

Education, Children and Young People Committee

2nd Meeting, 2024 (Session 6), Wednesday 17 January
2024

Budget Scrutiny 2024-25 and Education and Skills Reform

Introduction

1. The Committee is continuing its scrutiny of the Scottish Government's budget for education and skills following its pre-budget inquiry on [13 September 2023](#) and the subsequent letter it sent to the Cabinet Secretary on [19 December 2023](#).
2. Alongside budget scrutiny, the Committee is committed to continuing its scrutiny of reforms to education and skills in Scotland throughout this session, especially to understand what the impact of recent reports and reviews on education reform has been and will be on the ground and budget allocations.
3. This morning's session will therefore be split into two. The first part of the session will focus on the budget (approximately 1.5 hours). There will then be a 30-minute break, before the second part of the session will focus on education reform (approximately 1.5 hours). The Cabinet Secretary will make a short opening statement at the beginning of each topic.
4. In relation to education reform, the Committee is particularly keen to examine any progress that has been made on addressing the recommendations of the OECD report of 21 June 2021 on [Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence](#) as well as other recommendations. These include the recommendations of the [Report of Independent Review of the Skills Delivery Landscape](#) and the [Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment](#); notwithstanding statements made by the Cabinet Secretary on [7 November 2023](#) and [12 December 2023](#).
5. This builds on work previously undertaken by the Committee on this topic; including the evidence it took from the Cabinet Secretary on pre-budget scrutiny and the Scottish attainment gap on [27 September 2023](#); the Minister for Further and Higher Education and Minister for Veterans regarding the Scottish Education Exchange Programme and further and higher education issues on [21 June 2023](#) and 10 January 2024; and the evidence it took from stakeholders on [20 September 2023](#), [8 November 2023](#), and [15 November 2023](#).

Committee meeting

6. At its meeting today, the Committee will take evidence from Jenny Gilruth MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills.

7. Alongside the Cabinet Secretary for the session on Budget 2024/25 will be—

- Andrew Watson, Director for Children and Families
- Sam Anson, Deputy Director: Workforce, Infrastructure & Digital and
- Stuart Greig, Head of Reform Division, Scottish Government

8. For the session on Education Reform, the Cabinet Secretary will be supported by—

- Clare Hicks, Director for Education Reform and
- Laura Murdoch, Deputy Director, Curriculum and Qualifications Division, Scottish Government

Supporting information

9. SPICe briefings on the budget and on education reform have been prepared for the session. These are attached at **Annexe A** and **Annexe B** respectively.

10. The Committee, along with the Finance and Public Administration Committee, has also received a submission from [Universities Scotland on its analysis of the Higher Education Budget 2024/25](#).

Education, Children and Young People Committee Clerks
12 January 2024



Education, Children and Young People Committee

Wednesday 17 January 2024

Scottish Budget 2024-25

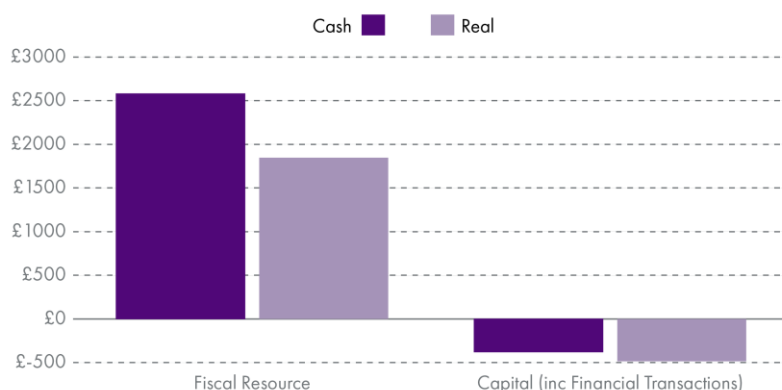
Introduction

This briefing is to support the Committee in its scrutiny of the Scottish Government’s 2024-25 budget.

The Committee took evidence specifically on its pre-budget scrutiny in September 2023. This work built on other evidence sessions the Committee undertook through the year. The Committee focused on the role and funding of local authorities, Further and Higher Education, and the Scottish Attainment challenge. The Committee wrote to the [Scottish Government on 2 November 2023](#). The [Government’s response was issued on 19 December 2023](#). This paper highlights the recommendations and responses in the context of the relevant budget areas.

Overall context

Resource (which covers day-to-day expenditure) and Capital (covering spending on buildings and physical assets) are the elements of the budget over which the Scottish Government has discretion. As we can see from the chart, Resource is due to increase by 4.4% in real terms in 2024-25 and Capital is set to fall by 7.1% in real terms.



A key context of the budget is the period of high inflation we have experienced in the past few years. This has impacted on the Scottish Budget with significant in-year changes being required in both 2022-23 and the current financial year (2023-24).

In his report on the [2022-23 Scottish Government Consolidated Accounts](#), the Auditor General stated—

“The Scottish Government continues to face significant pressures on public finances including the cost-of-living crisis, inflationary pressures, public sector pay, demand-led expenditure, the cost of delivering the statutory targets for child poverty and net zero, together with the impact of an aging population.”

The DFM’s foreword to the budget stated—

“We have been compelled to take painful and difficult decisions in order to prioritise funding in the areas which have the greatest impact on the quality of life for the people of Scotland.”

She said that the Scottish Government has adopted a values-based approach to setting budgets which are focused on the Government’s “three missions”—

- Equality – Tackling poverty and protecting people from harm
- Opportunity – Building a fair, sustainable and growing economy
- Community – Delivering efficient and effective public services

There was much discussion in advance of the Budget about the need for public service reform, and the likelihood of reductions to the size of the public sector workforce. However, the Budget contained no details on plans around public service reform, the size of the public sector workforce, or any details on assumptions and policy for public sector pay in 2024-25. The Scottish Government did say that it will “set out pay metrics for 2024-25 following the [UK] Spring Budget.” The DFM has written separately to the [Finance and Public Administration Committee on Budget day providing a "Progress Update" on public service reform](#) which sets out the Government’s approach to developing plans for reform.

Further and Higher Education

The Scottish Government allocates funding for the further and higher education sectors to the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) via the Budget. SFC then allocates this to institutions.

The 2024-25 budget allocations for Further and Higher Education are set out in the Budget document at [Table A5.07: Scottish Funding Council Spending Plans](#). This is shown in **Table 1**.

Table 1: Scottish Funding Council Spending Plans (Level 3)

The

Level 3	2022-23 Budget £m	2023-24 Budget £m	2024-25 Budget £m
Scottish Funding Council Administration	8.2	7.8	7.6
College Operational Expenditure	865.7	891.7	833.0
College Operational Income	(190.0)	(190.0)	(190.0)
<i>Net College Resource</i>	<i>675.7</i>	<i>701.7</i>	<i>643.0</i>
College Not for Profit (NPD) Expenditure	29.3	29.3	29.3
College Depreciation Costs	26.7	26.5	31.8
HE Resource	789.2	809.2	760.7
College Capital Expenditure	74.7	82.4	84.9
College Capital Receipts	–	–	–
<i>Net College Capital</i>	<i>74.7</i>	<i>82.4</i>	<i>84.9</i>
HE Capital	348.0	340.7	356.9
HE FTs	31.0	26.6	–
HE FTs Income	(8.9)	(11.6)	(8.9)
Total Scottish Funding Council	1,973.9	2,012.6	1,905.2
<i>of which:</i>			
Fiscal Resource	1,501.6	1,547.6	1,440.4
Non-cash	27.4	26.9	32.0
Capital	422.7	423.1	441.7
FTs	22.1	15.0	(8.9)
UK Funded AME	0.1	–	–

Source: [Scottish Government Budget 2024-25, Table A5.07](#)

Budget sets out a decrease in college and university resource budgets for 2024-25 and an increase in capital budgets.

Resource budgets for the further and higher education sectors have tightened in recent years:

- The [2022 Resource Spending Review](#) set out a flat-cash settlement for colleges and universities.
- While the 2023-24 Budget initially provided for an increase of £20m and £26m for university and college resource budgets respectively, this increase was later reversed, primarily [to fund the teachers' pay settlement](#).
- In November 2023, [Deputy First Minister Shona Robison wrote to the Finance Committee](#) to set out further in-year budget changes for 2023-24. This included £56m of savings across demand-led programmes at SFC. The Deputy First Minister's letter cited "projected lower spending than forecast across a wide range demand-led programmes" as the reason for the saving.

- In total, savings identified across the 2023-24 college and university resource budgets see colleges and universities receive £102m less than what was initially allocated to them in December 2022.

Funding for Further and Higher Education was a focus of the Committee's pre-budget scrutiny. [In its letter to the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills Jenny Gilruth MSP](#), the Committee called for clarification as to whether the Scottish Government remained committed to flat-cash allocations for both sectors until 2026-27, as [set out in the 2022 resource spending review](#). The Cabinet Secretary's response stated that flat-cash resource allocations could not be maintained due to financial challenges facing the Scottish Government, capital allocations had increased.

The Cabinet Secretary's response also stated that the Scottish Government's focus has been to "minimise the impact on frontline allocations for learning and teaching and support for students" and committed to working with the sectors "to respond to both the necessity and opportunities for reform".

When asked at the Committee's 10 January 2024 evidence session whether in-year cuts to the further and higher education budget would happen in 2024-25 as they had in 2023-24, the Minister for Higher and Further Education; and Minister for Veterans Graeme Dey said:

"...there are external factors that mean I can't sit here and say that absolutely wouldn't be the case." – [Education, Children and Young People Committee, 10/01/24](#)

He went on to cite the implications of the UK Government budget as an example of this.

In its [detailed analysis of the Education and Skills Budget](#), the Scottish Government states that the reduction in college resource budget is likely to impact on course provision and poses an overall risk to the availability of education, skills and training places:

"Changes in the college and HE resource budgets risk reducing education and skills training opportunities for young people, and for older people seeking to upskill." – [Annex B: Detailed Analysis by Portfolio, Scottish Government](#)

The analysis also states there is "significant risk" that the reduction in HE resource budget will increase competition for university places and disadvantage learners from socio-economically disadvantaged areas. The analysis states this will require monitoring of widening access requirements on institutions.

Sector response to Budget 2024-25

Responding to the publication of the 2024-25 Budget, [Universities Scotland's media release stated](#) it is a "a tough budget for higher education" which will mean "some inescapably hard choices for universities" due to falling Scottish Government funding and uncertainty around income from international students as numbers fall.

[Colleges Scotland's media release stated](#) cuts to college funding create "massive challenges for college leaders" of public sector organisations required to balance books, with the sector facing "major changes" and "difficult choices". The response also stressed the important role colleges play in delivering Scottish Government priorities.

[NUS Scotland](#) said the Scottish Government's recent announcement of a [rise in living support for students](#) was welcome, but stated "underfunding of universities and colleges is an increasingly acute issue". NUS Scotland said the cash terms cuts contained in the Budget will be "disastrous".

When asked about the cut to college and university resource budget cuts, João Sousa, Deputy Director at the Fraser of Allander Institute told the [Finance and Public Administration Committee on 9 January 2024](#): "I am surprised that that is a decision that has been taken given the fact that skills are such an important thing and they can have really long term ramifications, they are investment in human capital essentially..."

