



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Education, Children and Young People Committee

Wednesday 23 February 2022

Session 6



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EDUCATION, CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE COMMITTEE
6th Meeting 2022, Session 6

CONVENER

*Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)

*Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)

*James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)

*Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)

*Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green)

*Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab)

*Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con)

*Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Natalie Don (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP)

Louise Goodlad (Prince's Trust Scotland)

Maureen McAteer (Barnardo's Scotland)

Sara Spencer (Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland)

Jim Wallace (Aberlour Child Care Trust)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Stephen Herbert

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Education, Children and Young People Committee

Wednesday 23 February 2022

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:30]

Interests

The Convener (Stephen Kerr): Good morning, and welcome to the sixth meeting in 2022 of the Education, Children and Young People Committee.

We have received apologies from James Dornan. I am delighted to welcome Natalie Don MSP, who joins us as a substitute member for the first time today. You are very welcome, Natalie. I thank you for being here and invite you to declare any interests that are relevant to the remit of the committee.

Natalie Don (Renfrewshire North and West) (SNP): Because I have not sat on the committee previously, I declare that I am still a councillor on Renfrewshire Council.

The Convener: Thank you.

Oliver Mundell, do you want to say something?

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): Before we begin taking evidence, I wish to raise a point and seek your clarification, convener.

The Convener: Oh.

Oliver Mundell: I suspect that I am not the only member of the committee who has been concerned by reports that, after more than a year, the Scottish Government is still withholding from publication the draft version of the report that it received from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development last January and its response to that report.

Furthermore, I have heard that a parliamentary statement on the report by Professor Ken Muir is now planned, and it has been reported that senior leadership at the Scottish Qualifications Authority and other education bodies have already seen an advance draft of the report. I am not aware of that courtesy having been extended to this committee. This looks like a repeat of the situation with the OECD report, in which unaccountable organisations that are currently failing our young people are extended an opportunity to review and perhaps influence the findings of those reports without any checks and balances.

Having been a member of the committee for a number of years, I believe that it is insulting that

such documents have not been made available to the committee and that the practice of excluding Parliament and denying us the fullest opportunity to exercise our scrutiny function diminishes the work that we do. I find that unacceptable. I believe that we should urgently request those documents.

I know that we will discuss our work programme in private today, but I am increasingly concerned that too much of our education policy is decided behind closed doors, not least because of the culture of secrecy and lack of transparency at the heart of the Scottish National Party's approach. It is important that the public knows that the committee is alive to those issues and that we are taking our job of scrutiny seriously. Ideally, I would like to see a decision taken to move today's discussion of our work programme into public to allow this urgent matter to be addressed. If that is not possible, convener, I would like your assurance that the matter will be put on the public agenda for next week's meeting.

The Convener: Let me consider what you have said. Bob Doris has indicated that he wants to say something. It is only fair that I allow him the same privilege that I have allowed you.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): I will speak briefly, convener. It is for Mr Mundell to make whatever points he seeks to make at the committee, but I am conscious that, when the committee first met at the start of the parliamentary session, we said that we would work collegiately and across parties and would challenge the Government as and when appropriate, and in the strongest possible fashion, when we had to. We said that we would seek to work constructively with the Government and across the committee.

I am therefore disappointed that Mr Mundell has made a set-piece statement that I consider to be grandstanding. There have been many opportunities to raise those concerns within the committee before now, including in private session earlier this morning, when you, convener, asked if anyone wanted to make us aware of anything that they might wish to raise at today's meeting. No member took that opportunity.

I am keen for the committee to work collegiately to decide how best to respond to Mr Mundell's comments, but I am very disappointed by the idea of ambushing a committee at the start of a meeting when he has had many other opportunities to put this to members and to work collegiately. I find the tone unhelpful and overtly party political. That is not the way that I want the committee to work.

The Convener: I perfectly understand the sentiment behind your words, Bob.

Willie Rennie has now indicated that he wishes to speak. To be fair, having allowed two colleagues to speak, I do not think that I cannot allow him to do so.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): Oliver Mundell has a point, as there has been deep frustration that the Government has not been as open as it should have been over the OECD process. It is important that that is highlighted, that the committee takes a direct interest in it, that we have a public session on it and that we seek evidence from the Government and appeal to it to give us the additional information that we have been asking for for months.

It would be wrong if the media scrutiny on the issue was not replicated with scrutiny by this committee, because we have a massive responsibility, so I would like to have a public session. However the matter was brought up, it is important that we take our role seriously, actually scrutinise the Government and seek the openness that teachers and pupils deserve, so I would like to have a session on the issue at a future committee meeting.

The Convener: Thank you. Ross Greer also wants to comment.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): If the reports of the SQA attempting to limit the damage to its reputation in the OECD report are true, the SQA did not do a very good job of it, because the Scottish Government has decided to abolish and replace the SQA.

On the question of how we take this forward as a committee, I absolutely agree that there is a need for substantial public parliamentary scrutiny of the process. I would prefer that we discuss how we are going to do that as a committee in the normal way, through our normal work planning procedures. If we decide at our work planning discussion after the public session of today's meeting to move forward with public sessions, we will do so and they will be on the record. However, I do not like the implication that the way in which parliamentary committees go about their normal work planning—in private, so that we can flush out the issues collectively and decide how we will go about things publicly—is somehow a behind-closed-doors process that lacks scrutiny in and of itself. That is the normal way that Parliament functions. I am quite sure that, as a result of our private work planning meeting today, we will make decisions about what we are going to do in public about this—as we would have done regardless of what has just happened this morning.

The Convener: Thank you for that. Michael Marra is next.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): I have a lot of sympathy with all the contributions so

far. In terms of the core of what Mr Mundell says, I think that the early pre-amendment drafts should be published and they should absolutely be in the public domain—we should be able to have a look at them.

I also agree with all the other comments about how the committee should work: we want to work together collegiately. However, we need to find a way to tell the Government that we want to see those publications and see them quickly, and that we want to be able to understand the process of amendment and the influences brought to bear on the publications. How we do that is the question, but if we can come to a resolution on that, we want to be pretty clear that we should see those publications as soon as possible.

The Convener: Right. This is not an agenda item for today. Bob Doris made the point that I asked in the pre-meeting session whether there was anything that people wanted to raise in the meeting and there was no mention of this item.

My response to all of this is that we should consider it further when we meet in private later this morning. Everyone has had a fair chance to make their views known, and I think that that is my role as the convener. Having said that, we should consider the matter further in private later this morning, and we should now move on to our agenda items as planned. I hope that members all agree with that.

Scottish Attainment Challenge Inquiry

09:38

The Convener: We move on to the main item, and we are delighted to welcome to Parliament those witnesses who are attending the meeting in our committee room.

