that not where the concerns have come? You asked for things this year that previously have not been requested.

Fiona Robertson: Obviously, by definition, if you have a different question, you are asking for different things in response. I say that just for clarity. The marking instructions will change from year to year, because we are asking a different question. However—

The Convener: You have a number of past papers on the SQA website, and they tell people how to gain marks.

Fiona Robertson: Yes.

The Convener: Are all those relevant for people who sat the exams this summer? Are you confident, as you sit here in front of the committee today, that the information that is published on your website for learners and teachers on what you allocate marks for is accurate?

Fiona Robertson: Yes, I am confident.

The Convener: Okay.

Fiona Robertson: However, what I am saying is that it is important that our assessments will vary each year, as you would expect and—

The Convener: That is understandable, but I think that what people have trouble with—

Fiona Robertson: —the marking instructions, therefore, will be, by definition, different. The marking instructions are designed to help teachers to mark, so they need to be sufficiently detailed to ensure the integrity of our marking, while not being exhaustive. However, there are checks and—

The Convener: Yes, but the report that you say defends everything that the SQA has done says on page 33:

“the explain question for Migration and Empire needing a name to get a mark—this is not the same as previous years.”

In the same box, it says:

“The marking standard was much higher than previous years.”

That is on page 33 of your own report.

Fiona Robertson: That was a quote from the markers. That is what—

The Convener: Yes, I know, but they are the markers you listened to in forming the report. Are you saying that even the markers you quote in your report are wrong?

Fiona Robertson: No. I am just reflecting the evidence from the feedback from markers. However, I think that the report also highlights—Marty Ware can explain this in far more detail than I can—that learners did not need to name anyone to get the mark. Further checks were done to ensure that we had evidence to support that, and—

The Convener: Okay.

Fiona Robertson: No—this is really important.

There is something called a marker check right at the end of the process. Despite all the checks and balances that have gone before, there is a final check before finalisation and awarding take place. Even if a marker thought that the marking standard had changed, and even if a marker had been harsher in their marking—there is variability in marking—we have checks and balances in place to ensure that any adjustments that are

required are taken forward. Every marker's marking is checked.

I have not been a marker for the SQA, but I have marked exam scripts. That is common practice across education, including in further and higher education. That is what we do to ensure the integrity of our marking.

13:15

As Mr Adam highlighted, we have a really important role to fulfil. The interests of learners are at the heart of everything that we do. We want learners to do well, but we also have a responsibility to ensure that qualifications reflect the performance of learners, and that is what we have done.

I do not think that any of us feel happy about the fact that performance has dipped this year. It is a reasonable issue for the committee, teachers, learners and, indeed, colleagues across the SQA to discuss. The SQA has had a lot of challenge and scrutiny in recent years, but that debate must be tempered by the 10,000 learners who have undertaken that course this year, and—

The Convener: I am sorry, but we need to move on.

Fiona Robertson: —it must also be tempered by those who are preparing for exams next year.

The Convener: Or those who are struggling to prepare, because they are still waiting to get information.

Fiona Robertson: We have a responsibility to them.

The Convener: It has certainly been put to me that, in relation to the cohort who took highers this year, the numbers achieving A to C grades in history fell by 13.1 per cent, but there was no similar fall across all the other subjects that they were studying. That is why there are legitimate questions.

Ross Greer: I am grateful to Fiona Robertson and the SQA for the briefing that they gave to Opposition spokespeople on the eve of the review being published. Members of Parliament have made it very clear that we wanted more engagement from the SQA in recent years, so we got that.

On the convener's point about variation, it is entirely legitimate to say that there is variation every year—of course there is. The variation on this subject this year was clearly an outlier—any higher maths student could tell you that that was an outlier. That is why there is concern here.

I welcome the *TES* column that was written by the principal assessor and the team leader. There

is plenty in it that I agree with, but the point in their column that I really disagree with—this is at the core of my concern about the review and what is not in it—is that they say that it is not the responsibility of the SQA to look into why there was a drop in performance, and that, essentially, its job with the review was to quality assure its own processes. I am not going to dispute the outcomes of that review. However, if it is not the role of the chief examiner to look into why there was such a significant drop in performance, whose role is it?