Also appearing at the [Finance and Public Administration Committee](#), Colleges Scotland Chief Executive Shona Struthers told the Finance Committee described the budget as "death by 1,000 cuts". She stated that the cut to the college resource budget will see campuses close, a reduction in the number of students going to college and a reduction in the college curriculum.

Shona Struthers called for the government to remove duplication across the skills system and invest strategically for a better return. She also called for an honest conversation about what the sector can deliver with the resources it has.

Universities

University (HE) resource and capital allocations for 2022-23 to 2024-25 are set out in cash terms in **Table 2** and real terms in **Table 3**.

Table 2: HE Resource and Capital Budgets (Level 3)

	2022-23 Budget £m	2023-24 Budget £m	2024-25 Budget £m
HE Resource	789.2	<i>809.2</i>	760.7
HE Capital	348.0	340.7	356.9

Source: [Scottish Budget 2024-25](#), Table A5.07 Scottish Funding Council Spending Plans (Level 3)
Note: Resource funding figures for 2023-24 are in italics as the full amount of funding allocated was not received. This is explained further underneath the tables.

Table 3: HE Resource and Capital Budgets (Level 3) (Real terms)

	2022-23 Budget £m	2023-24 Budget £m	2024-25 Budget £m
HE Resource	851.4	<i>822.8</i>	760.7
HE Capital	375.4	346.4	356.9

Source: [Scottish Budget 2024-25](#), Table A5.07 Scottish Funding Council Spending Plans (Level 3) and [SPICe Real Terms calculator](#), looking at value in 2024-25.
Note: Resource funding figures for 2023-24 are in italics as the full amount of funding allocated was not received. This is explained further underneath the tables.

Please note, the resource budget figures in the tables above for 2023-24 **include the additional £20m for universities initially allocated**. Using these figures:

- **Resource funding for universities** has fallen by £48.5m (6%) in cash terms - £62.1m (7.5%) in real terms - between 2023-24 and 2024-25 Budget publications.
 - This figure reduces to £28.5m (3.6%) in cash terms if the £20m funding reversal for 2023-24 is taken into account.
- **Capital funding for universities** has increased by £16.2m (4.8%) in cash terms - £10.5m (3%) in real terms - between 2023-24 and 2024-25 Budget publications.

SFC published its report [Financial Sustainability of Universities in Scotland 2020-21 to 2025-26](#) in January 2024. The report looks at the latest forecasts up to academic year 2025-26 but does not take into account the 2024-25 Budget announcement.

The report finds the university sector's aggregate financial position going from a surplus of £385.2m in 2021-22, reducing to a forecast surplus of £226.5m in 2022-23 and a forecast deficit of £3.3m in 2023-24. A surplus of £44m is forecast for 2024-25. SFC states increases in staff costs (including pay), utilities and other operating costs, combined with a reduction in income from EU funds, capital grants and City Deal funding are behind the decline.

In a submission analysing the impact of the 2024-25 Budget, Universities Scotland stated the SFC report "highlights how precariously finances are balanced for the majority of institutions".

Universities Scotland states that the challenges the sector faces are likely to be exacerbated by the 2024-25 Budget settlement coupled with a "sudden" drop in recruitment of international students having "major financial implications for many institutions". Given these developments, Universities Scotland states that the suggestion sector finances will recover slightly by 2024-25 "would now be a dangerous assumption".

Universities Scotland states that the cash-terms reduction in the 2024-25 resource budget could have funding implications for universities in the current academic year (2023-24), due to this running four months beyond the financial year. SFC manage the reduction between the two academic years. Universities Scotland states this creates:

"...the risk that universities will see cuts intensified in AY 2023/24 (on top of the £20 million already withdrawn in-year) as well as planned cuts in AY 2024/25." – Universities Scotland submission

[Scottish Government figures](#) show the average expenditure per funded university place (Teaching Grant plus assumed tuition fee income) for 2022-23 was £7,558; in 2012-13, the figure was £7,139. Universities Scotland has been calling for an increase in teaching resource per student for several years. Its submission reiterates that call, stating:

"The Scottish Government could remove a modest number of undergraduate places from AY 2024/25, whilst still retaining overall

Scottish-domiciled numbers at historically high levels, by rebalancing the [2020 unplanned undergraduate expansion in response to the situation facing school-leavers during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic](#).

Universities Scotland recognises that the additional funded places injected into the system to address the consequences of teacher-assessed Highers were meant to be temporary. However, withdrawal of this temporary increase in funded places would only cut around £4-5 million. Universities' preference would be to see this "saving" reinvested in the unit of teaching resource for other home students." – Universities Scotland submission

Colleges

College resource and capital allocations for 2022-23 to 2024-25 are set out in cash terms in **Table 4** and real terms in **Table 5**.

Table 4: College Resource and Capital Budgets (Level 3)

	2022-23 Budget £m	2023-24 Budget £m	2024-25 Budget £m
Net College Resource	675.7	<i>701.7</i>	643.0
Net College Capital	74.7	82.4	84.9

Source: [Scottish Budget 2024-25](#), Table A5.07 Scottish Funding Council Spending Plans (Level 3)

Note: Resource funding figures for 2023-24 are in italics as the full amount of funding allocated was not received. This is explained further underneath the tables.

Table 5: College Resource and Capital Budgets (Level 3) (Real terms)

	2022-23 Budget £m	2023-24 Budget £m	2024-25 Budget £m
Net College Resource	728.9	<i>713.5</i>	643.0
Net College Capital	80.6	83.8	84.9

Source: [Scottish Budget 2024-25](#), Table A5.07 Scottish Funding Council Spending Plans (Level 3) and [SPICe Real Terms calculator](#), looking at value in 2024-25.

Note: Resource funding figures for 2023-24 are in italics as the full amount of funding allocated was not received. This is explained further underneath the tables.

Please note, the resource budget figures in the tables above for 2023-24 **include the additional £26m for colleges initially allocated**. Using these figures:

- **Net resource funding for colleges** has fallen by £58.7m (8.4%) in cash terms - £70.5m (9.9%) in real terms - between 2023-24 and 2024-25 Budget publications.

- This figure reduces to £32.7m (4.8%) in cash terms if the £26m funding reversal in 2023-24 is taken into account.
- **Net capital funding for colleges** has increased by £2.5m (3%) in cash terms - £1.1m (1.3%) in real terms - between 2023-24 and 2024-25 Budget publications.

Concerns about college sector funding were reported prior to the 2024-25 Budget. In September 2023, Audit Scotland's report [Scotland's Colleges 2023](#) highlighted:

"...sustained risks to colleges' financial sustainability, and an increased level of risk in most of them." – [Scotland's Colleges 2023](#)

Staff costs make up more than 70% of college expenditure. Many colleges have run voluntary redundancy schemes in recent years and some colleges are planning compulsory redundancies as they look to reduce costs. Audit Scotland found further staff reductions could "severely erode [colleges'] ability to deliver a viable curriculum".

In its [pre-budget scrutiny letter to the Cabinet Secretary](#), the Committee asked what work the Scottish Government had done to look at the impact of staffing cuts across the sector, what would be done to monitor this situation and what the role of SFC is in relation to compulsory redundancies at colleges. The Cabinet Secretary's response stated that operational decisions around staffing were a matter for colleges and the Scottish Government does not have access to data on this. On compulsory redundancies, the response stated that all options should be considered before turning to compulsory redundancies. While SFC should be informed at the "earliest opportunity", colleges are not required to seek approval or submit a business case.

The Committee's letter also asked for information about how new flexibilities requested by the college sector around the allocation and delivery of credits were being used. The [Cabinet Secretary's response](#) stated it was too early to provide detail on this, but feedback from the Tripartite Group suggested colleges "are already seeing the benefits of the changes". During the Committee's 10 January 2023 evidence session, the Minister said colleges had not been able to utilise credit flexibilities as expected and:

"...a lot of that was down to what that meant in reality on both sides and a lack of explanation...essentially they had asked for one size fits all approach that didn't entirely suit all of the individual colleges..." – [Education, Children and Young People Committee, 10/01/24](#)

The Public Audit Committee held evidence sessions on Audit Scotland's Colleges report on 26 October, 30 November 2023 and 11 January 2024. [During the 26 October session](#), Auditor General Stephen Boyle said "the viability of the college sector is challenged". He added:

"...in order to address that challenge, the Government and the Funding Council need to have a clear plan for what the future model of provision looks like." – [Official Report, 26/10/23](#)

[During the 30 November session](#), there was discussion of the number of colleges expected to be in a deficit position in the next financial year. There was also general agreement between witnesses that financial flexibilities given to colleges in 2023 were relatively minor.

[In a submission to the Committee](#) ahead of the 11 January 2024 session, SFC highlighted its recent [report on college finances](#). The report looks at the latest forecasts up to academic year 2025-26 but does not take into account the 2024-25 Budget announcement.

The SFC report sets out sector forecasts of an adjusted operating deficit of £27.2m for 2022-23, due to “flat cash in SFC grants and reduction in tuition fees relating to higher education provision not matched by the same level of reductions in costs”.

24 colleges (92%) forecast adjusted operating deficits in 2022-23, with 17 (68%) forecasting these to continue over the next three years. The SFC report notes that colleges tend to take a cautious approach to forecasting, and actual results have improved against earlier projections in recent years.

Cash reserves are also forecast to deteriorate. While the sector reported an aggregate cash balance of £141.4m at the end of July 2022, this is forecast to be a cash deficit of £4.2m by the end of July 2026. Four colleges forecast a cash deficit by the end of July 2024, and this increases to six by end of July 2026. The SFC report states this will:

- Make it difficult for SFC to ensure colleges have sufficient grants to manage their liabilities.
- Become increasingly difficult for colleges to self-fund staff restructuring activity and rebalance their cost base.

On staff costs, the report states:

“The sector reported staff restructuring costs of £6.7m in 2021- 22 and forecasts staff restructuring costs of £13.2m in 2022-23 and £8.2m in 2023-24. Based on current forecasts, significant staff reductions of 2,387 FTEs are projected over the period 2022-23 through to 2025-26, equating to the potential removal of 21% of FTE staff employed in the sector.” – [Financial Sustainability of Colleges in Scotland 2020-21 to 2025-26, SFC](#)

At the [Committee’s 10 January 2024 evidence session](#), the Minister told the Committee that he recognised the financial challenges facing colleges, and there was an opportunity to move quickly toward reform of the sector in order to help address these challenges. He confirmed that colleges would be expected to undertake reform within the current funding settlement in the short term.

Student support spending plans

Table 6 sets out spending plans for Higher Education Student Support for students studying Higher Education (HE) level courses at college or university.

Table 6: Higher Education Student Support Spending Plans (Level 2)

	2022-23 Budget £m	2023-24 Budget £m	2024-25 Budget £m
Higher Education Student Support	1,017.6	925.1	1,484.6

Source: [Scottish Government Budget 2024-25](#)

The Scottish Government’s [Level 4 data](#) shows the increase of £559.5m in the overall budget between 2023-24 and 2024-25 can be attributed to factors including an estimated

£197.4m increase in the cost of providing student loans (the non-cash RAB charge); recent increases in interest rates; and increase in loan value adjustments.