We will be taking evidence as part of our Scottish attainment challenge inquiry. Our focus this week is on the work of the third sector organisations that provide services that are funded through the attainment challenge. I welcome our witnesses. Jim Wallace, the director of children and families at the Aberlour Child Care Trust, is joining us remotely. Maureen McAteer, the assistant director of Barnardo's Scotland, is with us in the committee room. Sara—is that pronounced Sah-ra or Say-ra? I should have asked earlier.

Sara Spencer (Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland): It is pronounced Say-ra.

The Convener: I apologise. Sara Spencer is the cost of the school day project manager at the Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland, and she is joining us remotely. Louise Goodlad is senior head of partnerships, Scotland, at the Prince's Trust Scotland. You are all very welcome.

Given the fact that we are considering the work of the third sector in relation to the Scottish attainment challenge, I will start with Maureen McAteer. Is the work that Barnardo's does in relation to the attainment challenge additional to what was going on before? What is the value of the third sector's involvement in this?

Maureen McAteer (Barnardo's Scotland): Alongside a lot of other third sector organisations, we have always worked in partnership with families, communities and schools. However, Barnardo's has definitely been able to extend our involvement with schools through the Scottish attainment challenge.

To give you an idea of the scale, we work in 400 schools across Scotland, and probably about a third of that work is funded through the Scottish attainment challenge. That work tends to take a range of different forms: it can be one-to-one support for children in school and it can be group work with children in schools. We do a lot of family support, strengthening the link between the home, the family and the community, and we do a lot of work around removing barriers to children's participation in their education. For example, we do a lot of work around reducing anxiety, improving self-esteem, improving engagement in learning, and thinking about families and what

might be getting in the way of a child optimising their engagement in school. A lot of that relates to child poverty.

The Convener: What do you bring that was not already there? If you were not there, I presume that the role that you are playing would be played by someone else in the public sector?

Maureen McAteer: It does not necessarily need to be a third sector provider that provides that additionality, but it often is. In the work that we do, our role is very much focused on the child within the family and the community. It is about recognising that some of the challenges that are barriers to learning are not in the class environment or the school environment. A lot of the barriers are to do with what is going on in a child's life outside school.

We all know that children spend 80 per cent of their time outwith school, so what happens in their family and their community can have a huge influence on their capacity to engage in learning opportunities.

The Convener: I will bring in Ross Greer next, because I think that he has a line of questioning that follows on from this, and then I will chip in again.

Ross Greer: I will start with Maureen McAteer, but this is a question for everyone on the panel.

I say this with no prejudgment, but I am interested in hearing your thoughts on why the third sector is providing something that councils either will not or cannot provide. What is the unique contribution that justifies a significant amount of money being given to third sector organisations to deliver this, as opposed to its being delivered through councils or regional improvement collaboratives if it is about scale and so on? Why the third sector rather than the public sector?

Maureen McAteer: The third sector brings with it a unique set of skills. Our focus is specifically on wellbeing in its widest sense, so we can think about the child not just within the class environment, as our education colleagues tend to do, and we can think about those links between the family and the community that I mentioned earlier.

Our staff are trained in relational practice and trauma-informed approaches. They can think about how to support a child who might find the school environment difficult, and they can bring a different lens to what might work in an education environment or provide stepping stones for a child to reintegrate fully into their learning environment.

Ross Greer: Would any of the other panellists like to come in on the wider question of why the third sector is providing something that the public

sector cannot or will not provide? I will perhaps ask folk who are joining us remotely first. Jim Wallace, do you have any thoughts on that?

Jim Wallace (Aberlour Child Care Trust): A big strength of the third sector is the ability to engage with families. We have built up a good understanding of the challenges that are happening in the home as well as in the school. That is not to say that statutory providers cannot do those things. However, in relation to the work that we and Barnardo's have done, headteachers have found it useful to have that additional support and to have people in with a different focus on the family issues. Schools are under lots of pressure, and they have lots of children to work with. It is useful to have additional people coming in and providing support. It can provide some transformational outcomes for children.

09:45

We are particularly good, I think, at listening to children and families and understanding their needs and the challenges that they face. As Maureen McAteer was saying, multiple issues impact on children's learning, and it is complex to address those within the school situation. In our submission, we referred to work that we do with particular children on identified key obstacles to their learning and I think that we can help schools to work with those different, multiple obstacles that are barriers to children's learning in school.

Ross Greer: You said that it is not that statutory providers cannot give the comprehensive, holistic family support that you provide. The implication, perhaps, is that they will not give it or that there is some other barrier there. Can you expand on that? Why do you think that, although it is possible for a statutory provider to do what you are doing, it is not happening at the moment?

Jim Wallace: Statutory providers have vast pressures on their resources and demand upon their services. The partnership with the third sector adds additional resource. In some situations, the third sector can help children and families to build bridges back to better engagement with statutory services. Through our family work, we have noted that people can sometimes feel disengaged and mistrustful of what support is offered. Some parents that we work with have had their own negative experiences of school, and that impacts on their attitudes and is reflected through their children. We can work with parents to help them to view school and statutory services differently and create a better footing for working together.

Sara Spencer: The cost of the school day project works with schools and local authorities on financial barriers at school for children and young people and their families, and we look at practical

ways of overcoming and removing those barriers, usually by focusing on reducing costs for families, costs for participation, and incomes. That fits within the Scottish attainment challenge by being about removing barriers, reducing costs, and creating the conditions for attainment and the foundations on which other interventions can stand.

On the question about why it is the third sector and not anyone else, and in terms of what the cost of the school day project is working on, lots of different people are working on awareness and action around poverty, with lots of really brilliant work being done in local areas by equity teams. There is also the work of the attainment advisers. A whole range of people are working to do those things.

On the additional value that third sector organisations can bring, to take our organisation as an example, we can bring evidence to this area from the wider work of the organisation and our wider research into child poverty. We can bring wider expertise on, for example, the social security changes in recent years and how they are impacting on families, so there is an extra element there.

Importantly, we try to take evidence from the schools, children and families that we work with and use that to inform policy. All the different actors working in this area find that additionality useful.

Louise Goodlad (Prince's Trust Scotland): Some of it relates to the expertise that the third sector can bring. The Prince's Trust works in schools, with young people for whom school might be not working and who are struggling as a result. We set up a separate club that focuses on practical and employability-related skills to help young people to move towards a positive destination when they leave school. As part of that, we help them with attainment through Prince's Trust qualifications related to developing personal, social and employment skills.

We bring in a lot of employers from our employer network as part of that programme. Schools can struggle to do that. Other areas of Scottish Government policy, such as developing the young workforce, are focused on doing so, but the Prince's Trust can bring big, national employers into schools to support our work. Our expertise also sits behind a lot of the lesson plans and the structure of that programme, and we bring a lot of skills in youth work.

Young people can be put off if they have to work with statutory services. Ours is a trusted brand and young people know that it is for them. As Sara Spencer said, a lot relates to the underlying

foundations that help with attainment: confidence, motivation and engagement.

