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Convener
Education, Children and Young
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Dear Convener

Thank you for your letter of 3 October, which followed my appearance at Committee on 27 September. I was delighted to attend in what was my first appearance at the Education, Children and Young People Committee as the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills. I look forward to attending again in due course.

I was pleased to be able to update members on the progress made in relation to the Scottish Attainment Challenge programme since the Committee's inquiry report was published last year, and to address members' queries on important issues across my portfolio relating to early years and childcare, and further and higher education.

I would like to reiterate that I remain focussed on closing the poverty related attainment gap - using our investment in the Scottish Attainment Challenge to further empower headteachers and Local Government to achieve their ambitions to improve outcomes for children and young people impacted by poverty. Indeed I am pleased to advise the Committee that we have now received local authorities' stretch aims for progress up to 2025/26 and are reviewing these ahead of publication later in the year.

At the session I offered to provide updates on the following areas. You have recognised some of these points cannot be responded to immediately and fully, as they relate to ongoing discussions and work. However, I trust these responses will be helpful meantime.

Re-profiling of the £7m contribution from councils to the Redress Scotland budget for 2024-25, which is to be reallocated to the funding of the teachers' pay settlement

Let me take this opportunity to reaffirm again, as I did at Committee, that the workers involved are Local Government employees, not teachers, so this is not a specific Education dispute and I am not directly involved in the negotiations. Nevertheless, following the conclusion of the Local Government pay negotiations, the Scottish Government will work with COSLA to agree a reprofiling of Local Government's 2024-25 contribution of £7 million to Scotland's Redress Scheme. Reprofiling of their 2024-25 contribution will have no detrimental impact on the operation of the Scheme, including redress payments to survivors, with the Scottish Government ensuring sufficient funding is available in the interim. Local Government will collectively maintain their agreed overall total contribution of £100m.

Teacher audit that the Scottish Government has committed to, which will look at workforce planning to ensure that there are enough teachers to fill vacancies and also to deliver the reduction in class contact time

The audit is an external modelling and research exercise we are commissioning to help inform decisions on education workforce planning for future years. This work will bring together a range of factors including current teacher numbers, pupil teacher ratios and the projected decline in the number of school-aged children.

We need to consider all of these issues holistically and ensure we will have an education workforce in place that enables us to progress our commitments to reducing teachers' class contact time, raising attainment overall, closing the poverty-related attainment gap and improving additional support for learning, while delivering maximum value for money.

The Invitation to Tender was published on 15 September and a bidder was appointed on 16 October, with a view to reporting by the end of December 2023. I am happy to provide you with further updates when this work has concluded.

Results of Education Scotland's deep dive on attendance

Work is progressing at pace on the Education Scotland deep dive on attendance - *Attendance: Understanding the Issues!* Education Scotland are on track to complete the deep dive in the coming weeks, which will seek to provide:

- A deeper understanding of the current barriers and challenges experienced by schools, children and young people and their families and which influence school attendance, including the impact of the pandemic.
- Clear examples of effective strategies that are supporting improved attendance.
- Clarity on what further support or intervention is required in areas where attendance is not improving.
- An understanding of how well current national approaches to data collection, analysis and presentation are supporting Local Authorities and schools to fully understand and address attendance issues.

In recognition that this is a priority for us all, this is a short, sharp piece of work to allow its findings to be shared with schools quickly, to support work on attendance this year and beyond. Alongside the Attainment Advisors' work on this, Education Scotland's Wellbeing and Inclusion team, NIF Officers and SG data teams are supporting this work. HMIe will also contribute analysis of relevant evidence from school inspections. Attainment Advisors have worked closely with Local Authorities to collate their views and collect case studies of positive practice. Findings from this piece of work will be submitted to the Scottish Government and I shall share its findings with the Committee in due course.

Work that the Scottish Government is doing with the Scottish Funding Council, to identify potential savings and reduce its administration costs

The Scottish Government continues to work with the Scottish Funding Council to deliver savings from the funds they are responsible for distributing and any budget savings will be published in the Autumn/ Spring Budget Revision.

This includes careful monitoring of demand-led budgets to return savings from lower than anticipated demand. Budget savings of £46 million have been made to date and these have been included in the Autumn Budget Revision. These are in relation to a planned budget uplift for colleges and universities that was used to support other Scottish Government priorities.

The Scottish Funding Council's administration budget covers their running costs, including staffing. At £7.8m for the 2023-24 financial year, it represents 0.4% of their total budget. The Scottish Funding Council participates in and promotes shared services: it shares multi-location office space efficiently with Scottish Enterprise and they are engaging with the Scottish Government's work on the Single Scottish Estate. In addition, the Scottish Funding Council and Scottish Enterprise also have a shared internal audit function.

Additionally, the Committee would appreciate an update on the Flexible Workforce Development Fund when that is possible

No decision has yet been reached for the Flexible Workforce Development Fund in 2023/24. As I highlighted during my appearance at Committee, budget negotiations have been extremely challenging this year due to the ongoing, significant pressures on Scottish Government and agency budgets. I do though appreciate the impact that this uncertainty has on colleges and employers and we are working hard with partners to confirm the position as quickly as possible. I will keep the Committee fully apprised on this.

Let me finish by stating that I very much welcome the Committee's continued focus on the important work of the Scottish Attainment Challenge and my wider portfolio. I believe this Committee has one of the most important roles within the Scottish Parliament in driving the improvements needed across our education system. That is what will improve outcomes for our young people. I trust that my appearance at Committee assures Members that I am committed to working with the Committee on this shared endeavour.

Yours sincerely

JENNY GILRUTH

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