The increase in the overall budget also masks a £23.4m reduction in budget for student support and tuition fee payments in 2024-25. The Level 4 data states this “reflects savings made in 2023-24 and anticipated demand”.

Lifelong Learning and Skills

The Lifelong Learning and Skills spending plans include funding for Skills Development Scotland (SDS), skills programmes, Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA), student support and wellbeing, international activity and community learning and development.

Table 7 sets out the spending plans at level 3.

Table 7: Lifelong Learning & Skills Spending Plans (Level 3)

	2022-23 Budget £m	2023-24 Budget £m	2024-25 Budget £m
Lifelong Learning	20.0	20.1	14.3
Skills	50.6	50.6	36.9
Skills Development Scotland	217.1	206.6	202.5
Total Lifelong Learning & Skills	287.7	277.2	253.7

Source: [Scottish Government Budget 2024-25, Table A5.08](#)

The spending plans in this area show an overall cut of £23.5m (8.4%) between 2023-24 and 2024-25.

This includes a £13.7m fall in the skills budget line for 2024-25. [Level 4 data](#) states this comprises of a £9.4m cut to grant funding for third sector organisations to support young people to make successful transition to employment, education or training. The explanation given for this is that it reflects “efficiency savings and budget transfers made in 2023-24 and a scaling back of skills programmes in 2024-25”. Funding for EMA has also reduced by £4.3m, and this is explained as being in line with “demand-led savings made in 2023-24”.

There is also a £5.8m reduction in the Lifelong Learning budget line between 2023-24 and 2024-25. The [Level 4 data](#) gives more detail behind this, showing a £6.8m fall in funding for international activity from £7.9m in 2023-24 to £1.1m in 2024-25. This is attributed to a reduction in international activity. There is no mention in the 2024-25 Budget document of funding for the Scottish Education Exchange Programme (SEEP), despite the [2023 Programme for Government](#) committing to launch this following a ‘test and learn’ project in 2023-24.

The Level 4 data also shows a £1m cut to Community Learning and Development funding from £3.2 in 2023-24 to £2.2m in 2024-25. An [independent review of Community Learning and Development provision](#) is currently underway.

An increase of £2m for Lifelong Learning and Skills total operating costs is also shown in the Level 4 data. This funding is to support advice and policy work across the Scottish Government’s Directorate for Lifelong Learning and Skills.

Children and Families

The Children and Families spending plans include resources for the Scotland's Children's Hearings system, preventing young offending, Scottish Social Services Council, delivery of the Redress Scheme, work to deliver The Promise and care system reform and Early Learning and Childcare expansion.

Table 8: Children & Families Spending Plans (Level 3)

	2022-23 Budget £m	2023-24 Budget £m	2024-25 Budget £m
Children's Rights, Protection & Justice	51.1	53.6	51.4
Creating Positive Futures	32.7	37.7	43.4
Disclosure Scotland Expenditure	24.8	23.5	23.8
Office of the Chief Social Work Adviser	20.9	28.1	49.4
Redress, Relations and Response	60.5	60.7	60.3
Care Experience – Whole Family Wellbeing	25.3	95.3	84.2
Early Learning and Childcare	55.6	51.7	73.5
Total Children & Families	270.9	350.6	385.9

Source: [Scottish Government Budget 2024-25, Table A5.05](#)

[Level 4 data shows](#) funding allocated to the Office of the Chief Social Work Adviser has increased from £28.1m in 2023-24 to £49.4m in 2024-25. This is an increase of £21.3m (76%). This increase is mostly down to a 457.4% increase in funding for development of the social work workforce; this budget line is up from £4.8m in 2023-24 to £26.8m in 2024-25.

The Care Experience – Whole Family Wellbeing budget line (previously called Strategy, GIRFEC and The Promise in the 2023-24 Budget) has reduced by £11.1m on 2023-24. Level 4 data shows this is due to the budget line for Improving Lives for People with Care Experience reducing and being merged with The Promise budget line.

The Level 4 data also shows a £50m funding allocation for the Whole Family Wellbeing Fund (WFWF). The Scottish Government's [Medium Term Financial Strategy](#) restates the commitment to provide £500m for the Whole Family Wellbeing Fund over the course of this session of Parliament. The 2024-25 allocation brings total funding allocated to the WFWF over the course of this session to £100m so far.

The increase in the Early Learning and Childcare budget is covered in the 'School Education and ELC' section of this briefing.

School Education and ELC

The majority of funding for school education and ELC is through local authorities. There are also a number of central funding streams which support national programmes or are monies for specific grants to local authorities.

A key change this year compared to previous years has been the movement of the ELC expansion grant into local authorities' General Revenue Grant. However, to support

comparisons, the budget for previous years has been presented as if the ringfenced ELC grant was in the GRG in previous years.

Centrally funded programmes

The Scottish budget is organised in four levels. Level 1 is the level of the Cabinet Secretary's portfolio. Level 4 is the lowest level. Prior sections in this paper have looked at Further and Higher Education and Child protection. This section will look at those areas which relate to school education and ELC.

The following table shows the overall resource and capital funding for a number of level 2 lines.

Selected Level 2 lines

	2022-23			2023-24			2024-25		
	Total	of which		Total	of which		Total	of which	
		Resource	Capital		Resource	Capital		Resource	Capital
Learning	458.4	418.0	40.4	496.9	402.8	94.2	712.5	657.8	54.7
Education Reform	92.1	79.8	5.5	99.4	88.0	6.5	98.4	85.8	7.9
Education Scotland	30.3	26.5	1.0	28.7	26.5	0.0	29.2	26.5	0.0
Local Government Gaelic Grant	4.5	4.5	0.0	4.5	4.5	0.0	4.5	4.5	0.0
Local Government Attainment Grant	120.0	120.0	0.0	120.0	120.0	0.0	120.0	120.0	0.0

The table above shows some selected lines which, wholly or partly, relate to school education. The totals in bold includes the budgets for Resource (day-to-day spend), Capital, Non-cash (usually depreciation) and UK Annually Managed Expenditure (demanded UK Government funded expenditure). AME funds the outlay of Student Loans and supports certain pension schemes but it accounts for very little spend in the lines above.

The large increase in the Learning line is due to the inclusion of money to support the teachers' pay deal within that line. The other lines have remained fairly static in cash terms between 2023-24 and 2024-25. Flat cash settlements represent reductions in real terms.

Learning

There are three Level 3 lines under Learning. These are:

- Education Analytical Services
- Improvement, Attainment and Wellbeing

- Workforce, Infrastructure & Digital

The first of these, Education Analytical Services, is a relatively small budget line of around £4m per year. This section will focus on the second and third areas and only on the Resource and Capital elements.

Improvement, Attainment and Wellbeing

	2022-23		2023-24		2024-25	
	Resource	Capital	Resource	Capital	Resource	Capital
Communication Teams (Schools)	0.2	0.0	0.2	0.0	0.2	0.0
Raising Attainment	78.7	0.0	79.9	0.0	81.9	0.0
Grant Aided Special Schools Indirect Capital	0.0	0.2	0.0	0.2	0.0	0.2
Compensation Payments (SPPA)	0.8	0.0	0.4	0.0	0.4	0.0
Equalities, Inclusion and Additional Support for Learning	26.8	0.0	26.8	0.0	27.4	0.0
Health and Wellbeing	50.9	30.0	26.2	80.0	33.4	43.0
Total	157.4	30.2	133.6	80.2	143.4	43.2

The Raising Attainment line funds the Attainment Scotland Fund (excluding £120m for PEF), National Improvement Framework programmes and for the School Clothing Grant. The Government states that the increase in 2023-24 to 2024-25 was in relation to “contracted costs to deliver Scottish National Standardised Assessments and uplift school clothing grant in line with inflation.” The increase of this line of around £2m equates to around 1% increase in real terms.

Equalities, Inclusion and Additional Support for Learning covers funding for funding Grant Aided Special Schools and for a range of support services for pupils with additional support needs and their parents, e.g. Enquire. Members will be aware that the funding to support pupils with additional support needs mainly comes from local authorities’ budgets. The increase of £600K is to cover inflation and this represents a small increase in real terms.

The Health and Wellbeing line supports food and health, relationships, sexual health and parenthood education. It also provides national support for a range of projects promoting positive relationships, behaviour, mental health and wellbeing and engagement in schools and the national anti-bullying service. Resource funding for this line is budgeted to increase £7.2m year on year. The Government states that the “additional resource investment to

support the expansion of provision of free school meals. The capital budget for this line is due to reduce by £37m and this too is to support the expansion of free school meals.

In relation to universal free school meals, the Committee asked the Government to provide the evidence it had on “the effectiveness of free school meals on education and wellbeing or on child poverty” and to undertake an evaluation on the roll out of universal FSM thus far. The Cabinet Secretary’s response said—

“I confirm that the Scottish Government is working closely in partnership with local authorities on arrangements for the delivery of our commitments, and we will consider evaluation of our approach as part of this.

“We are prioritising our budget towards our aim to ensure excellence and equity in education and skills, including reducing the poverty-related attainment gap and to support our wider national mission to tackle child poverty. We will continue to deliver free school meals for all children in primary 1 – 5 and special schools. The next phase of our expansion of Free School Meals will be targeted to children in primary 6 and 7 who are in receipt of the Scottish Child Payment in the first instance, with £43m of necessary capital investment to expand facilities and provision to begin during 2024-25.”

Workforce, Infrastructure & Digital

£m

	2022-23		2023-24		2024-25	
	Resource	Capital	Resource	Capital	Resource	Capital
Teacher Training	178.3	0.0	178.3	0.0	170.6	0.0
Teachers' Pay	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	242.0	0.0
School Estate	0.4	0.0	0.4	0.0	0.4	0.0
Technologies for Learning	10.3	10.0	7.3	13.0	6.3	10.0
Schools Unitary Charges	58.6	0.0	71.0	0.0	82.0	0.0
Jordanhill School	7.0	0.0	7.0	0.0	8.1	0.0
Jordanhill School Indirect Capital	0.0	0.2	0.0	0.2	0.0	0.3
St Mary's Music School Grant Payments	1.6	0.0	1.6	0.0	1.6	0.0
Learning and Support (Advice and Policy)	0.4	0.0	0.4	0.0	0.3	0.0
Total	256.494	10.2	265.894	13.2	511.266	10.3

The Teacher Training line is described as “funding to maintain teacher numbers, recruit and train student teachers, operate the teacher induction scheme and enable initiatives to

support the structure of teachers' professional learning in Scotland." The reduction of around £7.7m compared to previous years is explained by the Scottish Government as being an "operating cost reduction due to workforce efficiencies and Initial teacher Education budget now aligned to uptake."

The Committee explored the policy of maintaining teacher numbers in its pre-budget work. Its report said—

"The Committee firmly believes that it is critical to focus on outcomes rather than inputs and that a strict focus on teacher numbers can be difficult to understand given local variation in circumstances, including school rolls.