I question what Ross Greer said about a lot of money going from attainment challenge funding into the third sector. It is interesting that there is a perception that we benefit from attainment challenge funding, and that is one of the reasons I am keen to be here today. Local authorities fund us but, as far as I am aware, none of them say that it comes out of the funding for the attainment challenge. I could not swear that, because I do not always know what pot of money support for the trust comes out of, but we certainly have not seen a huge increase in funding for our work as a result of the challenge.

We do not want to go on about funding. There is a lot of value to the attainment challenge. However, if the perception is that a lot of money comes to the third sector because of it, I do not think that is happening.

Ross Greer: That was very interesting. However, that answer leads us directly into lines of questioning that other members would like to come in on. Therefore, I will leave it at that. If there is time, I will speak to Jim Wallace about some of Aberlour's services.

The Convener: Will Louise Goodlad please expand on the ways in which the Prince's Trust interacts with local authorities and talk us through what its relationship with local authorities is like? Is the relationship with schools or with local authorities? If it is with local authorities, is it with a group of schools within those authority areas or is it with individual schools that positively engage with the trust?

Louise Goodlad: It works differently in different places. There is a patchwork. We have some great relationships with local authorities. In those cases, we work very closely with the local authority, which directs us to the schools that it would like us to work with or tells us which ones are keen to have what we call an achieve club, which is what the Prince's Trust offers.

In other areas, the local authority might not engage with us, but it might broker with schools on our behalf. That might involve asking us to speak to individual schools about pupil equity funding, for example. In other places, schools that have heard of our product come to us directly and tell us that they want to have it in their school.

Another great boon of the third sector is that we can bring in investment from outside the public sector. The trust has a mix of funders. As a result, the situation is messy, as there are different sources of funding. Ultimately, we want to be there for as many young people who need our support as possible.

Most of the time, our relationship is with the local authority, which will partly fund our work and help us to form relationships with schools. Once that relationship is in place, we work directly with the school. We train a member of the school to run the programme.

The Convener: Is that a member of staff?

Louise Goodlad: Yes. That staff member is often involved in pastoral care or is passionate about what the trust does and about employability. We train them and they run the course, but we are there as a contact for support. That is why the work is so scalable.

The Convener: What is it? Did you call it an achievement club?

Louise Goodlad: We have achieve clubs, which consist of a small group of young people who have been identified by their school as people who could really benefit from that kind of support. Usually, they take part in the club, which is very project based, as one of their lesson options from secondary 3 or 4. The young people work towards a formal Prince's Trust qualification, but there are different curriculum strands around it, so they can do preparation for work and can work on health and wellbeing and lots of—

The Convener: Do the participants self-select or are they selected?

Louise Goodlad: It is a mix. If there is an achieve club in the school, people such as the careers adviser from Skills Development Scotland might recommend it to young people as something to consider. It tends to be their guidance teacher who recommends it, when young people pick their subjects, as something that they might benefit from. It tends to involve young people who might be at risk of leaving school with no, or very few, qualifications. Being in an achieve club is a great way for them to broaden their qualifications. We hear time and again from young people who hated school and did not feel that it was doing anything for them that the achieve club gave them something to show on their CV, so they feel that they have something to offer employers now.

The Convener: How do you measure the success of such clubs? Can you share any measurements of success with us?

Louise Goodlad: Yes, sure. We work with about 1,700 young people, and—

The Convener: Is that in all 32 local authority areas?

Louise Goodlad: It is not across all 32 local authorities; the work is more concentrated than that. I do not have an exact figure for the number of local authorities.

The Convener: Okay. You can come back to us on that.

Louise Goodlad: Before Covid, about 70 per cent of those young people achieved a qualification. During Covid, that figure dropped to about 50 per cent—understandably, schools have had a lot of other things to think about.

We measure success by doing “distance travelled” measurements. We have a “my journey” form, where a young person tracks how their confidence is growing and how their other soft skills are developing, because that is really important in underpinning the attainment. We also look at school leaver destinations for the young people who have been part of our clubs and at how that compares with the average.

There are various ways to monitor the success of the programme. We also gather feedback from teachers and young people. We are in the middle of reviewing how we can have even more impact evaluation behind the programme so that we have such measurements.

The Convener: Are there measurable outcomes that you can share with the committee in relation to the pupils with whom you engage?

Louise Goodlad: Yes, we have data on them—

The Convener: It is about positive outcomes, so is going on to an apprenticeship and college, for example, the kind of outcome that we are talking about?

Louise Goodlad: Absolutely. It is about going on to something after school, whether it is further education, employment or training of some sort.

The Convener: Is it basically the case that, for every £1 of resource that goes to an organisation such as yours, you bring in more than £1? You have said that you have other resources that you call on and that you deliver additionality—you bring something different that would not be there if you were not there.

Louise Goodlad: Yes, I think so. For example, Apple is one of our partners. All the young people have iPads now, so, along with schools in Glasgow, for example, we provide digital skills that are designed by Apple. Young people learn coding and get access to internationally recognised training. We are able to leverage in the investment and the focus on Scotland’s young people from such organisations. I do not think that schools would have the capacity to do that. We are able to leverage in funding, and it is really important to get employers into schools, too.

The Resolution Foundation has a brilliant stat: if young people have something like four meaningful engagements with employers during their time at school, they are 85 per cent less likely to not have

a destination when they leave school. We can bring employers in. Employers such as Tesco help us to design our programmes. We bring in a lot of value through our content as well as financially. It is—

10:00

The Convener: I hear what you are saying, and I can think of examples in my region of that kind of interaction between schools, organisations such as yours, employers and all kinds of external bodies that support young people, which is fantastic, but my concern is that there are many other schools where none of that is happening. Local employers have even told me that they do not feel welcome at all, and I am talking about before the pandemic, not just during it. They do not feel as invited as they perhaps ought to be. Is that your experience? I know that we are talking in generalities but, from your perspective, is that a reflection of the situation across Scotland, not just in Central Scotland, which I represent?

Louise Goodlad: It is hard to speak for schools that we are not in, if that makes sense, because that is not my—

The Convener: [*Inaudible.*]—the ones that you are not in as opposed to the ones that you are in. You will know what the balance looks like.

Louise Goodlad: Yes. Some local authorities that we talk to know which schools will welcome the third sector. Certain schools have everything—they are great and have holistic support around young people. They might have Maureen McAteer’s team helping at home and the Prince’s Trust helping in school, but there are other schools whose leadership might not see the value in that.

I know that there is a balance in relation to the devolution of decision making down to school level, and I completely understand the power of that. It is about having consistency in equity. Obviously, I will say that young people in every school could benefit from what we offer, but, in some way, the barrier is the funding, because we are a charity and cannot make that offer to every school. We end up having to direct as much as possible to the young people who are supported through the attainment challenge and to young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, but we have to take account of where we can pay for what we do, where we can resource it and which schools welcome us in.

The Convener: It is also about the value of what you deliver, which relates to the outcomes.