If, for the purposes of this question, we accept the premise—others have already covered potential issues with the review itself—that the review found that there were no issues with either the exam or the marking, as has been pointed out already, the conclusion is that the fall in the rate was due to a drop in the performance of students. I feel that the review is only half a review, because it does not look into why there was a drop. If it is not the chief examiner's job to look into that, whose job is it?

Fiona Robertson: I have a responsibility to explain, and that is what the course review does. We also have a responsibility to ensure that we are clear with teachers—this is what we do through our events on understanding standards—about what the standard is, that we are able to exemplify the standard and that we are able to offer support to teachers who are teaching our courses.

I have a responsibility, and the SQA has a responsibility, to explain. If you look at the course review for this year, it explains some of the issues in relation to the empire and migration section in one of the question papers. When I spoke—

Ross Greer: If I could just cut in, I said that the course review explains what the issues are in relation to the answers that came back. The core question is this: why did those answers come back? If we accept your premise that the cause of the issue was underperformance by pupils compared with previous years, then yes—your job is to explain the SQA's processes, procedures and quality assurance, and you have done that. Surely your job as chief examiner is also to look into why there is unusual underperformance. This subject was clearly an outlier. If it is not the chief examiner's job to look into why pupils underperformed to such an extent this year, whose job is it?

I will rephrase that, because that was my first question. Do you think that it is your job to understand why pupils underperformed? We can set aside the process issues with the SQA as an organisation. Is it your job, as the chief examiner, to understand why there was underperformance, if this year was such an outlier?

Fiona Robertson: I play a role in explaining what has happened and how learners have engaged with our qualifications. On results day, we provide a snapshot of the performance of the learners who have taken our qualifications.

However, there are wider issues in which the SQA has no locus, such as presentation decisions, the quality of learning and teaching, and the progression of learners. About a quarter of learners who undertake higher history do not have a previous qualification in history. That is not my decision—presentation decisions are at the discretion of schools. There are a number of things that I cannot fully explain, but the SQA holds a lot of useful evidence about how many learners are being presented and how they are engaging with our qualifications.

I will give an example. The course report highlights that, for one of the questions on empire and migration, many people gave examples of pull factors when the question had asked for push factors. We cannot give people marks if they answer a different question. Although I accept that there have been issues, there was clearly a shift in performance in higher history this year.

Ross Greer: That is the core point. On that specific example, I do not have the depth of knowledge about that paper, but I accept that you cannot give marks for an answer to a question that was not asked.

Fiona Robertson: I am afraid that many people did that.

Ross Greer: Cabinet secretary, although I accept that the SQA's report was externally quality assured by the Welsh equivalent body, the report is about quality assuring the SQA's own processes. The SQA came to the conclusion that the issue was not the exam paper or the marking scheme, but unusual underperformance by pupils. If it is not the chief examiner's role to look into why that was the case, in relation to questions about presentation and so on, where in the system does that responsibility lie? Whose responsibility is it to look into that further?

Jenny Gilruth: Ultimately, it is the responsibility of the Scottish Government and local authorities. In law, we have the responsibility for improving Scottish education, and I accept my role in that.

The point that Fiona Robertson made about overrepresentation is a key theme in the report, which—I know—all committee members will have read. The report looks at whether young people sat a qualification at a level that they might not have been ready for, and whether that perhaps had an impact on their performance. We need to look at that specific issue. I am keen to speak to the chief inspector about that and about how we can provide support by working with local

authorities. The committee will be aware of the ongoing improvement work on the curriculum improvement cycle.

I am also mindful of the longer term, because I do not want a repeat of what happened this year. I want young people, parents and teachers to have confidence in our qualifications system. I am mindful of the committee's report and that we will have a debate on the matter in two weeks, and I would be happy to meet any committee members if they have any ideas.

I am particularly mindful of the role of accreditation and of how we can provide confidence in the system that there is independence of thought in applying regulation to the qualifications. As the cabinet secretary, I will need to consider that, because I am mindful that learning lessons through the reform process is so important. On Ms Duncan-Glancy's point, the new qualifications body has to carry the trust of Scotland's teachers, pupils and parents.

It is imperative that we consider the role of continuous assessment, which is a live issue in relation to my recommendations on Professor Hayward's review. Arguably, if we had a process of continuous assessment—which, incidentally, we did have—we would not have such a level of overrepresentation.