"The Committee recognises that an increase in teacher numbers is required to deliver reduced contact time and notes that the Scottish Government has recently commissioned a teacher audit to inform its decisions on education workforce planning in future years. The Committee asks the Government to set out how it intends to deliver the commitment to reduce contact time while taking account of the distinct challenges different local authorities face."

The Cabinet Secretary's response argued that at least maintaining teacher numbers is central to reducing the poverty related attainment gap. On contact time, she stated—

"I would like to assure the Committee that I remain committed to delivering a reduction in class contact time for our teachers. This commitment was made in response to one of the core recommendations of the OECD review of Curriculum for Excellence, and reducing class contact time will benefit both teachers and children and young people.

"The external analysis and research exercise that I have commissioned (the audit) will help inform our thinking on this. This work is due to conclude early in the New Year. I want to ensure that we have an education workforce in place that enables us to progress our commitments to raising attainment overall, closing the poverty related attainment gap and improving additional support for learning while also delivering maximum value for money, and this work will be vital to informing that. In the meantime we will continue our discussions with the Scottish Negotiating Committee for Teachers on how best we can progress the vital commitment to reducing class contact time."

The initial results of the teacher census were published in December and this found that teacher numbers fell by 160 FTE between 2022 and 2023. This is a 0.3% decrease.

The Schools Unitary Charges line covers revenue funding commitments to local authorities for Scotland's Schools for the Future programme (SSF) and outcomes-based funding payments for Learning Estate Investment Programme (LEIP) projects. Under the current LEIP projects, local authorities fund the construction of schools. The Scottish Government's contribution supports ongoing 'lifecycle and maintenance' costs of the new schools built under this programme. This line is likely to continue to increase in future years as more schools are completed under this programme. How the outcomes-based element of LEIP works in practice is not clear.

The Teachers Pay line of £242m is new for 2024-25 budget. This is "funding to support our teaching profession by delivering the historic pay deal for our teachers, which has a cumulative value of 14.6% over 28 months." This new line of £242m is nearly double the

total year on year increase in resource funding in the Cabinet Secretary’s portfolio which is £128m. The Cabinet Secretary’s letter to the Committee noted that meeting the cost of the pay deal has been supported both by “reprofiling” her budget and through additional resource. She said that the pay deal will contribute to outcomes by helping “to both recruit and retain highly skilled professionals.”

These data are comparing budgets to budgets. Funding of this magnitude is expected to be provided to local authorities in the current financial year but was not wholly included in the budget process last year. The Government [published a paper with details of the Autumn Budget Revision in November](#) and this contained useful information on the funding of the teachers’ pay deal. The total expected funding for the teachers’ pay deal in 2023-24 is £237.8m. Of this: £50m was included as part of the £140m contribution to Local Government Pay at 2023-24 Scottish Budget; £109.5m was transferred into local authorities’ GRG through the Autumn Budget Revision and further £78.3m is expected to be transferred into the GRG in the Spring revision. As of November, the Government said that £52.5m is being held in the Learning line to be transferred in the Spring revisions, the remaining £25.8m would be “funded through savings, reprioritisations and improved funding position by [the Spring Budget Revision]”.

Given all of the £242m will be provided to local authorities in-year to pay their staff, it is not clear why this money is presented in the Cabinet Secretary’s portfolio, rather than being base-lined into local government’s GRG.

Education reform

This Level 2 line includes three Level 3 lines:

- Curriculum
- Education Reform
- Gaelic

Curriculum

	£m		
	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
	Resource	Resource	Resource
Curriculum	30.8	30.9	30.0

There is only one Level 4 line under Curriculum. This supports “a range of work across the Curriculum for Excellence and includes funding to remove core curriculum charges.” The small reduction is due to “consolidation and remodelling of some curriculum programmes and operating cost reduction due to workforce efficiencies.” Of this money, £8m will be transferred to local authorities for “Removal of Curriculum Charges” and £12m for “Removal of Music Tuition Charges”. These amounts have not been updated to account for inflation and are the same as in 2022-23.

Education reform

£m

	2022-23		2023-24		2024-25	
	Resource	Capital	Resource	Capital	Resource	Capital
Schools Reform	4.6	0.0	12.7	0.0	12.2	0.0
SQA Development /Accommodation Costs	3.4	0.0	3.4	0.0	3.6	0.0
Scottish Qualifications Authority	18.9	0.0	18.8	0.0	18.8	0.0
Scottish Qualifications Authority - Capital	0.0	2.5	0.0	2.5	0.0	3.9
Total	26.9	2.5	35.0	2.5	34.6	3.9

There has not been a great deal of movement in funding in cash terms year on year under Education Reform. The small decrease in schools reform will be achieved through “workforce efficiencies”. The flat cash settlement for the SQA suggests that any cost of living increases for its staff will have to be met from existing budgets – but this is not set out in the Scottish Government’s budget documentation.

Gaelic

£m

	2022-23		2023-24		2024-25	
	Resource	Capital	Resource	Capital	Resource	Capital
Bòrd na Gàidhlig (Alba)	5.1	-	5.1	-	5.1	-
Gaelic Indirect Capital	-	3.0	-	4.0	-	4.0
Gaelic Schools	1.0	-	1.0	-	1.0	-
Gaelic Broadcasting	13.1	-	13.1	-	12.6	-
Gaelic Education, Culture and Arts	2.2	-	2.2	-	1.7	-
Scots Language Development	0.3	-	0.3	-	0.3	-
Gaelic Development	0.5	-	0.5	-	0.5	-
Total	22.1	3.0	22.1	4.0	21.1	4.0

The table above shows that the budget for 2024-25 will reduce by £1m compared to 2023-24 and 2022-23. £500k of this cost saving is in Gaelic Broadcasting which among other things, supports MG Alba and contributes to BBC Alba. The reduction is expected to be achieved through “operating cost reduction due to workforce efficiencies.” The other line where there is a reduction is in “Gaelic Education, Culture and Arts” this line “supports the Gaelic activities of Sabhal Mòr Ostaig and Storlann which is the national centre producing support for pupils, parents and teachers in Gaelic education”. No explanation was given for this reduction.

In addition to the budgets above, there is a separate £4.5m ringfenced grant shared across 27 local authorities to deliver Gaelic education. This grant has not been updated and is the same as in 2022-23.

Again, it is not clear how the Bòrd na Gàidhlig will pay for any cost-of-living increases for its staff.

Education Scotland

The core budget for Education Scotland, which covers staffing costs is £22.5m which is the same in cash terms as in 2023-24 and 2022-23. There is a separate “Other” line at Level 4. There is not a great deal of detail on this line – it is described as funding to support “the Government’s desire to ensure excellence and equity across the education system”. The resource spending under the “Other” line is £5.0m in 2024-25, the same in cash terms as in 2023-24.

Early learning and Childcare, school aged childcare and holiday meals

The key change to funding in Early Learning and Childcare is that the ringfenced grant for the expansion of ELC has been baselined into local authorities’ GRG. The budget documents for 2024-25 helpfully show data of budgets in 2023-24 and 2022-23. What had been £521.9m listed in the Education and Skills budgets in previous years is presented as part of the local government GRG – i.e. one does not see a large drop in Education and Skills just because the budget line has moved.

The ring-fenced grant had remained static in cash terms from 2021-22 to 2023-24 and local authorities’ contributions towards funding pre-primary education had increased in that period. The shift away from ringfenced monies in this circumstance is in line with the Verity House agreement.

There remains some budget lines within the Cabinet Secretary’s portfolio which are related to ELC policy. The Early Learning and Childcare level 3 Line sits under “Children and Families”. The table below sets out the funding for this area.

Early Learning and Childcare

£m

	2022-23		2023-24		2024-25	
	Resource	Capital	Resource	Capital	Resource	Capital
ELC Expansion	23.8	-	10.4	-	26.2	5.5
School Age Childcare	31.8	-	36.3	5.0	14.5	5.5
Holiday Meal Alternative	-	-	-	-	21.8	-
Total	55.6	-	46.7	5.0	62.5	11.0

The increase in the resource budget under the line “ELC Expansion” of £15.9m¹ is due to “additional funding to deliver the commitment to pay £12/hour” for staff in the PVI sector. It is not clear why this is listed here rather than being added to Local Government’s GRG as it is likely to be a continuing cost.

School Age Childcare funds the policy development to create year-round school age childcare which is to be targeted at low-income families. The apparent reduction in the resource for that line is because the Holiday Meal Alternative had previously been included and this year has been separated out. The Holiday Meal Alternative provides funding for local authorities to provide (normally) cash or vouchers during the holidays to families of pupils who are statutorily eligible for free school meals (e.g. through the receipt of qualifying benefits, not through the universal offer). The sum of the resource allocation in 2024-25 for School Age Childcare and the Holiday Meal Alternative is almost the same as the equivalent in 2023-24.

The Government does not set out what the £11m of capital funding will support. The Cabinet Secretary’s response to the Committee’s pre-budget report gave an update on school aged childcare. She said—

“In the last year we have made good progress on our work to build a system of School Age Childcare, including delivering a range of funded school age childcare services targeted towards the priority families as set out in Best Start, Bright Futures. This has included focused work in early adopter communities, access to childcare projects and a partnership with the Scottish Football Association delivering around 3800 places. We have also carried out a literature review and audit of service provision for children aged 0-3 which we expect to publish soon, alongside carrying out engagement with key stakeholders.”

The Committee’s pre-budget report recommended that—

“Given the pressure on local government budgets and with inflation remaining high, the Committee believes that when providing directed or ring-fenced funds to local authorities, the Scottish Government should be clear on how it will uprate these funds for subsequent years.”

The Cabinet Secretary’s response focused on the previously ringfenced grant for ELC expansion. She said that the grant had reflected the costs of delivery. However, it is not clear what the position is in other areas. For example, the reducing spending power of flat

¹ Does not sum with the data in the table due to rounding.

cash PEF and SAC funding or whether the Government expects local authorities not to uprate holiday meal alternatives in line with inflation.

Sustainable rates

On [20 December 2023, the Government published its latest report on the funding and support provided by local authorities to the PVI sector.](#)

This found that the average hourly rate paid to the PVI sector for 3-5 year olds in 2022-23 was £5.80 and for 2 year olds the average was £6.43 per hour.

The average hourly rate paid for 3-5 year olds in 2022-23 was 6.6% higher than when rates were reported in August 2021. Overall it found—

- The average rate paid has increased by 57.6% for the delivery of funded ELC to 3-5 year olds, from £3.68 per hour to £5.80 per hour;
- The gap narrowed between the highest and lowest sustainable rate paid for the delivery of funded hours to 3-5 year olds, from 40.5% in 2017-18 to 21.5% in 2022-23

As with a number of other reports, this publication highlighted some of the tensions between the PVI sector and local authorities. It said—

“On one hand, the majority of council officers we spoke to were confident that the rates they were paying were sustainable. ... it was reported that they had seen very little evidence of funded services in the private, third or childminding sectors reporting to them that they had been under financial duress or of services closing due to financial sustainability pressures. A number of local authorities also reported they were taking some reassurance from the numbers of applications they had received from new providers to enter into funded provision.