Michael Marra: What Louise Goodlad said about the transparency of the money is key, and we can come back to that. An organisation might not understand where the money is coming from,

and I have to say that, at times, it is also difficult for us to tell. I see colleagues nodding their heads. It would be a positive thing to understand that.

My question relates to the additionality that the third sector brings. I have had representations from third sector providers about the amount of resource that they bring to the table on top of commissioned work. Maureen McAteer, have you done any research or work on the percentage value that you bring in on top of the commissioned work that you do?

Maureen McAteer: It is very difficult to do that, because it is very variable. It depends on what the core service is to start with. Often, the bigger the core service, the easier it is to lever in more money. For example, when you are commissioned by an individual school to do a piece of work on support for families, it is very difficult to bring lots of additionality to that, but when you are commissioned across a local authority area, it is a lot easier to bring in lots of additionality and ramp up the offer, because you have that stable core. The insecurity that that brings is a real flaw with pupil equity funding. Most PEF contracts for the third sector are allocated annually. We welcome the commitment to clarify with headteachers what they will get over the course of this parliamentary session, but I am not entirely sure whether that will translate into more stable contracts for the partners that are currently commissioned in those schools.

I will pick up on some of the points that Louise Goodlad made. Innovation and decisions being made close to communities bring lots of benefits, but, from our perspective, there is a real role for the local authority. We have direct comparisons, with attainment challenge funding allocated across the local authority versus allocations to individual schools across other authority areas. That strategic piece involves everything being connected to the local children's services planning partnership and thinking about the totality of resource across all the different services that work together to support children and young people. You can make a much bigger difference than through the granular work that can be done in a school or through a PEF contract. So much additionality can be brought in.

I am interested in the interface between the work on the attainment challenge fund and other Scottish Government funding streams. From our perspective, fragmentation can be challenging. A family's needs are not cut into chunks, with some being attainment issues, some being family support issues and some being early years issues. Those things are all connected, which is why a more holistic approach, rather than a school-centric approach, is essential for getting good outcomes for children, young people and families.

Michael Marra: I will put to Jim Wallace from Aberlour a variation of the same question, on the additional resource that your organisation might bring. It has been reported to me in my home city of Dundee that the figures from a third sector organisation—those that are centrally held—could be up to 50 or 60 per cent on a contract. Ms McAteer provides a representation of that. On a larger contract, that is easier—I understand that—but do you feel that Aberlour brings that additional benefit?

Jim Wallace: Yes, I think that we bring lots of additionality. It is not always just pounds—financial contributions. Since the start of the pandemic, Aberlour has dispensed more than £2 million to families. We recognise that the biggest challenge that many of our families in Scotland currently face is poverty. Children cannot learn if they go to school hungry in the morning, and they cannot settle at night in their house if they are too tired. One of our workers told me the other week that she was asked to go in and help children with their bedtime routines, because they were not settling. She said that she took cereal, biscuits and milk, because the real reason why they were not settling at night was that they were hungry. If children are hungry when they go to school in the morning, they are not in any ready state to learn. It is a matter of getting finance directly out to families to help them with their challenges.

The problem will be a growing one. The cost of living crisis is coming upon us soon, with soaring energy bills and so on. We bring a lot of direct support to families, which positively impacts on the services that we support in schools. We have teams of people who engage with children and families to get their voices and views heard. If we listen to what families say about what their challenges are, what they are facing, what the stresses are and the impact on them and their children, we can deliver more. That is the real opportunity. Our contribution is in multiple arenas around the whole issue of children's learning. I have been in social work for 40 years, and many of the issues that we are facing today have been around all through that time.

The Promise has helped us to look at language differently. We used to speak about "disengaged pupils" and "disaffected learners". That was very common parlance, and it put the problem squarely on the pupil—on the child. It is now for us to turn that round, look differently at what the real barriers are, and take responsibility for creating the conditions in which children learn. That is often about helping them to build relationships, to regulate their emotions and to be ready to learn.

Michael Marra: I and some other committee members were privileged to visit some of your workers in Dundee earlier this week, and we heard

about some of the work that they do. In that respect, I found your comment about 30 or so years' experience in social work useful, because my understanding of that conversation was that that kind of work used to be done by social workers. Is it fair to say that?

Jim Wallace: To some extent. The pressures and demands on local authorities and social work departments have gone up while resources have gone down, so I would be slow to criticise. Social workers were able to have a different kind of engagement with families 30 years ago, and there is a need to build back that connection between families and those who support them. Moreover, we should not judge people. We must be on their side, not on their backs—that is the important thing.

Michael Marra: I hear what you say loud and clear. I have to say that I was hugely impressed by the workers whom we met earlier in the week, and I give all credit to your organisation for the work that they are doing. The tone of my question was not critical. We are trying to understand what has happened with the money and what it has replaced. Has there been genuine additionality? Is new activity happening as a result, or are we seeing money that had been in the public sector being given a role elsewhere? I am not casting aspersions on how things are being performed at the moment. It is important for us to understand whether more is being done or whether things are being done differently.

Finally, I want to ask about the precariousness of funding. Your written submission makes some comment on that, and I know that that is a core issue for local authorities and headteachers in seeking to sustain engagement over a long period of time. Although the amount of money has been reduced this year, the Scottish Government has given a guarantee in respect of that type of activity over the coming years to the end of this parliamentary session. However, the challenge is that the money is set against the local government budget. What will happen if the interventions that we are talking about are taken out and the money has to be used to plug gaps? I took from the written submissions—from Barnardo's Scotland's submission in particular—that that is a challenge and that we have to see the issue in the context of local government budgets. Is that fair to say?

Perhaps Maureen McAteer can start off. I will then come to Jim Wallace.

Maureen McAteer: That is fair. Prior to the pandemic, we published a report called "Challenges from the Frontline—Revisited: Supporting families with multiple adversities in Scotland during a time of austerity", which articulated the impact of austerity on services provided by the third sector—in this case,

Barnardo's Scotland—and the interface with local authorities. I agree with Jim Wallace about the role of social work shifting and changing and being far more focused on the children who need care and protection and the third sector taking on more of an early intervention role, but I should say that some of us have been around for a long time and know that those are long-standing organisations with a long history of supporting families and communities.

I think that there is a difference in what we do. For example, we previously had a service that was broadly similar to what we do now and which was grant funded. There is now more or less the same service but with an outreach element and connectivity with the school community. The difference is that there have been far more self-referrals, far less stigma about accessing support and a much lower rate of re-referral, which suggests that, when families get the support that they need, it works much more effectively.

A big part of that is the fact that the workers and supports are visible in school communities. By being able to drop in, have a wee chat and get some light-touch support or a wee bit of signposting, you might be able to avert a crisis, whereas before, people felt that it was harder to reach the support that they needed. I therefore think that there is a benefit to having that interface between community supports and the work that not just we at Barnardo's but we in connection with other third sector providers in local areas do to ensure that people get the support that they need. The access via schools is important, too, because people are in and out of them. They are universal services, and we can reach lots of families that way.