In fact, I remember sitting where Ms Dunbar is sitting now, asking Fiona Robertson that exact question, probably in 2019. As we do not currently have continuous assessment, we arguably have overrepresentation. It is difficult to quantify that, but I think that one of the Hayward recommendations, on going back to continuous assessment, is the answer. That will help to drive improvement, and help to support and scaffold young people in preparation for that qualification.

The third point concerns accreditation and next steps. I am also very mindful of the role of SATH in all this, and listening to its feedback will be imperative with regard to where we go next.

The Convener: If you are arguing that one cause could be that too many people are taking history and have not done the preparation, why was there such a fall this year?

To go back to the "Higher History Review 2024" report, the chart on page 36 is clear. In 2015, attainment was at 85 per cent; in 2016, it was 87 per cent; and it was subsequently 83 per cent, 83 per cent, 73 per cent, 78 per cent and 78 per cent—and then, in 2024, there is the fall to 66 per cent. Why would that be the case just this year, and not over the past couple of years?

Jenny Gilruth: It is very difficult for me, as cabinet secretary, to point to one factor—

The Convener: But you are using that as a potential reason.

Jenny Gilruth: Of course. On page 10 of the report, it talks through the qualification changes in recent years. It also makes a point about the qualification requirements for history, in particular, not having been consistent since 2018. There have been changes to the qualifications largely as a result—

The Convener: But just last year, 78 per cent were getting grades between A and C.

Jenny Gilruth: Yes, but last year, a different approach would have been taken, because the approach that was taken during the Covid pandemic was still being applied. A more lenient approach was applied last year. Fiona Robertson might want to speak about the detail of that.

Fiona Robertson: Over the past five years, there have been changes both to the structure of assessment and the awarding approach post pandemic—

The Convener: In fairness, I understand that. It was more on the point from the cabinet secretary—

Fiona Robertson: I think that that sets in context the point that you make about comparisons. I do not want to overstate this, but we need to be careful about drawing comparisons. We have seen shifts in attainment across other courses, as well. I am not seeking to diminish what we are talking about, but it is important that we do not either overstate or understate what we are seeing.

The Convener: A lot of members still want to come in. Ross Greer, do you have a brief question?

Ross Greer: I hope that this is just a yes or no question, convener. It is about communication with the profession. Am I right in understanding that there is no way for the SQA to communicate directly with everyone who teaches history in Scotland? You can communicate with schools and subject-specialist associations, and with your own markers, but there is, at present, no mailing list of every history teacher in Scotland.

Fiona Robertson: That is my understanding. We have contact with the relevant association and through the events that we hold—there are mechanisms that we can and do use. We are looking at that in the context of our engagement with subject specialists across the spectrum, and we are keen to do more of it. There is good engagement on an on-going basis, but you are absolutely right.

Ross Greer: Absolutely—that is something to consider for the wider reform programme, not just for history.

Fiona Robertson: Yes, that is true.

Miles Briggs: I thank the witnesses for joining us this afternoon. Confidence and trust in the exam system really matters, and the internal investigation has not restored that trust—we all need to admit that. In fact, I think that it has undermined trust even more. We see it all online—that the SQA is marking its own homework and the investigation is a whitewash. How do you move on from that? I put that question to the cabinet secretary first.

Jenny Gilruth: The member raises an important point. I go back to a point that I raised earlier: it is imperative that the new qualifications body, and the SQA, have the trust of Scotland's teachers and its pupils and parents. This has been a challenging time with regard to some of the coverage. However, opinions vary on some of the outputs.

Members have made points about the report. However, the report puts substantive evidence to its recommendations, and I think that it is difficult to challenge the content of the report. I have not heard today from the committee any challenge to the content.

If, after this committee session, the committee hears evidence from people who get in contact with it, I will be happy to consider that. At present, however, the report does not provide me with an evidence base for looking at anything further. I think that that was the point that Ms Duncan-Glancy was referring to earlier. We have to work with Scotland's teachers—as you all know, I was previously a teacher and I was a marker. The point was made earlier about the disconnect that often exists between the qualifications body and being at the chalkface. I think that being a marker is important, in particular for a secondary teacher, in order to get an understanding of the national standard and an opportunity to contribute to what the national standard looks like. In my view, that informs better practice, and it can help to support better learning and teaching.