“Most funded providers who engaged with the review process had a different view – a significant proportion did not think the rate they received in 2022-23 met their current costs of delivery, including meeting the substantial increases in the real Living Wage (with an increase of 10.1% announced in September 2022) and general cost increases. They also highlighted that, in their view, the rate did not provide them with adequate resources to provide quality ELC over the longer term.”

Local Government

Local Government is central to the development and delivery of a range of services in education and children’s services. Therefore the overall budget settlements for local authorities have an impact on the delivery of services and achieving outcomes in areas of the Committee’s and Cabinet Secretary’s remits.

COSLA’s response to the budget stated—

“The Scottish Government has delivered a major blow to communities and has put councils at financial risk with a cash cut to Local Government in its draft Budget (published on 19th December) and no provision for inflation or pay increases, COSLA said.

“COSLA Leaders described the draft Budget as not only leaving councils at real and significant financial risk for the coming year, but as it stands, it will mean cuts in every community in Scotland and job losses across Scottish Local Government.

“Following a full meeting of Council Leaders today (Thursday) COSLA said that whatever way the Government presents the figures, the reality is that once again the people in our communities have been left at the end of the queue. That is why we are calling for urgent discussions with Scottish government to ensure a meaningful negotiation on the budget takes place before the final budget is presented to Parliament.”

The following text is an edited extract from SPICe’s overall budget briefing on the 2024-25 Budget.

Local government

The local government element of the budget is always one of the most fraught, and complicated, parts of the annual budget process. It is the second largest spending area in the Scottish Budget, after health, and helps fund vital services such as school education, social care, roads, parks, leisure and culture facilities, community and economic development, planning, environment, and so much more. But local government is not a delivery agent of the Scottish Government, albeit that's where most of its budget comes from. Rather, councils have their own democratic mandates and local priorities which they are accountable to their electorates for delivering.

There are two factors which make this year's discussions different to previous years. Firstly, this Budget is published only five months after the [Verity House Agreement](#) (VHA), signed between the Scottish Government and COSLA. We therefore have some high-level principles in place – agreed by both parties - which we can measure spending decisions against. These include an assumption against ring-fencing, a commitment to sustainable public services and an agreement to the underlying principle of "no surprises" when it comes to budget discussions. This brings us to the second factor in play this year: the Scottish Government's surprise announcement of a [planned council tax freeze](#) at the SNP annual conference in October and the subsequent debate about what "fully funding" a freeze actually means.

This section summarises some of the changes to the local government settlement in 2024-25 compared to the 2023-24 Scottish Budget document. More detailed analysis of local government budget matters – including a summary of changes over time and discussion of allocations by local authority – will be available in a separate SPICe briefing due for publication in mid-January.

Revenue settlement

The following tables present figures from the Scottish Budget documents for both 2023-24 and 2024-25. This is to ensure we compare like-for-like between the two years. There may well be changes to the 2024-25 local government allocation between now and March when the Local Government Finance Order is finalised. Likewise, there are likely to have been in-year changes made to the 2023-24 settlement which the following tables do not capture.

The tables below show a cash increase of 6.8%, or 5% real-terms, in the total local government revenue settlement when compared to the 2023-24 Budget. This is the largest year-on-year increase to the local government settlement seen for over a decade.

Local Government revenue settlements 2023-24 and 2024-25 (Cash terms) (£m)

Local Government (Revenue)	2023-24 Budget document	2024-25 Budget document	Cash change (£m)	Cash change %
General Revenue Grant	7,133.9	8,403.9	+1,270.0	+17.8%
Non-Domestic Rates	3,047.0	3,068.0	+21.0	+0.7%
Specific (ring-fenced) Resource Grants	752.1	238.8	-513.3	-68.2%
Revenue within other portfolios	1,471.8	1,534.4	+62.6	+4.3%
Total revenue settlement	12,404.8	13,245.1	840.3	+6.8%

Local Government revenue settlements 2023-24 and 2024-25 Real terms (2023-24 prices) (£m)

Local Government (Revenue)	2023-24 Budget document	2024-25 Budget document	Real change (£m)	Real change %
General Revenue Grant	7,133.9	8,265.3	+1,131.4	+15.9%
Non-Domestic Rates	3,047.0	3,017.4	-29.6	-1.0%
Specific (ring-fenced) Resource Grants	752.1	234.86	-517.2	-68.8%
Revenue within other portfolios	1,471.8	1,509.1	+37.3	+2.5%
Total revenue settlement	12,404.8	13,026.6	621.8	+5.0%

The above tables show a significant increase in the General Revenue Grant (GRG) and a big reduction in the Specific Revenue Grant element of the revenue settlement compared to the 2023-24 Budget document. These changes are partly explained by the shifting of £521.9m of previously ring-fenced funding for Early Learning and Childcare Expansion into the GRG. The reduction in ring-fencing is discussed below but will be seen as a positive

development for local authorities, giving them greater discretion over how they spend their budget. Furthermore, an additional £120.6 million has been switched from the capital to revenue budget in 2024-25, to help fund local government pay deals, and this has also contributed to the increase in GRG compared to 2023-24.

These tables also show an increase in the amount of revenue being transferred to local government from other portfolios, mainly relating to education and social care policies. There is always debate over the extent to which this money is ring-fenced or directed.

Ring-fencing and in-year transfers

The Budget document tells us that reducing ring-fencing is part of the post-[Verity House Agreement](#) relationship between the Scottish Government and local government:

"[the Budget] displays our commitment to that partnership by reducing levels of ringfenced and directed expenditure by baselining almost £1 billion of funding across Health, Education, Justice, Net Zero and Social Justice, giving authority and autonomy to local partners to achieve the outcomes we share in a way that best meets the needs of local communities."

The £1 billion figure quoted above comprises previously ring-fenced Early Learning and Childcare Expansion grant (£521.9 million) plus a number of funds previously transferred from other portfolios in-year (combined £429 million). These, according to the Budget document, have been "baselined" into the General Revenue Grant in 2024-25. This goes some way to explaining the big increase seen in the General Revenue Grant in the tables above.

Lynne Currie, Senior Researcher (FE/HE, Children's social work, child protection and adoption) and Ned Sharratt, Senior Researcher (Education, Culture), SPICe Research

12 January 2024

Note: Committee briefing papers are provided by SPICe for the use of Scottish Parliament committees and clerking staff. They provide focused information or respond to specific questions or areas of interest to committees and are not intended to offer comprehensive coverage of a subject area.

The Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP www.parliament.scot

Appendix – School education data

As well as the budget, December also sees a number of publications in relation to school education. In December 2023, the Government published—

- [Achievement of Curriculum for Excellence \(CfE\) levels: 2022/23](#)
- [Summary statistics for schools in Scotland 2023](#)
- The latest (normally) triennial [PISA results were published on 5 December](#).

The Government also published the [National Improvement Framework and improvement plan 2024](#) which reflects on some of the data in the releases listed above, and sets out the actions in the coming year to deliver improvements. Separately the Government published data on the [Scottish Attainment Challenge - Local stretch Aims: 2023/24 to 2025/26](#).

All of these documents contain a wealth of information. Only brief headlines are presented here.

Achievement of CfE levels

ACEL is based on teachers' judgements of their pupils' achievements. The national publication provides information on performance in literacy and numeracy, based on all pupils in publicly funded Primary 1, Primary 4, Primary 7 and Secondary 3 classes, and for all pupils based in special schools/units. This found—

“The percentage of pupils achieving the expected CfE Level has increased in 2022/23 across all organisers and stages, as compared to 2021/22. For P1, P4 and P7 combined both literacy and numeracy have risen slightly above 2018/19 levels whilst for S3 (Third Level or better) they remain slightly lower.”

Summary statistics for schools in Scotland 2023

This document is the early release of data from the Pupil and Teacher censuses, along with information on ELC. More detailed data from the Pupil and Teacher censuses is normally published in March.

The headline findings in terms of teachers and pupils was—

“In 2023 there was a decrease in the number of pupils and in teacher full-time equivalents (FTE). However, as both these changes were relatively small the pupil teacher ratio (PTR), which gives a measure of the size of the teaching workforce relative to the pupil population, remained at 13.2 after rounding.

“Teacher numbers increased in the secondary sector and for centrally employed but the combined decreases in primary, special and ELC sectors were large enough to result in a reduction in teacher FTE overall. There was a decrease in both teachers and pupils in the primary sector and the primary PTR remained at 15.3. In secondary schools there was an increase in both teachers and pupils. The increase in secondary pupils was slightly higher proportionally than the increase in secondary teachers meaning there was an increase in pupils per teacher which resulted in the secondary PTR increasing from 12.4 to 12.5.”

National Improvement Framework and Improvement Plan and Local Stretch Aims

The National Improvement Framework and Improvement Plan reflects on progress in achieving the overall aims of (mainly) school education in Scotland and also sets out the plans for the year ahead.

In terms of measuring the attainment gap, the NIF now reports on 13 measures (up from 11 previously). These are—

- 27-30 month review (children showing no concerns across all domains)
- Two Health and Wellbeing measures: Children total difficulties score at ages 4-12 and at ages 13 & 15
- Four measures of literacy and numeracy in primary and secondary schools using the Achievement of CfE Levels (ACEL)
- Three school-leaver measures, having at least one qualification at SCQF Levels 4, 5 and 6 on leaving school
- 16-19 year olds participating in education, training or employment
- School Attendance
- Initial Positive destination

Data on all of these measures can be found online in the [NIF interactive dashboard](#). A number of these measures show progress in closing the poverty-related attainment gap (e.g. Participation Measure and All Positive Destinations), in some others there is a more mixed picture (e.g. one qualification at SCQF Levels 4, 5 and 6 on leaving school), and in the Attendance measure the gap is growing.

This session, the Government refreshed its approach to the Scottish Attainment Challenge and part of this was a requirement for local authorities to set “ambitious but achievable stretch aims for progress in overall attainment and in closing the poverty-related attainment gap in the 2022/23 academic year across a sub-set of the 13 National Improvement Framework measures of the poverty-related attainment gap.” New aims have been set for the three-year period of 2023/24 to 2025/26.

PISA

The Programme for International Student Assessment is a, normally, triennial exercise which assesses maths, science and reading of 15 year olds across OECD countries and beyond. The last PISA assessment was due in 2021 but was delayed by the pandemic. The 2022 assessments took place across 81 OECD Member and partner economies. Nearly 700,000 students took the PISA test in 2022.

The [Scottish Government's social research department published analysis](#) on the PISA results for Scotland on 7 December. It is important to note that PISA is a sample survey and the scores presented are estimates. The data presented is quite dense and therefore only

the headline findings are highlighted here. On the overall performance the analysis stated—

“Scotland's overall performance in 2022 was lower than in 2018 in mathematics and reading, and similar in science. The OECD average for mathematics and reading also fell, with 31 OECD countries achieving a lower score in mathematics than in 2018.”