Michael Marra: I turn to Jim Wallace. There is now a reliance on the work that you have all described. It is important that that work is being done, because the social work services that previously intervened no longer exist. Is that correct?

10:15

Jim Wallace: There have been cuts to service delivery, so what the voluntary sector or the third sector now provides is essential if we are to keep pushing forward for good outcomes.

A question was asked about how we evaluate the impact of PEF and the attainment moneys. We need to establish clear measures of success. As an example, we could talk about the work that we are doing in Dundee. We have worked with 60 per cent of the children in one primary school there, and there is good feedback on what we are doing, but does that help to narrow the attainment gap

overall? I am not so sure about that. We need to establish real, strong measures.

Those bits of work are important, but we need more fundamental changes and strong commitments to children's learning going forward. As I have said, one of the biggest things is poverty. We have a quarter of a million children living in poverty. If we cannot address that, it will obviously impact on their schooling and their ability to learn.

The Convener: Maureen, when you described the support that you give to families, you talked very optimistically about some of the successes that you have had. Will you describe what support you give to parents and families in practical terms?

Maureen McAteer: When we work in schools, we usually have a conversation with the headteacher about what is needed. As Louise Goodlad said, it is about trying to have some consistency but also flexing according to what is required in individual contexts. That can involve one-to-one support for children or group work. We do social and emotional learning and also provide that family support.

As Jim Wallace highlighted, poverty is an enormous issue for families, so a big part of our work is about their material needs. We try to put in place any possible mitigations for child poverty. We cannot overestimate the psychological impact of poverty, just how hard it is to live in poverty, or the impact that that has on people's sense of wellbeing. They have to navigate really complex systems just to survive, and it depletes people. There is a lot of support for mental health and wellbeing, which are massively interlinked.

On the sorts of successes that we see, as we said in our written submission and as Jim Wallace said, it is very difficult for us to draw a direct line between what we do and improvements in young people's educational attainment. However, we can ensure that kids maintain their time in school, enjoy school, participate, and manage peer group interaction much better. That can mean that there is not a queue of kids at the headteachers' door every day, because everybody seems to be managing a bit better.

There are all sorts of things around families. One of our outcomes is around family wellbeing, with families themselves identifying that they are getting on better—that they are getting the support that they need, they feel more in control, they have more efficacy, and they feel that their voices are being heard. Those sorts of outcomes are the things that we look for when we are working with families.

The Convener: It is about people having confidence and meeting challenges within their

own resources. That is quite hard to measure, is it not?

Maureen McAteer: Yes, and it is often a long journey. There is a temptation to look for quick fixes, but we need to consider the backdrop and the context that families are living in. We have rising child poverty, and the cost of living crisis that we are looking at is horrendous. The report that we produced before the pandemic highlighted a pretty grim picture, and it has only got worse. There is just so much support that needs to be put in place to keep families stable, because they face such a challenging environment in trying to connect with schools and give their children the best possible chances.

The Convener: A point that you made in your written submission struck me emotionally as well as in other respects. It is in the part in which you mentioned pupils engaging, sustaining friendships, managing transitions, arriving on time, and feeling ready to learn. You said:

“One Headteacher told us: ‘if someone said to me “but he’s still not meeting his benchmarks”, I’d say “but he’s in class.””

That is a measurable thing that is perhaps not going to hit any headlines, but it will make a tangible difference in the longer term.

Maureen McAteer: If kids are not there, they are not going to learn. There is so much more to this. On the point about what is measured, we mentioned in our submission the importance of health and wellbeing. During the pandemic, we have lobbied and said that there should be more focus on that, because it has felt as if things have been weighted towards academic attainment.

Before coming here today, I asked some of our headteachers to give me some feedback, and every one said that health and wellbeing is the foundation. We will get nowhere if the health and wellbeing of the kids in our establishments are not secure. If they do not feel safe and nurtured, we are on a hiding to nothing. It does not matter how high the quality of our teaching and learning is: if kids are dysregulated, they are not going to be able to make the most of the opportunities that we give them.

The Convener: That is very helpful. We will come back to some of those issues.

I will bring in Fergus Ewing, who indicated some time ago that he wants to ask about the funding issue that Michael Marra raised.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): I thank the witnesses for their evidence and for what they do. Over the years, I have had occasion to work with some of the charities that are giving evidence today, and I recognise what Mr Wallace said earlier—that what they do is, in many ways,

not instead of but complementary, additional or supplementary to what the state does through its agencies. It often does that work in a different way, and it is not necessarily all about money. I just wanted to make that point. I do not think that we should start from the premise that, if we had a perfect social work department, a perfect state and perfect schools, we would not need the third sector. I think that, actually, we need the third sector in addition. It is easy to get sidetracked by regarding money as the proxy for everything, but it is not that.

Over the years, I have been struck by the position of many charities—even leading ones such as Aberlour, Barnardo's and the Prince's Trust. As I understand it, they all have various funding streams, including funding from the state, the private sector and philanthropic donations. All of those are important, but each of the charities has certain funding from the state. The impression that I get is that many charities spend as much time chasing the money, which is granted on a very short-term basis from year to year, as they spend performing their function, which is to provide support—in this case, to the most needy.

I have often thought that, if the funding was guaranteed on a three or four-year basis, that would alleviate the pressures on major charities—or, really, on all charities—quite considerably. Of course, some might lose funding altogether, which is, I am afraid, just something that will happen in life.

I am sorry that my question has been a wee bit long winded, but have I analysed that in a fair way? Do people in the charities spend a lot of time chasing the funding rather than providing the services for young people that they get up in the morning to provide—in this instance, to tackle the hardship of poverty?

Louise Goodlad: We are very aware of the balance between how much we spend on raising funds and how much we spend on our charitable activity. We keep a very close eye on that. When it comes to PEF, which is provided school by school, we have made a conscious choice not to pursue that, because we do not want to put our resource into it. We would need a much bigger team in order to focus on that fundraising, because it would involve having 300 relationships with 300 secondary schools.

We have to follow the money a little bit. So, where we have a relationship and we can access funding, we obviously do that, but we are not going to end up spending a lot more on people such as me and less on people such as our youth development leads, who are out helping young people. We want the money to be spent at the front line and not on administrators.

We have to make a really conscious choice about that, but part of the reason that our programme and our delivery do not grow at the same rate is that we are not able to secure the funds to grow them. It is a constant balancing act, I would say.

Jim Wallace: I think that what Fergus Ewing said is important. More sustained, guaranteed funding for services on a three-year basis would be welcome.

At Aberlour, we have had a lot of stability in relation to the funding coming in. We have closed very few services in the past six or seven years because of a lack of funding. Sometimes, good services can close through bad decisions. That is always regrettable. However, we have focused on good relationship management and on trying to deliver what we say we are going to do. We believe that that helps with sustainability. We have four-year contracts with some of our family support services down in the Borders, where we got a funding arrangement that was based on delivery.