We need to look at opportunities for the teaching profession to get involved with the new qualifications body, so that teachers do not feel as though it is an organisation that does things to them. I speak from personal experience and I know that that was often the feeling of the profession in the past. It is important that teachers have professional opportunities to engage with the new qualifications body and be part of it, so that they own the qualifications process, as much as anything else.

The Convener: I will let Pam Duncan-Glancy come in for a second, on that point.

13:30

Pam Duncan-Glancy: My earlier point was not that we should now have an independent review, although that is a legitimate view. It was more about whether, when you saw all of this happening before the SQA did the review, you asked it to do an independent review.

Jenny Gilruth: I did not. I answered that question previously.

Miles Briggs: Cabinet secretary, current history teachers who marked the exam said that they were “confused and demoralised” and that those who were in charge of assessments have “effectively destroyed the subject”, and your colleague Fergus Ewing has said that the process has been “fatally flawed”.

I note where we are today and what has been investigated. You have a power to regulate procedures in the SQA. You said that you are happy enough and that we need to move on, but do you not consider that the questions have not been answered, that a lot of people will not want to be markers any longer and that a lot of people will not have confidence in the next history exam? What is angering pupils and parents is the fact that people who are going to sit the next exam will not have confidence in it. Do we actually need a new, independent investigation to look at the issue, and not an internal process?

I take on board what you said about the Welsh being involved, but the report has not cleared things up. I am not sure whether you think that time will mean that things move on and people will just have to live with it, but does this not show that there is a problem at the heart of the SQA? Are you taking advice from your colleagues who are not happy with the process?

Jenny Gilruth: I very much recognise the strength of feeling in relation to the matter. In my experience, it is quite unusual that the qualifications body would instruct a review of such a nature. I am not sure whether that has happened previously in other subject areas.

Fiona Robertson: It has not happened for many years.

Jenny Gilruth: It is therefore quite unique.

I take the member’s point on board, but the issue that I have as cabinet secretary is that the report that I have been presented with does not present a substantive evidence base for me to issue a directive. I think that that is the point that the member is making. If that evidence base exists, I will consider it. However, the report that I

have been presented with, which is a rigorous report—I am sure that all committee members have read it in detail—looks very thoroughly at the question paper, at the marking guidelines and at how they were applied. I do not have—

Miles Briggs: What would the trigger be? If a teacher contacts you tomorrow to say—

Jenny Gilruth: I am more than happy to hear concerns from any of Scotland’s teachers. They routinely contact me on a daily basis, Mr Briggs, and I am more than happy to engage with them.

I have accepted the findings of the report that has been published. Incidentally, I do not think that any member who is in the room today has found any issue with the findings of the report. I was keen to hear from SATH. I think that it is reasonable for me as cabinet secretary to say that I accept the findings of the report but I want to hear the views of Scotland’s history teachers about where we go next. That is the pragmatic approach to take. If Mr Briggs has any further information, I am more than happy to hear it.

The Convener: Just to be clear, I note that, as a committee member, I challenge the findings of the report. The pool has not been wide enough to get information to form the report. If you speak only to the people who are going to agree with you, you will come up with a report such as this one. If you cast the net more widely, you might get more recommendations.

George Adam: Convener, can other members make points about how they feel about the report?

The Convener: Absolutely. John Mason is next.

John Mason: I have a few questions. Ross Greer asked what explanations there might be. One was that candidates were entered before they were ready and another was about falling standards of literacy. Is that a possibility?

Jenny Gilruth: The report makes that comment, and it was made by one of the markers. It is an observation from somebody who marked this year’s exam scripts. It is not for me to comment on that, but that is a reason that has been put forward in the report. Fiona Robertson might want to say more on that.

Fiona Robertson: Some evidence is emerging from markers, not just in history but in other areas where we expect extended pieces of writing, that some learners—not all, because we still see excellence—are struggling more than previously. History is a subject where we might see that play out, because we expect extended pieces of writing.

John Mason: That leads me to my next question. There is an idea that some subjects are more affected by such issues, and the suggestion

is made that there is more variation in humanities subjects than there might be in maths, for example. Is that the case?