Under each of the domains, the headline findings were

- Scotland's mean score in **mathematics** in 2022 was similar to the OECD average and was lower than all previous PISA cycles (2003-2018).
- Scotland's mean score in **reading** in 2022 was higher than the OECD average. It was similar to 2006, 2009, 2012 and 2015 and lower than 2000, 2003 and 2018.
- Scotland's mean score in **science** in 2022 was similar to the OECD average. Scotland's mean score was similar to 2018, but lower than PISA cycles 2006-2015

PISA also includes questionnaires for schools and pupils. In terms of wellbeing, the analysis highlighted—

“In PISA 2022, students in Scotland were more likely than in PISA 2018 to agree that they feel like they belong at school, and less likely to report experience of bullying acts. However, they were more likely than in 2018 to report having skipped a day of school recently.”

Education, Children and Young People Committee

17 January 2024

Education Reform

Introduction

In autumn, the Committee took evidence from several panels on education reform. The Committee heard from

- [Professor Louise Hayward and colleagues on the Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment, 20 September 2023](#)
- [Academics and experts on 8 November 2023](#)
- [School leaders and their representatives on 15 November 2023](#)
- [James Withers on his review of the skills delivery landscape, also on 15 November.](#)

This work builds on work the Committee has undertaken earlier in the session when the Committee took evidence from:

- [OECD team on 8 September 2021.](#)
- Professor Gordon Stobart attended [Committee on 10 November 2021](#) on his paper for the OECD, [Upper-secondary education student assessment in Scotland – A comparative perspective.](#)
- [Professor Ken Muir, 23 March 2022](#)

Education reform has been a constant within the school education system for many years. Reform in the current session of parliament has been framed around the conclusions of the OECD's 2021 report, [Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence Into The Future](#). The purpose of the OECD's work was to explore "how the curriculum is being designed and implemented in schools and to identify areas for improvement across the country."

The processes of reform have a number of areas of focus. Central to most of this work is the process of ensuring that schools and teachers have the support, the structures, the capacity and the agency to enact the Curriculum for Excellence. Alongside this is a focus

to reduce the poverty related attainment gap and to support pupils with additional support needs.

Following the OECD review, the [Scottish Government announced that it would abolish the SQA and separate the inspection functions from the functions of Education Scotland](#). It then commissioned Professor Ken Muir to undertake a review of how to take that decision forward. The Government also commissioned a review of school qualifications. These actions reflected some of the recommendations in the 2021 OECD report. Further details of the Government's work to take forward the range of recommendations in the 2021 OECD review were included in [an Implementation Framework](#) and the Scottish Government provided an update to the Committee on a number of these actions [in a letter to the Committee in October](#).

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills gave a statement to Parliament on Tuesday 7 November 2023. This set out the next steps in the government's reform process. This included a consultation on a future bill which is intended to replace the SQA and change the inspectorate. Another statement on 12 December set out plans to review the curriculum.

At this meeting, the Committee will hear from the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills. This paper sets out some of the themes from the evidence sessions in autumn.

An empowered system and collaboration

Much of the work to reform school education in the last parliamentary session sought to “empower” professionals and to support greater collaboration.

The 2015 OECD report, [Improving schools in Scotland, an OECD Perspective](#), argued that collaboration is a necessary part of CfE but that “there needs to be clarity about the kinds of collaboration that work best to bring about the innovations and improvements to enhance student learning, and to create coherent and cohesive cultures of system-wide collaboration”. (p17)

The 2015 review was also concerned with strengthening the “middle”; this broadly was referring to the structures that sit between the classroom and national policy. The 2021 OECD report noted that—

“Empowerment is a process that requires trust between decision makers and stakeholders: it takes time to take root, as well as resources and support, as the stakeholders empower themselves and develop the necessary capabilities, expertise and self-confidence to fulfil their mission.” (p79)

The International Council of Education Advisors' (“ICEA”) recent report highlighted “the importance of collaboration among teachers and schools and the need to develop coherent networks to support innovation and improvement across the system.” This, the ICEA argues, is necessary to enable knowledge, expertise and ideas to move around the system. The ICEA Report continued—

“It is crucial that such collaborative working is not a blind act of faith. Rather, activity must be underpinned by systematic enquiry to ensure that evidence informs developments rather than replicating uninformed or out-of-date practice. Building a Scottish Networked Learning System that promotes working across boundaries and is driven by evidence will ensure that all teachers have access to the very best professional learning and resources to impact on pupil achievement.”

The ICEA's recommendations in this area suggest that the government facilitates collaboration that is being led by teachers for teachers. It also recommended that the government invests in "the technological architecture to support teacher collaboration across curricula, organisational, geographical and professional boundaries".

James Withers told the Committee that there needs to be greater coherence and collaboration at the national level. He said—

"There is a natural duplication in the system. It is born not of any bad intent but of a system that has been allowed to evolve, is fragmented and does not collaborate as tightly as it could, as well as a lack of political direction to shape the system." (OR 15 November 2023, col 50)

In 2018, the Scottish Government and COSLA agreed a joint agreement on Education Reform. This was predicated on the introduction of a reform bill being introduced that year. That bill, however, was subsequently not introduced, and the government sought to achieve its aims administratively. Shortly afterwards, a suite of guidance materials on [creating an "empowered system"](#) were issued by Education Scotland. This included [the headteachers' charter](#) as well as guidance on [Empowering School Leaders](#). The headteachers' charter stated—

"In an empowered system headteachers and Local Authorities are partners, each contributing and supporting each other and respecting the different role each plays."

The Committee was told by headteachers on 15 November that there is a mixed picture across the country in relation to the freedom and support headteachers receive. Barry Graham said that the system is at its best "when you give headteachers the room, the resources and the time to be creative". ([OR 15 November 2023](#)). [Peter Bain from SLS said:](#)

"My local authority gives me a very high degree of autonomy and responsibility within the constraints of management circulars, local authority policies and, obviously, Scottish Government policy. I have the freedom to work with people in my local community to develop a curriculum that is appropriate for them. ... Through SLS, our members tell us that curricular constraints are placed on them, with local authority management teams having a strong veto on their curriculum. The problem concerns why that veto exists and why they use it."

[Greg Dempster from AHDS said—](#)

"The AHDS does a workload survey each year, and we ask members about the empowerment agenda and how they feel about each of the four dimensions of that agenda: curriculum, improvement, staffing and resources and funding. On both curriculum and improvement, the vast majority of respondents—way up at about 80 or 90 per cent—say that they have an adequate degree of freedom in relation to those areas of their work or, rather, an appropriate degree of autonomy—those are the words that we use in the survey. When it comes to staffing and budgets, the picture is very different. Well over 60 per cent of members say that they do not have an appropriate degree of autonomy when it comes to staffing, and there is a slightly less negative picture—although it is still a very negative one—in relation to funding."

School-level spending decisions

Curriculum leadership at a local level may also entail or require resource allocation decisions. There has been a longstanding policy aim that schools have a significant level of autonomy over their budgets. Devolved School Management (DSM) was introduced in 1993 to enhance and improve the management of resources at school level. 2019 DSM Guidance stated—

“DSM must provide headteachers and schools with the autonomy and flexibility to ensure decisions are made at the most appropriate level. Local Authorities should, within their DSM scheme, provide headteachers with clear information about which areas of expenditure are delegated to them. Whilst headteachers should have flexibility in the budgets required to operate and administer a school, there are also areas of expenditure that are not generally considered suitable for devolution to schools.”

The guidance lists those areas which are generally considered unsuitable for devolution to school-level. These include: costs in relation to the school estate (e.g., PPI, capital costs, maintenance); school meals, EMA and clothing grants; and corporate support function costs for example finance, HR, and legal functions.

The [local government finance statistics reflecting the annual accounts of local authorities for the year 2021-22](#) reported that 65% of all gross expenditure on schools in that year was “devolved”.

However, again, the Committee heard from representatives of headteachers that the implementation of the national guidance varies across different local authorities. [Mr Bain told the Committee](#) that while his local authority provided significant freedom, “more than 50 per cent of local authorities have constrained the Scottish Government’s devolved school management guidance to the extent that they dictate the staffing formulas and resource budgets, which, in turn, restricts a headteacher’s ability to use the autonomy and empowerment that were supposed to have been granted to everyone.”

The [current operational guidance](#) says—

“Headteachers will have access to their school’s full allocated amount of Pupil Equity Funding and should work in partnership with each other, and their local authority, to agree the use of funding. Local authorities should not ‘top slice’ Pupil Equity Funding. Any additional corporate costs should be reasonable, proportionate, and taken in consultation with, and with the agreement of, headteachers.”

[Graham Hutton from SLS told the Committee in November](#)—

“In my role as general secretary, I am hearing concerning stories of authorities where PEF money has been top sliced by 10 or even 15 per cent to fill in gaps in the other budget and the cost of the school day money or curriculum money—which are supposed to cover home economics, art and design, techie and drama—so that young people do not have to pay any more for their supplies, such as food and wood. That money is not going out to schools. It has been put out by the Scottish Government, but it is not reaching schools. That is a concern.”

Culture and capacity

Central to much of the work to support implementation of CfE is ensuring that schools and teachers have the support, structures, capacity and agency they need to enact the Curriculum for Excellence.

The ICEA's recent report reiterated its view that there should be a balance between structural change, cultural change, and capacity building. It has suggested that there should be more attention on "cultural change and capacity building, especially amid significant structural change." (p3)

Professor Humes suggested that culture change is a long-term endeavour and should start at the top and there should be a distribution of power. He suggested that Scottish education has had "a lack of intellectual leadership" and suggested that there is a "cosy conformity" within policy-making circles (8 November 2023, col 16).

Professor Humes also stated that culture at a school-level could change. He said teachers should be encouraged to ask "why questions ... why are we doing this". He also said that teachers should also be encouraged to be creative, experimental and innovative (8 November 2023, col 24).

The 2021 OECD report noted that teachers and school leaders "are committed to varied teaching approaches for student learning and have proven their ability to develop schools' own curricula". The report continued "curriculum design and continuous improvement require time and professional investment, which schools can only achieve with ongoing support from the system." (p12) It stated—

"Scotland made great progress in developing and supporting teachers' capacity to be curriculum makers, and the capacity of school leaders to lead the curriculum process in their schools. This work has become challenging for schools considering the multiple new policy initiatives; and Scotland's comparatively high rate of teachers' class contact time and its expectations for teachers to lead and plan curriculum locally." (p12)

The 2021 OECD report found evidence that there are strengths in the professional support for teachers and school leaders. It also found that school leaders have strong networks. It also reported that "school leaders see their role as interpreting the policy context for their school to ensure that the school and the teachers are protected from policy incoherence and overload". (p98)

The Cabinet Secretary announced at the SNP's autumn conference that she intended to establish a Centre of Teaching Excellence. Speaking to Parliament in November, the Cabinet Secretary said—

"We know that excellent teaching is already happening in schools across Scotland. Children and young people are achieving and the attainment gap is narrowing, but more must be done to support the profession. [The new centre of teaching excellence will] fill an important gap in our national approach to education. It will help us to remain at the cutting edge of teaching practice by distilling research and evidence into practical support for teachers in our classrooms.

"I anticipate that the centre will be hosted by a university, learning from the successful model of [CELCIS], and working closely with the Scottish Council of

Deans of Education. Being hosted by a university, the centre will link the school sector with the university sector at national level.