The challenge for the third sector overall is that, if we are not delivering, our services will probably be cut and will come to an end, whereas services in the statutory sector can endure for years. We need to get to a position whereby we can not only add investment but disinvest in some things that do not work or do not deliver. That is a challenge for the statutory sector. It needs to say, "We are going to change this," or, "We are going to stop doing that," and there are certain things that prevent that. To shape a different future in terms of what we want for children and families in Scotland, we might need to look at disinvesting in some of the things that we do and reinvesting the money in innovative, new things that are proven to work.

At Aberlour, we have invested our own money in developing services. We do that sometimes in partnership—we will pay half the cost of a service in order to establish it and the local authority will pay the other half. We did that recently with a family support service in Falkirk. We put £90,000 of our own money in and, after a year of our delivering it, the local authority said, "This is working. We will now fund you for two years." The local authority has now expanded the service.

We are prepared to put our money where our mouth is, and we are prepared to deliver. That needs to happen across the board. There need to be reviews that ask whether services are still meeting the needs that they are meant to deliver on.

Sara Spencer: The Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland is a wee bit different from the other three organisations that are represented here because our funding comes through the Scottish

attainment challenge. The cost of the school day project is not about providing direct services to children and young people; it is about working with schools and local authorities on things such as awareness raising, professional learning, developing resources to involve school communities in dealing with financial barriers, good practice gathering, and so on, so it is a wee bit different as a project.

The fact that we have had direct funding that has come centrally from the PEF policy unit and that has been focused on national development has given us the scope to work in a range of different ways with a range of different local authorities and schools. That has allowed for a spread of approaches to the cost of the school day in the widest sense throughout Scotland in recent years. If we had been busy chasing pupil equity funding to work specifically in this school or that school, the project would not have had the reach and the impact that there has been so far.

I would also reflect on the benefit of local approaches such as local authority-wide approaches to such work. We had a partnership with Dundee City Council over three years that received local SAC funding. We could see that a local authority-wide approach could have a bigger impact than there would have been from our working in individual schools on awareness raising and involving children and young people in that agenda.

10:30

The cost of the school day project is on-going in Dundee because there was scope for a local authority-wide approach. It has statements of intent on how it will remove financial barriers for children and families, there is an on-going steering group and there is an education officer who runs things centrally. That is even with our having stepped away from that partnership. Local authority approaches and funding along those lines in relation to the cost of the school day project have been really helpful, because they mean that it can be embedded in the systems that are already there.

Maureen McAteer: I will be brief. Given that the meeting is specifically about the attainment challenge, I would highlight that the biggest chunk of money is weighted towards PEF, which is a challenge for the third sector. There are unintended consequences of that. Although we have managed to have quite stable contracts across our PEF portfolio, when staff are employed with the guarantee of work for only a very short period of time, it is difficult to have long-term planning and security. We know that relationships work. Therefore, if we had a system that could ensure that relationships are at the heart of how

we support our children and young people, we would get much better outcomes for families. I just wanted to make that wee point about the insecurity that is woven through the PEF system.

The Convener: That is a very powerful point.

Bob Doris: It seems like some time ago that Louise Goodlad was talking about good examples of working with families and young people in secondary schools on employability, linking with businesses, CVs, interview experience and so on. It is worth noting that figures that came out yesterday showed a record level—more than 95 per cent—of young people in Scotland reaching a positive destination, so we must be doing something right in schools. I am sure that the third sector is a key partner in making sure that we get it right. Good things are happening, convener.

I cannot help but say that, in Glasgow, attainment levels are well above the national average and the city has met the significant challenge of young people in deprived communities reaching positive destinations. I have got that out of the way, convener. I wanted to say that I am very proud of my local authority.

How do we map the role of the third sector within that and maximise the benefit of the third sector? In 2021, analysis of PEF showed that 43 per cent of headteachers said that they were collaborating with the third sector, which means that more than half were not collaborating with the third sector. There is a contradiction and a tension, because we want headteachers and school communities to have the flexibility to spend the PEF money as they see fit, but I would want to assure myself that they are maximising the wider opportunities that are out there, including by contracting with the third sector.

I would welcome comments on whether there is a need for a more formal role in how schools engage with the third sector. There is no guarantee that the third sector would necessarily get funding from PEF, but should a more formal process be gone through in spending PEF? Given that I mentioned Louise Goodlad, it is only right that I ask her to respond first.

Louise Goodlad: It is a complex landscape: there is Education Scotland, the regional improvement collaboratives—RICs—and the attainment advisers. There are lots of different bodies. Pre-Covid, a strategic group from the third sector came together with the Scottish Government and Education Scotland to have a conversation about the strategic overview of what was happening and how the third sector could engage with education. Maureen McAteer and I were part of that group. That kind of fell away and the focus understandably changed over the Covid

pandemic, but, for me, there is something challenging in how we navigate that.

I do not know how headteachers do what they do. They are amazing. For me, as someone in the third sector, in which there are so many offers and organisations, it is about how we make it easier for headteachers to see what is available, because they cannot be experts on everything. Does that guidance and co-ordination sit at local authority level or somewhere else? There are a lot of different forums and ways in which to do that. Again, it comes down to how we, as organisations, engage in the right places to share what we have to offer and make it as simple as possible for headteachers to understand what impact can be had. It all comes back to the question of what works. How do we show what works and get the right evaluation, so that they can make an informed decision?

I do not know whether that answered the question.

Bob Doris: Perhaps there is no ideal solution. I am just trying to work out how we can ensure that there is consistent engagement between headteachers and the third sector in spending PEF in the procurement of services. My local headteachers are well aware of the good-quality third sector organisations that exist in north Glasgow, and they make use of them.

I do not know whether Maureen McAteer has a suggestion as to how we can formalise or put structures around that. Today, the appeal is that schools and local authorities should be using the third sector more. How do we do that without telling them what they have to do? How do they keep that flexibility to spend the money as they see fit and still work collegiately with the third sector—as, I am sure, they do in my area? Maureen, do you have a suggestion?

Maureen McAteer: Yes, but it is probably not a popular one, because the empowerment agenda pushes that delegated authority very much down to school level.

To reiterate a wee bit of what I said earlier, there is certainly an important role for local authorities in helping with the co-ordination not just of what happens in school but of the interface with other bits of activity that happen across children's services, because otherwise it can feel bitty and fragmented.

We have the biggest successes where there are really strong partnerships, both on the front line—the team around the child, and the individual school—and right up through the structures that are in place with local authority colleagues in education social work, education psychology, and community learning and development. That is where we get the biggest bang for our buck—

when everyone is working collaboratively together, to the same end.