Fiona Robertson: The report highlights that. However, we are talking less about variability and more about the fact that marking can be more challenging in subjects that are considered to be more subjective.

John Mason: They are less black and white.

Fiona Robertson: Yes. An example is the marking instructions for physics, chemistry and maths. Those exams often include short questions that require very specific answers to get the marks. They are almost binary in nature, and that is understood. In my answers to previous questions, I have set out the checks and balances that we have put in place in that knowledge for courses such as history.

The issue is not unique to Scotland; it is an issue that all exam bodies in similar positions to us—and, indeed, in other sectors—also face.

John Mason: I guess that we all have different preferences. That is why I preferred maths and accountancy to history and geography.

The report states that the marking instructions were “intentionally more detailed” this year. Was that because everything is improving year by year or was it specifically felt that they had not been adequate in the past?

Fiona Robertson: I go back to my comment that the marking instructions are different. There was further exemplification in the markers meetings and in the marking instructions to help teachers to mark. It was that simple.

Martyn Ware (Scottish Qualifications Authority): That was in response to a request from markers for further detail in the marking instructions to give them greater confidence in the consistency of their marking. It was a direct response to feedback, as well as the other factors that Fiona Robertson mentioned.

John Mason: Okay—thank you. The report makes the point that there was difficulty in recruiting markers in some subjects. That might lead me to think that people do not have the required experience or are inconsistent. Would that be a wrong assumption?

Fiona Robertson: Yes. Markers go through training and quality assurance before they go into live marking. However, it is fair to highlight that, for some courses and some subjects, we have challenges in marking. Sometimes markers withdraw at the last minute, for lots of different reasons, so it is challenging. All committee members will know this, but I highlight that we mark about 1.3 million scripts from the start of the

diet to the point at which there is a cut-off, which is in some cases at the beginning of June. It is done in a very concentrated time-defined period, so we need all markers to be with us throughout that.

The report highlights that there were some issues with markers, but history was not significantly different from other courses or other subjects that we deal with.

Willie Rennie: If you had your time again, or if exactly the same circumstances happened again, would you commission a fully independent report rather than an internal one that was externally verified? Would you do it differently?

Fiona Robertson: The first point in the opening statement that I did not give was about the discussion about the SQA’s carrying out of the review, which has been a core criticism. The simple answer to the question of why we carried out the review is that it was our job to do so. The committee will want to consider that in the context of what the cabinet secretary has said and its consideration of the Education (Scotland) Bill.

When I appeared before the committee in September, I said—I think that it was in response to a question that you asked—that there is a choice about where the regulator sits and what it does. At the moment, the regulator in Scotland does not do national qualifications at all. They are self-regulated. There are some choices around that. If anything, rather than considering whether the work should have been done independently or not, the question therefore gives rise to a consideration of future arrangements.

We all want there to be public confidence in our education system and our qualifications system. I certainly want that. If the arrangements that are in place give rise, for whatever reason—rightly or wrongly—to the kinds of questions that have been asked today, it is legitimate to question those arrangements. However, it is important that I highlight that everyone who has been involved in the review has acted with the utmost integrity. I fully stand by the report.

On that basis, the very short answer to your question is no. I am content with the report and how it has been undertaken. However, if public confidence or the committee’s confidence is such that there is another structural issue that needs to be considered, that is a matter for the committee and for the Scottish Government to consider.

The Convener: We have to watch the time, because we are not allowed to meet while Parliament is meeting in the chamber. We have only a few more minutes, and the committee has other business. I would have liked to have been able to spend more time on the issue, but the committee genuinely appreciates the time that you have given us today.

Given what you have just said to Willie Rennie, if you are so confident in the report and so confident that the findings are clear and categorical, why not have a wholly independent review? Surely that would simply confirm everything that was in the internal review that was externally verified. That would then just be copied into a wholly independent review that would have the trust of teachers, students and markers.

Fiona Robertson: As I have just said, I have undertaken the work on the review in line with my responsibilities, and I stand by the report's conclusions.

The Convener: What would bar you from having a wholly independent review?

Fiona Robertson: There is nothing to stop me or the cabinet secretary commissioning an independent review—

The Convener: Is that a suggestion that both of you will take away to consider following today's committee meeting?