“... Crucially, however, the centre must be designed with our teachers. Indeed, the centre needs to help school leaders and teachers to grow professionally throughout their careers.”

Time is key resource for both teachers and school leaders. The government intends to reduce teachers' class contact time by 90 minutes per week to 21 hours. Any changes to teachers' terms and conditions will need to be agreed by the [Scottish Negotiating Committee for Teachers](#) and there have been reports that there has been [little progress on this commitment](#).

Dr Marina Shapira reflected on research she had undertaken on the impact of curriculum policy on choice, attainment and destinations in Scotland. She told the Committee—

“From what we learned from the findings from our study, it does not seem that teachers' capacity has increased or been improved. Teachers are overworked and are complaining about lack of non-contact hours to do anything other than go into the classrooms and teach. To us, that is one of the keys—increasing resources and then allowing the teacher to have more non-contact time—if we want teachers to be able to use their agency and actively participate in curriculum-making and improving learning for students. We did not find visible improvements compared with what it was [previously].” (8 November 2023, Col 30)

Delivering or enacting the curriculum

Curriculum for Excellence is intended to be developed locally by practitioners and school leaders. The learning is intended to reflect the communities in which the schools sit. Therefore, the curriculum may look different in one place to another. It also means that, to a large degree, in BGE particularly, the curriculum is created at the level of schools – not nationally. In these circumstances, the curriculum and the delivery or enactment of the curriculum are not necessarily distinct concepts.

The [Scottish Government published an Implementation Framework](#) which said that the government would adopt the OECD's [implementation framework for effective change in schools](#). In this, the OECD noted that “policy reforms do not always translate into concrete actions and visible results in schools, however well designed they may be ... effective education change requires recognising that implementation is as important as the policy design itself, and is in fact a key aspect of the policy success in reaching schools and classrooms”.

The ambition or the philosophy of CfE is well-supported and has been reflected in the evidence the committee heard. Dr Scott said that the philosophy was “bang on” (8 November 2023, col 1). Professor Stobart noted that CfE “has been widely respected internationally” and was considered “ahead of the game”. However, he caveated this view and said, “CFE was admired from a distance at a general level, but nobody asked too many questions about implementation and what the teachers did or how they felt. It was a noble ambition without going into the details of it in the classroom.” (cols 6 and 7)

Professor Walter Humes said that in his view, CfE, when introduced, the policy lacked clarity – it was “under-conceptualised” (col 2). Dr Shapira said that “there were lots of

issues with the implementation of its aims” and (col 3) and Dr Scott suggested that the issues with implementation were affected by the tightening of public finances in the 2010s.

The 2021 OECD report identified a number of tensions in the delivery of CfE. These were:

- Tensions found between local curriculum flexibility and the need for coherence to achieve system-wide objectives
- Tensions in the understandings of breadth and depth of learning
- Tensions in the conceptualisation of knowledge, skills and competencies
- Tensions between curriculum, student assessment and evaluation (p34)

A paper by Professors Chris Chapman and Graeme Donaldson published in March 2023, [Where Next for Scottish Education, Learning is Scotland’s Future?](#), said—

“Education systems are complex, messy, and often inflexible. They are composed of a diverse range of stakeholders including learners, parents, the profession, business, and local and national government. Of all public services, it has been claimed that education systems are the toughest to reform.”

Dr Janet Ross told the Committee that it is important to consider and learn from how CfE has been implemented in a holistic manner. In moving forward with reform, she suggested it is important to consider the range of areas which have been highlighted. She said—

“We have a brilliant learning scenario in how we implemented CfE; we just need to be honest and willing to say what really has worked and what has not, and not just focus on one area. After all, if you look at the OECD reports, you will see that they highlighted several areas that needed change. However, we tend to focus on only one or two such areas; they can drive the system, but they will not be a solution to the whole thing. This is about learning from the past ... it is about thinking about how we do this and engaging across the piece.” (8 November 2023, col 24).

The OECD suggested implementation should balance “traditional top-down implementation processes with more bottom-up approaches”. It suggests that an effective implementation strategy needs to:

“align and communicate three key dimensions and make them actionable in a coherent way:

- Smart policy design
- Inclusive stakeholder engagement
- Conducive environment”

The first and fourth tensions the OECD highlight in terms of local flexibility and assessment respectively are covered in more depth elsewhere in this paper. Here the focus will be on knowledge and the tensions between breadth and depth.

Knowledge

The 2021 OECD report referred to its own Future of Education and Skills 2030 project which describes the integration of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values as competencies.

[This said](#)—

“The concept of competency implies more than just the acquisition of knowledge and skills; it involves the mobilisation of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values to meet complex demands. Future-ready students will need both broad and specialised knowledge. Disciplinary knowledge will continue to be important, as the raw material from which new knowledge is developed, together with the capacity to think across the boundaries of disciplines and “connect the dots”. Epistemic knowledge, or knowledge about the disciplines, such as knowing how to think like a mathematician, historian or scientist, will also be significant, enabling students to extend their disciplinary knowledge. Procedural knowledge is acquired by understanding how something is done or made – the series of steps or actions taken to accomplish a goal. Some procedural knowledge is domain-specific, some transferable across domains. It typically develops through practical problem-solving, such as through design thinking and systems thinking.

The panels the Committee has heard from have not touched on the epistemic knowledge identified by the OECD. There have been discussions on the balance of propositional knowledge (e.g. facts) and procedural knowledge (e.g. skills) as well as interdisciplinary learning.

Professor Humes suggested that there had been an overcorrection from the Scottish curriculum being too focused on propositional knowledge at the expense of skills to CfE not being clear enough on how knowledge is considered in the curriculum. (col 9) Professor Stobart said—

“We do not learn in a vacuum; we need to learn about things. There was a move in learning whereby it was as though you could learn without any content. In my book, that is just not how it works. We need to have mastery of information, facts and basics in order to be able to think about them and use them. We need that kind of deeper learning. It is a combination of asking the question, “What do we need to learn now?” and the fact that we need to learn something. It should not be a case of, “We know how to do things, but we do not know anything.”” (Col 9)

Pauline Walker from SLS told the Committee on 15 November 2023—

“There is a lot of national guidance and documentation to support us, particularly for the senior phase. It is a little bit fuzzy for the BGE. Things can vary from school to school, although they tend not to, because we collaborate. There could be more national guidance for the BGE: we cannot develop skills without content and knowledge, so what content and knowledge should be in there? That area is much wider and more skills-based.” (col 8)

The OECD recommended that Scotland adopts “a systematic curriculum review cycle with a planned timeframe and specific review agenda”. The Cabinet Secretary’s letter to the Committee in October 2023 provided an update of some work looking at curriculum areas—

“Co-design and pilot curriculum review groups involving a total of more than 500 teachers and educators, local authority representatives and senior leaders are

involved in the work. Initial pilot curriculum reviews were held in three curriculum areas (Maths, Health and Wellbeing and Social Subjects) in session 22/23 with follow up sessions planned in these areas for 23/24. An additional three curriculum area reviews in Modern Languages, Expressive Arts and English are planned for session 23/24.”

In her statement to Parliament on 12 December 2023, the Cabinet Secretary stated that in 2024 the Scottish Government will begin a curriculum improvement cycle. She said—

“This will include curriculum content, the role of knowledge, transitions between primary and secondary and alignment between the broad general education (BGE) and senior phase.”

Breadth of choice in secondary

The OECD noted that breadth and depth can be interpreted in different ways. The focus of the evidence the Committee has heard has been around the timetabling of subjects in secondary school. Dr Marina Shapira along with Professor Mark [Dr Marina Shapira along with Professor Mark Priestley published research in February last year on the impact of curriculum policy on choice, attainment and destinations](#). This found, among other things—

- Overall, under CfE, a reduction in the number of National Qualifications entries in S4 compared to the period prior to the introduction of the new curriculum.
- A steeper decline in enrolments in subjects such as Social Subjects, Expressive Arts and Modern Languages, compared to subjects seen as core curriculum (e.g., Maths and English).
- Evidence of social stratification in overall and subject entry patterns in S4, with a steeper decline (e.g. fewer entries, a narrower range of subjects) affecting students from comparatively disadvantaged areas.
- Significant variation in the number of subjects studied in the BGE in secondary, both between schools and across different year groups.
- Evidence of the significant curricular fragmentation in many schools, with a large proportion of students being taught by over 15 teachers each week.

Dr Shapira told the Committee—

“We found some absolutely appalling practices such as channelling young people into higher-performing subjects, discouraging them from taking up subjects in which they were not predicted to perform well and abandoning whole subjects that were deemed to be low performing but that might have been very important for providing a holistic, well-rounded education. For us, the culture of performativity was one of the main issues standing in the way of the successful implementation of curriculum for excellence.” (Cols 3 and 4)

In terms of the subjects offered in the BGE phase of secondary education, Peter Bain from SLS said—

“Traditionally, across the board there might be youngsters in the BGE—secondary 1, S2 and S3, although some schools have gone away from using the BGE in S3—and

they would get roughly 13 to 15 subjects per week and have a period or a couple of periods of physical education, or something else, per week. That is very formulaic, and within it schools use whatever free resources or partners they have to add some interdisciplinary learning, spice, interest or project work to make it a bit more enjoyable, rather than just funnelling the kids around 13 to 15 subjects. However, sadly, funnelling is what happens in most schools in the country, so I suggest that we should reform the BGE at some stage soon.” (15 November 2023, col 9)

The panel of headteachers explained that they were focused on meeting the needs of their communities and pupils. Pauline Walker said—

“We can map a young person’s journey all the way from nursery to S6 and look at how they build skills, knowledge and qualifications on their way through. We can do that in general areas—for example, expressive arts, a maths pathway or a science pathway—and can make decisions to ensure that those pathways are supported. However, we will always have the random pathways that come out at the sides—the other experiences that need to be on offer, as we have talked about. That is why we have 90 courses on offer: to allow those pathways.” (15 November 2023, col 12)

Despite the headteachers themselves telling the Committee that they ensure that pupils’ needs are met, they found some barriers in doing so. These included structural barriers such as the availability of staff or other resources. The headteachers, however, saw the curriculum itself as being a barrier to breadth of options. Ms Walker argued that the curriculum is “geared toward the top 50% or so” and that pupils from disadvantaged families are disengaging as a result (col 15). One of the constraints that the headteachers identified was how they are held accountable.

Accountability

One of the key tensions is how to support a system where there is a great deal of freedom while at the same time having a system of accountability.

Reflecting on the recent PISA results, the OECD said, “understanding the conditions under which greater school autonomy works in the interests of students is critical for education policy making”. In this context the OECD said—

“The greater the autonomy granted to schools in an education system, the higher the average mathematics performance; and this is most evident when education authorities and schools had certain quality assurance mechanisms in place. More specifically, the quality-assurance mechanisms that appear to ensure that greater school autonomy is associated with better academic performance across PISA-participating countries/economies are (in descending order of importance): teacher mentoring arrangements; monitoring teacher practice by having inspectors observe classes; schools’ systematic recording of students’ test results and graduation rates; internal or self-evaluations; tracking achievement data by an administrative authority; and using mandatory standardised tests at least once a year.”([PISA 2022 Results \(Volume I\), p235](#))

Dr Janet Scott said to the committee that it is important that what happens in the education system is assessed as a whole as well as whether individual institutions are performing. She argued that in doing so, one needs to be careful as any metric produced on education may be used to address external agendas. Dr Scott also argued that there should be more

experimentation and pilots which could lead to comparative assessment and improvement (OR 8 November 2023, cols 29-30).