Bob Doris: That is helpful. It is about how we get to a structure around that, without a bureaucracy, and still have that local autonomy. Sara Spencer made a similar point about the local authority and schools and getting the balance right in procurement around that. Maybe I will go to Sara—or was it you who said that?

Maureen McAteer: No. Can I quickly come back in with one thing, though? There is something about equity. For example, a child or a young person might move into kinship care in a local authority area and get support from somebody in a school. That support does not then follow that child, because another school might have a different range of priorities that it funds through PEF.

We are seven years down the line and there are some things that we know are essential and that should be in place for every child in every family, because we have learned an awful lot over that period. I just wonder whether there should be a bit more focus on putting some of those big rocks into place while still allowing flexibility at the individual school level.

Bob Doris: Maureen McAteer has made an interesting point, which has been made to me before—that the money does not follow the child. An indicator of need and poverty within a school results in a financial sum to be spent on raising attainment within that school. Clearly, that does not follow a child when they go to another area.

I was going to ask Sara Spencer whether something around co-production could be a way forward. PEF is to be guaranteed over three-year periods, I think, to allow greater planning. School headteachers will want to talk to their parent councils and wider school communities, and they will want to make decisions that are based on the needs of the school—which sits within the wider community that the third sector is part of. Are there any good examples of co-production with the use of PEF moneys, or should we talk about co-production more in relation to the direction of some of those funds—keeping the school still in charge of deciding how that money is spent, but knitting in some of those third sector organisations? That might be pie in the sky, but I am trying to find a solution.

Sara Spencer: There are lots of different pieces of information, data and knowledge that inform what PEF is spent on in a school. It is really important that some of that data comes directly from children, young people and families on low incomes.

The cost of the school day approach is at the heart of that. It is about talking with children and

young people in a non-stigmatising way about where costs might cause issues or problems. It is also about doing the same with their parents and carers and giving them the opportunity to mention costs that might be of concern and where financial support might be required.

The process is about the voices of children and families being at the heart of identifying not only problems but solutions. Schools are often aware of the financial challenges and barriers for families. As many of the other witnesses have mentioned, the situation for families is increasingly difficult. The financial situation is really difficult and schools see that every day, because the financial circumstances for their children and families have changed and worsened over the past couple of years.

Having children, young people and families at the heart of considering financial barriers and saying what should happen in their schools is crucial. It is advised that part of the PEF spend should be decided through participatory budgeting. There are examples to draw on from some work in Midlothian in which we were involved a few years ago, which was led by parent councils.

There are exciting opportunities with pupil equity groups and pupil voice groups, which are common in many schools. Lots of cost of the school day groups are also springing up at the moment. Such groups give loads of opportunities for schools to work with children, young people, parent councils and other parents to get the solutions right in school.

We are talking about the value of third sector organisations such as those that are represented at the meeting. Listening to children, young people and their parents and carers about what value those organisations' services have brought to their lives, their school experiences and how they are able to engage with school is really powerful in and of itself. We should listen to that.

Bob Doris: My final question is for Jim Wallace. I mentioned that 43 per cent of headteachers report using the third sector. In my area, the third sector is hugely valued and many headteachers know its value. How do we increase that amount from 43 per cent and get significant involvement from the third sector in a way that keeps schools and headteachers in control of spending?

Jim Wallace: The challenge is capacity. I do not think that any of the organisations that are represented at the meeting would have the capacity to engage with every school in Scotland on co-producing services for PEF; it would be an immense undertaking. When we have gone into that arena, we already have a footprint of established family support and other services so we have a legitimate place to get on board. It

would be difficult for us to go into some areas to try to establish such involvement without that foundation.

10:45

I commend the alliance model that has been developed in Dundee, in which third sector partners are collaborating effectively and are trying to get out of the competitive scenario in which various third sector partners are looking for funds from the same sources. The work in Dundee is quite important in terms of how we go forward. There is the opportunity—although we are all here at the table—to say, for example, that Action for Children is best placed to deliver something, that Barnardo's could come into a space, or whatever, so that we use our resources as effectively as we can, instead of chasing money, which is not a helpful way of going about things.

Bob Doris: I thank Jim Wallace for that really good example of how the work could be done. I have no further questions, convener.

The Convener: Jim Wallace mentioned Action for Children and Barnardo's. In its submission to the committee, the Robertson Trust talked about displacement within the third sector, with the larger charities rolling over the smaller ones. Would you like to comment on that? Have you witnessed the marginalisation of smaller charities that the Robertson Trust talks about?

Jim Wallace: We do not want to see that marginalisation. There is real value in the small charities, as there is in the bigger ones. We have done collaborative work in Highland with Barnardo's and Action for Children, and we are working with the Highland Homeless Trust. There are other good charities, such as the Calman Trust. I see the value of the small charities.

It is hard for them, at times, to get into the space, so we must understand that we need to take competitiveness out of the sector. The third sector's biggest challenge is that we are constantly being urged to collaborate but are also being forced to compete with one another for tenders and so on. That is difficult.

Some of the tenders that Aberlour puts in—I assume that it is the same for Barnardo's—are pretty complex undertakings. Some of the smaller charities must really struggle to find the resources and capacity to enter the fray, so they probably need some assistance. We certainly see the value of small charities and do not want to dominate them. They should be encouraged into the space. We have partnerships with a number of small charities across Scotland; it is helpful to have such grass-roots connections.

The Convener: The tendering process is supposed to create a level playing field, but if the situation is as you have just described it, it is almost designed to create an uneven playing field, because the smaller charities cannot get—*[Interruption.]*

I am sorry—go on, Jim.

Jim Wallace: That depends on how it is done. Some tenders are complex and demand a lot of resource and time. The bigger charities have development units that work on such things or have people that they can pull into teams to do that work. It is very hard for smaller charities to do that. I have spoken to some that have said that they cannot possibly enter the process. The best thing that we can do is try to partner with them within our tender submissions. If local authorities were to encourage that, as they sometimes do, that would be a positive step.

The Convener: There is a real risk that the tendering process will go the same way as commercial tendering has gone with local authorities and other public bodies, in that it has become harder and harder for small businesses to get a fair share of what is available in the public sector. The same could be true for the third sector, so we should take note of that—in particular, in relation to the attainment challenge.

I turn to Stephanie Callaghan.

Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): Thank you, convener, and I thank all the witnesses for being here this morning. I have three questions to ask, but, before I start, I want to say that it is important to be clear that our teachers are trained as educators to work within large classrooms full of pupils, which I hope remains their priority. However, third sector organisations get children who are struggling to a point at which they are ready to learn, and it is really good to be hearing about that today.

It is also great to see that tackling poverty is being put front and centre in the work; we call it the poverty-related attainment gap for a very good reason. The impact of poverty on our children and their families is devastating.

The first of my three questions is for Sara Spencer, on parental mental health. How important is parental mental wellbeing, and how big an impact does the practical and financial support that families get have on children's learning? I know that it can be quite difficult to measure that impact; it is not always easy to work it out. Have you seen a substantial improvement in children's learning, progress, behaviour and so on?