Fiona Robertson: I said at the start of today's discussion that we were keen to ensure that the evidence led us to whatever conclusions were required. On the basis of the report's conclusions, I do not think that further investigation is required.

The Convener: But an independent review could speak to people who have not been spoken to during the compilation of the SQA's review, so it could come up with slightly different recommendations. All that I am asking is whether that is something that you and the cabinet secretary will consider in the light of the evidence that we have received and the discussion that the committee has had today. Will you at least consider that?

Fiona Robertson: I am satisfied with—

The Convener: So you will not consider that. It is a straightforward question, to which I need an answer.

Fiona Robertson: That is something that I can take away as feedback from the committee—

The Convener: And consider?

Fiona Robertson: —in conversation with the cabinet secretary.

The Convener: Will you consider the suggestion? I do not know what is difficult about saying that you will consider it.

Fiona Robertson: I am happy to do that—

The Convener: Thank you.

Fiona Robertson: —but I also need to make clear what I have said in relation to the conclusion of the review and my satisfaction with the

conclusion of the review, on the basis of the evidence that was presented. Therefore, I do not consider an independent review to be necessary.

Martyn Ware: I would like to make a point about the evidence that was gathered for the review. An increasing amount is being made of the fact that we did not speak to anybody beyond the people who were most closely involved in setting standards for higher history this year and of the fact that we did not speak to learners or to other teachers.

The starting point for the review was that we listened to learners, to teachers and to others who expressed concerns about the standard that was set in higher history. That was the evidence that gave rise to the review. The review set itself a number of questions to answer, which are set out very clearly in the report. The fundamental question was whether the standard that was set in higher history this year was different from the one that was set last year.

Having set that question—this would be the case with any such review—we then needed to determine what evidence would help us to answer it. I and my colleague who worked most closely on the report considered what evidence we needed. The evidence that we needed came from the process of setting standards for higher history this year. Had we gone to speak to teachers and learners, we would have heard expressed the concerns that led to the review in the first place. What we needed was not more of that evidence, but evidence on the standard-setting process. We listened very—

The Convener: That is why—

Martyn Ware: We considered very—

The Convener: Mr Ware! That is why I believe—this is a personal opinion—that an independent review would have been better. You are using the word “we” a lot and talking about what you think. It would have been better if you had assembled that evidence in the construction of the review. Cabinet—

Martyn Ware: If you will allow me to—

The Convener: Thank you.

I will bring in the cabinet secretary.

Jenny Gilruth: The evidence base of the report has not been in contention today—I have not heard that from members. However, I am happy to hear from history teachers. I did that through my engagement with SATH, but I put on the record again that I am keen to hear from history teachers directly on the issue. The evidence base that I have been presented with and which we have discussed throughout today's session does not tell me of the challenges that you have spoken to

today, convener, and it does not necessarily reflect some of the other views that you have heard. However, I do not discount those views, and I am more than happy to hear from those teachers.

The Convener: Thank you.

Finally, Ms Robertson, I will read you two quotes from teachers. One says:

“I have never been so demoralised about the state of history at SQA level”.

The second, which is from an experienced teacher writing in *The Herald*, states:

“what we have recently experienced with the SQA has been nothing short of a national scandal”.

Will you apologise for this?

Fiona Robertson: Those are the views of two teachers, who I am sure are concerned about the performance of their learners. The report highlights the variety of views. We have sought to take forward an evidence-based report that cuts through perception and opinion and ensures that learners have the right result. That has been my focus. I am happy to apologise if something has gone wrong, but we undertook the review to see whether anything had gone wrong. There are some recommendations and improvements that we can make, but it is really important that we cut through some of the anonymous commentary and, given the responsibilities that we have to learners, ensure that our attention is on ensuring that they get the right results. That is what we will—

The Convener: Of course, some anonymous commentary is whistleblowing, which is crucial to ensure that we get things right for students and teachers going forward.

Cabinet secretary, Ms Robertson and your officials, I thank you for your time today. I believe that individual MSPs may want to discuss more issues, but I am grateful that you have come to the committee to discuss the matter with us. Thank you.

13:47

Meeting continued in private until 13:51.

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