

20th October 2023

Sue Webber MSP
Convenor – Education, Children and Young People Committee
The Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
EH99 1SP

Via Email - ecyp.committee@parliament.scot

Dear Sue,

Thank you for your letter of 29th September 2023 on the Education Children and Young People Committee's work on education reform, inviting the views of COSLA on the issue.

Local Government is committed to providing the best possible outcomes for children and young people. As set out in the COSLA Plan 2022-27, we are prioritising work to develop and secure the best education for all our children and young people, providing wider learning and support while tackling poverty and social inequality.

Due to the timescales of this request, we have been unable to consult our Children and Young People Board on the range of issues mentioned within your letter, as such the following draws on existing COSLA's positions which may be evolved as work progresses.

'Scotland's Curriculum: Into the Future'

COSLA have noted the wide-ranging recommendations made by the OECD's 2021 report, Scotland's Curriculum: Into the Future.

Whilst COSLA has engaged in strands of work which has followed this report, most obviously Professor Muir's work on the national bodies, we have not had a great deal of direct involvement in the response to these recommendations in the round.

'Putting learners at the centre'

COSLA's response to Professor Muir's consultation in 2021 focused on the following key messages:

- Over the past decade we have seen a consistent and/or increased level of resource provided to national education bodies, whilst at the same time Local Government have faced serious financial constraints requiring councils to make difficult decisions in how they support improvement within education. This review is an opportunity to review the balance of resources to support education, and which functions can be delivered nationally or better supported locally. We believe that the presumption should be resources should be channelled as locally as possible, with clear justification for those functions which remain national.

- Roles and responsibilities across Scottish Education can be blurred. There is also an opportunity to ensure greater shared vision across the system, we believe that there are lessons to be learned from the experience in public health reform of creating a shared vision. Specifically, the co-sponsorship model between COSLA and the Scottish Government for Public Health Scotland should be considered in the reform of national bodies.
- We would welcome establishment of an independent inspectorate. We recognise that inspection can play an important role in providing public confidence and determining and sharing best practice.

Following the publication of the 'Putting Learning at the Centre' report, COSLA agreed the following position:

- COSLA supported a national discussion to create 'a compelling and consensual vision' for the future of Scottish education.
- COSLA welcomes the establishment of a new qualifications body, and the recommendations that the governance of this body is more accountable to its stakeholders, including Local Government, noting the importance of building a new body in line with the work on the redesign of qualifications being led by Professor Hayward.
- The theme running through the report that national education bodies should be more responsive to local needs was an overdue recognition of the importance of taking a child-centred and bottom-up approach to supporting children and young people.
- The focus on subsidiarity was seen as particularly important for the new national education agency. COSLA therefore welcomed the recognition of the benefits of a co-sponsorship model, between COSLA and the Scottish Government, for the new national education agency to drive that more responsive body.
- COSLA welcomed the development of an independent inspectorate and an opportunity to take a broader look at inspection activity to have greater focus on empowerment, collaboration and self-improvement.

All Learners in Scotland Matter - national discussion on education

As set out above, COSLA's welcomed Professor Muir's recommendation to hold a national discussion on the future of Scottish Education.

COSLA and the Scottish Government agreed to co-convene the national discussion, which reported both to Scottish Ministers and COSLA. COSLA officers, alongside Scottish Government officials, worked to support the independent facilitators – Professor Carol Campbell and Professor Alma Harris – through their extensive engagement programme.

COSLA have welcomed the work by Professor Campbell and Professor Harris. This included the publication of 'All Learners in Scotland Matter' which included a vision for the future of Scottish education, guiding values and the suggested priorities within the call to action, published in May 2023.

We continue to consider their findings, COSLA have recognised the importance of creating a coordinated response to the wide range of reports which have been published in recent

months. We are engaging with the Scottish Government to discuss the merits of a joint response to the findings of the National Discussion across Local and national Government.

Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment (the “Hayward Review”)

COSLA responded to Professor Hayward’s public consultation in 2023. The following key messages were set out as being core to the considerations of a review of qualifications and reform:

- Ensuring qualifications enable greater continuity between the delivery of the curriculum during the Broad General Education stage and in the Senior Phase.
- Ensuring qualifications capture the breadth of knowledge, skills and capacities that young people develop throughout their education.
- Learning from the alternative delivery of qualifications during the pandemic and consider what lessons can be learned from assessment and qualifications in further and higher education.
- The importance of understanding the capacity of the education system to meet changes to qualifications and what further support may be required.

Further to the publication of the ‘It’s Our Future’ report, COSLA was invited to provide an initial response by the Scottish Government over the summer. The following were the key points agreed by the COSLA Children and Young People Board in August 2023:

- COSLA is broadly supportive of the direction of travel of the new approach to qualifications and the shape of the reform programme set out by Professor Hayward’s report, as it is in line with the key points set out in COSLA’s response to the public consultation.
- However, we believe that this report is a first step and there are areas that will need to be worked through in more detail with schools, local authorities, and our partners across the education system.
- A key area will be ensuring a continued focus on equity as a new framework for qualifications and assessment is created. Scotland’s communities, and therefore schools, are diverse in terms of geography, demographics, and levels of deprivation. It’s important to consider what support will be required to ensure all children and young people are able to demonstrate their knowledge, skills, and abilities that they have gained from their experiences.
- Equally important will be the work that will need to take place across Scotland to understand the capacity that will be required in schools across Scotland to deliver a new approach to qualifications.

Independent review of the Skills Delivery Landscape (the “Withers Report”).

The Withers Review made a number of recommendations across the whole of the skills delivery landscape. Education services have a key role to play in building skills, as do a range of other services delivered by local authorities, including economic development and employability.

As such, COSLA continues to engage with colleagues across the Local Government family to consider the recommendations of the Withers review.

Connections with wider reforms across Children's Services

COSLA has set out positions on the recent report on education reform above, however we would also be clear that connections must be made and maintained with the reform programme across Children's Services. This includes - but is not limited to – the implementation of the Promise, proposed children's services structural reform, further expansion of early learning and childcare, continued efforts to tackle child poverty and the work of the Children and Young People's Mental Health and Wellbeing Programme Board.

Achieving the best possible outcomes for children and young people in terms of their health, wellbeing and achievement requires the input from a wide range of services across the public and third sector. Education of course plays a vital role but must not be seen in isolation amidst a complex policy landscape.

Verity House Agreement

As the Committee will be aware, the Scottish Government and COSLA signed the Verity House Agreement earlier this year. The agreement sets out new and improved ways of working between Local and national Government in terms of three shared priorities – poverty, transforming our economy through a just transition to deliver net zero and delivering sustainable person-centred public services.

Education reform clearly has a role to play across all three of these priorities. The Scottish Government and COSLA have been undertaking initial discussions on the implications of Verity House Agreement on education and children's services.

Recognising the comprehensive and wide-ranging recommendations from the recent reports on Scottish Education (and the interactions with wider reforms across Children's Services set out above), it is important we work collectively as an education system to create a considered, sequenced and deliverable programme of reform.

Vitally, this response must be focused on improving outcomes for children and young people.

We look forward to continuing constructive discussions with the Scottish Government across the education reform agenda in line with the priorities and approach agreed in the Verity House Agreement.

I hope the content of this letter is helpful to the committee in their consideration of the education reform agenda.

Yours Sincerely,



Cllr Tony Buchanan
COSLA Children and Young People Spokesperson