Dr Marina Shapira said that, in secondary schools, her research had found a “culture of performativity” whereby curriculum decisions are made to achieve better results rather than for pedagogical reasons (OR 8 November 2023, col 3). Peter Bain agreed and said—

“Some schools, local authorities and communities feel the need to ensure that the metrics of school performance are maintained. By that, I mean that there is a desire to keep hitting five-plus Higher figures at the expense of providing a vast array of vocational courses that would best suit particular young people and individual unique communities. That is being put to the side in order to hit the five-plus figures.” (OR 15 November 2023, col 6)

The metrics that Mr Bain identifies are not included in national measures of performance of the education system.

Assessment and parity of esteem

One of the key observations of the 2021 OECD review was that the linkage to Senior Phase (S4-S6) and the period where pupils learning is certificated is problematic. The report stated—

“The coherence of CfE enactment is less consistent, however, in the Senior Phase (for learners aged 15 to 18 years), where fundamental challenges exist for curriculum and subsequent assessment re-design. Without taking up the task of a re-visioning of CfE in the Senior Phase, the practices in upper-secondary education will keep lagging in its curriculum components (aims, pedagogy and assessment) and will exercise a counterproductive influence on Broad General Education and the transition for students.”

[Professor Stobart remarked on 8 November](#) that it is likely that Scottish students are the most examined in the world. Pupils may have exams every year for three consecutive years, which has led to the “two-term dash” and, it is argued, a curriculum in senior phase dominated by qualification specifications.

There are a wide variety of qualifications available in Senior Phase. Nonetheless there is a concern that there is too greater focus on traditional academic courses which would support entry to universities. The ICEA report recommended that the Government should—

“Ensure that parents, carers and family members have a strong understanding of the learning pathways and opportunities available for their children and young people so that they can participate confidently and productively in supporting learning trajectories.”

The SCQF provides a framework to read across both the level of different qualifications (how advanced they are) and the size of the courses (how long they take) which is measured in SCQF points. Pauline Walker suggested to the Committee on 15 November 2023 that qualifications should reflect the level of the qualifications and that there should be no distinction between Highers and other qualifications of a similar level. The Scottish Government’s School Leavers statistics include data other SQA level 6 qualifications which are the same size as Highers (24 points), e.g. Skills for Work Qualifications. The government also publishes an “All SQA Qualifications Attainment Measure” within the

leavers' data which includes all qualifications provided by SQA at a given SCQF level. James Withers said to the Committee—

“I found an alphabet soup of acronyms, with NPAs, FAs, SFW— national progression awards, foundation apprenticeships, skills for work—Highers and Advanced Highers. Those are all beautifully mapped out on the SCQF framework, from level 1 through to levels 10 and 11. How on earth have we managed not to use that framework and not to refer to levels 6 and 7 and instead have come up with different terms? That blows my mind. That solution is sat there; we could embrace that.” (OR, 15 November 2023, col 47)

The RSE's submission said of parity of esteem—

“[Achieving parity of esteem] will necessarily involve sparking a profound culture change in which society is prompted to reflect on what it truly values in its education system. Parity of esteem is not just about ensuring that different learning pathways and career destinations are afforded equal respect. It is also about delivering on individual autonomy and dignity. Education fulfils multiple objectives, from driving the economy to empowering individuals to become informed, engaged members of society. The system must honour and support the different ways in which learners choose to interact with it.”

Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment

Following the two OECD publications on Scottish Education in 2021, the Government commissioned Professor Louise Hayward to lead an Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment. The [review began its work in early 2022 and through 2022 and 2023 undertook a number of phases of consultation](#). Its final report was published shortly prior to the summer recess.

Some of the key recommendations in the report are:

- Adopting an SDA (Scottish Diploma of Achievement) as a graduation certificate for all senior phase educational settings.
- Removing exams in all subjects up to SCQF level 5 (e.g. National 5s), examinations may be retained in levels 6 and 7 (e.g. Highers and Advanced Highers).
- a digital profile for all learners which allows them to record personal achievements, identify and plan future learning

Professor Hayward [told the Committee in September](#) that the report provides a “longer-term direction of travel for qualifications and assessment in Scotland”. She also touched on implementation—

“What we have learned from the curriculum in Scotland, but also internationally, is that it is not enough to plan for the educational aspect of innovation; there has to be a plan for change. The process of change has to be carefully planned, and, to be effective, it has to be co-constructed. So, everyone who is involved in making it work has to be involved in the process. The pace of putting ideas into practice should depend on the level of resourcing that is available. It is about working through the ideas and being realistic about the investment that can be made as they develop.”

The Cabinet Secretary [told Parliament on 7 November 2023](#)—

“Since the conclusion of the Hayward review in June, I have been seeking views on the recommendations pertaining to the national qualifications. We undertook a survey with teachers and lecturers on the report, which received more than 2,000 responses. Although agreement on the need for change was clear, there were varying views on next steps, and on the perceived appetite for radical reform.

“In that context, I cannot ignore the challenges that our schools are currently responding to, and I must balance that reality with any reform of our qualifications system. With that in mind, I propose—subject to parliamentary agreement—to return to the chamber in the new year to debate the proposals fully. In the meantime, I will engage with Opposition spokespeople on the next steps, to ensure that we use any parliamentary debate to encourage greater support for political consensus.”

The ICEA’s most [recent report](#) noted that, internationally, there has been “pushback towards retaining traditional exams, despite their potential negative consequences for student equity and wellbeing”. [Dr Janet Scott told the Committee last September](#) that it is important that education changes gain the support of wider society. [Professor Humes agreed and said](#)—

“Public education is a civic good. It is an important bulwark of democracy, so you need as many citizens as possible to buy in to the vision of where we are going in the education system.”

The panels last November argued that full consensus is not possible and not necessarily desirable. [For example, Professor Stobart stated](#)—

“I think that there needs to be some policy leadership, yes. There might well be a tendency to say, “These two groups are not agreeing. Let’s set up another group to get consensus”—and so it goes on, instead of saying, “We really have to get down to some practical steps here.” There will always be objections—you cannot have reform without some vested interest being upset by it.”

National structural changes

The Scottish Government launched [a consultation on a future education bill in November](#). The consultation closed on 18 December 2023. This set out the rationale for abolishing the SQA and replacing it with an organisation with similar functions – awarding and accreditation. It said—

“The overarching policy objective of establishing a new qualifications body is to ensure that qualifications consistently meet the needs and expectations of their users, the education system, economy, industry and other providers who use and recognise qualifications and awards. A key priority for the new body is that it will involve pupils and students, teachers and practitioners, and wider stakeholders in its decision making. It will be accountable to and transparent with these stakeholders through robust governance and other arrangements.

“As the new body takes shape we will encourage and promote an organisational culture that puts those who rely on its services at its centre. Close collaborative working with the education and skills system in designing the new body will ensure

the organisation can deliver on expectations and add value to the existing system from the outset.”

There are a number of current powers the Government has which allows it to influence or direct the work of the SQA. Scottish Ministers appoint the board of the SQA (s1 of the Education (Scotland) Act 1996) and they may make directions “of a general or specific character with regard to the discharge of [the SQA’s] functions and it shall be the duty of SQA to comply with such directions.” (s9 of the 1996 Act). Ministers have the power to introduce regulations “in relation to the procedure of the SQA, and of any committee established by it, as they think fit” (para 10, sch 1 of the 1996 Act). In addition, in 2002, ministers established the SQA advisory council under powers in section 3 of the Scottish Qualifications Authority Act 2002. The advisory council considers and provides advice to the SQA on a range of matters in relation to the function of the SQA. If the SQA chooses not to act upon the advice of the council, it must explain why in writing to both the council and ministers. Ministers appoint members of the advisory council.

The Cabinet Secretary wrote to the Committee last November on the consultation. In terms of the inspectorate, she said—

“On inspection, the intention is to strengthen the role inspection plays to ensure it secures accountability, provides assurance and drives improvement. This can be achieved in a number of ways and the consultation seeks views on whether legislation or non-legislative means are the best way to support this. My overarching aim is to ensure there is public confidence in the work of the inspectorate and that there is an appropriate level of involvement from across the education system. It is therefore intended that this part of the consultation seeks further views on the purpose and priorities for improvement of inspection; the establishments and services subject to inspection; and the different possible legislative and non-legislative reform measures to address priority issues within the system.”

The ICEA's [report commented on the](#) Muir Report and reiterated its call that an “independent HM Inspectorate of Education should be established as a matter of urgency. The ICEA said that it is not for it to “prescribe specific changes”. However, the ICEA stated—

“Changes should only be made as an integral and necessary part of a coherent approach to governance across all levels of the education system. Clear beneficial impact on the learning and experience of the young people and their teachers should be the acid test of any proposals. In the past we have argued for “shifting the ownership of change”. Given the need for cultural change in a climate of austerity, this focus is more important than ever.”

And later it stated—

“The ICEA recommends that the overarching theory of change in the short to medium term is not to change structures too much (this is expensive), but to redirect energy to focus on improving teaching professionals, professional development collaboration, and innovation. The idea is to build capacity and remove barriers to grass-roots innovation by identifying points of high leverage.”

Professor Humes argued that the decision to replace the SQA was a “political decision”. He also said that there is a tendency in Scottish education policy to reach for structural reform when problems are encountered. He argued that “the real problems of Scottish education

are cultural rather than structural” and that a rebalancing of power is required. (OR 8 November 2023, cols 22-23) In his submission to the Committee, Professor Humes said that culture change “must start at the top”. He continued—

“Politicians (national and local), Chief Executives of national agencies, Directors of Education and senior civil servants need to ask themselves how they will change. This will raise challenging issues about authority, power and responsibility.”

Dr Janet Scott said that it is important to understand what is to be achieved by any structural reform and to be alive to any unintended consequences. (OR 8 November 2023, cols 21-22).

During the session with the headteachers representatives, the committee heard that—

“A huge amount of criticism of the SQA arose during the pandemic basically because of the time delays when decisions were taken over what to do with exams. The whole profession felt that those decisions all came too late.” (Peter Bain, OR 15 November 2023, col 32)

The panel on 15 November also argued that any new agency must be more transparent about its strategic decisions and better include the voices of the profession in those decisions.

Some stakeholders are keen to see the SQA abolished. After the Cabinet Secretary announced in June that the education bill would be delayed, [the EIS stated](#)—

“Secondary teachers in Scotland will be angered and dismayed at this news. The SQA continues to be a huge driver of workload for Secondary teachers and others who deliver SQA qualifications. Its reputation amongst teachers is in tatters.”

**Ned Sharratt, Senior Researcher (School Education, ELC, and Culture), SPICe Research
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