Sara Spencer: We all know that poverty has a huge impact on parental mental health. It is

dangerous to the mental health of families to have the stress, pressure and anxiety of living in poverty. People have that constant weight on them as they try to provide the basics for their family.

There is an interesting link with how that plays out in schools for parents and carers. In my written submission, I mention that we did a bit of research recently on a resource called "Talking about costs and money at school". We are aware that it is difficult for schools to bring up the subject with parents, and that it can be difficult for parents to bring up concerns about costs and financial support with schools, so we wanted to dig into that a bit more.

In our research, we asked parents how it feels to engage with schools on such issues, and we were really struck by what came back. Lots of responses showed the power of the shame and stigma that surround poverty. On whether people had good experiences with schools, people talked about what they felt when they went to talk to schools. There were fears of judgment—people thought that their child would be judged as a result of their financial situation. People felt guilty that they could not provide what was needed for their child, whether that was a trip, resources or whatever else it was that they were approaching the school about. There was a huge sense of guilt, shame and fear, and we do not want parents and carers to have relationships like that with schools. That all ties together for families in the mental health, stigma and shame arena.

However, all the time, we see that schools can provide families with practical help and kindness, and that they understand the challenges that families are going through. Especially during lockdown, many schools have gone to huge lengths to support families in applying for entitlements and in signposting them to, and helping them with, financial support, because—as we know—many families experienced drops in income, job losses and so on.

Along with the negative responses that were filled with fear, shame and stigma, we also heard about brilliant things that schools were doing for families and about the impact that that had on how parents felt. Two things that were said stuck in my mind. One person said that they really notice when our schools are trying to help, and another said that it really feels like they have their back. That is really powerful for families in the context of the financial circumstances that many are currently living in. There is quite a clear link between good relationships, good parental involvement and engagement, and better learning for children.

It is essential that we look at stigma, how it affects things such as the uptake of support in all senses—although I am thinking of entitlements, in particular—and how it can be reduced.

Stephanie Callaghan: I have a question for Jim Wallace. I had a look at the planning and monitoring paperwork that you use to move young people forward. That work is quite similar to work that I have done in the past in co-ordinating education initiative projects. Will you tell us a wee bit more about co-production—about the impact of giving the young person power and control over their learning, how well that is helping you to start to measure things, and how that can be improved?

Jim Wallace: It is still fairly early days. We were prompted by the pandemic. A number of the children whom we work with are in our residential houses, because they cannot live at home. When the lockdown started, I thought that those places would become a bit like pressure cookers, with children not being able to get out to school and not being able to do a lot of other activities, but we observed something different. All the children were in the same boat, and they were a bit more relaxed. For some children, school is a place where there are a lot of tensions, and they have anxieties about going there. Learning outside school for that period was quite positive for some children, who said that they were able to get through more work and to do things differently. They started their school day a bit later, for example—a variety of flexible and personalised measures were put in place.

We put together a group to look at how we might work differently and create a different learning environment that would meet the needs of the children in a more flexible way. To do that, we have involved young people and our staff in discussions about how we can approach that differently. We have had support from the clinical psychologists who work with us. That is about trying to understand all the barriers that affect children's learning, including emotional barriers that relate to their low mood, low motivation and high levels of anxiety. None of those things can just be wiped away, but we can look at how we can address them and create a better place for children's learning.

We are still on a journey. We have not quite finished the review, but there are a few examples of our having set up individual plans for children and we are seeing some progress with that. I hope that we will report more on that initiative over the coming months and years.

Many years ago, there was off-site provision for children, but that was cut down. Some children do very well in mainstream schools. Obviously, they are the best places, but we need to consider how we can create the right environment and make changes in schools in order that we meet the needs of all children.

Some of our young people have spoken about learning support bases in schools and stigma,

because it is sometimes seen that the “bad” children go to those bases. We need to find a way to remove that stigma and to create a positive learning environment that is not about taking difficult behaviour out of a classroom and locating it somewhere else in the school, but is about looking at the child's learning needs and building on that.

I hope that that answers your question. We have not finished that journey yet; we are just on the road.

Stephanie Callaghan: It would be good if you could keep us posted on that.

That brings me to my next question, which is about wider support. In previous evidence sessions we have been told that the wider wraparound support from third sector organisations and from health, social work, youth work, autism and justice services is absolutely crucial to ensuring that children achieve their potential and do as well as possible.

11:00

We also have the early years work. There has been a huge investment in early years education and in work on things such as attachment—I know that Barnardo's does quite a lot of work on that.

How important is it to have wraparound care and interagency work? How can that work better? For example, could there be funding for joint teams, or something like that? Do you have any innovative ideas that have worked?

Maureen McAteer: Is it okay for me to come in?

Stephanie Callaghan: I am sorry—I was just looking at you, Maureen, but I did not name you.

Maureen McAteer: Thank you.

That is a really important question. Obviously, today's discussion is focused on the Scottish attainment challenge, but the attainment gap starts long before a child gets anywhere near a school gate. Although the expansion to 1,140 hours of childcare provides some support, it is about children having access to nursery care and is not necessarily about support for parents, strengthening the attachment relationship and building families' capacity to give their very young children rich learning environments so that, when they turn up at school, the gap might not be quite as big as it is currently.

Any early-level teachers that you come across will say that they would love more intervention and support to be available to families at that earlier stage. By the time a child gets to primary 1, some patterns are, unfortunately, pretty entrenched. I have talked a couple of times about the importance of the wider system in providing a

network of support to children and young people. That is particularly the case for those for whom there is complexity and who might, in order to fulfil their potential, need additional support beyond what is available universally. The local relationships are essential.

Just prior to Christmas, we did a survey with all our school-based staff about what the new normal was like and what issues were coming up for children and young people, now that they are back in school. The biggest concern among all our staff was the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people. Even among children and young people who were, prior to the pandemic, managing fairly well, a significant cohort have been really impacted by the lockdowns.

More families in which there is a child with additional support needs have been coming to our attention because, throughout the pandemic, services that were previously in place had, for understandable reasons, to pull back from face-to-face contact with families. Families often felt a bit like they were abandoned to navigate a really difficult period without the support that they felt that they needed.

All those things are important. On the mental health concerns, I do not need to tell anybody here that the waiting lists are enormously long. From our experience on the ground, we think that many children and young people who are on waiting lists could benefit from a community intervention. They might not need a child and adolescent mental health services clinical intervention. If holistic support was available at a universal or enhanced universal level, we would be able to support them, rather than their having to wait for months and months only to be seen as not fitting the CAMHS criteria.

We need to consider whether we can beef up the PEF approach to make available right across our communities, rather than in individual schools, some of the things that we know work and are important in fulfilling the needs of children and young people and their families. There is a need. In the whole system, we need to try to get kids who do not need CAMHS into more community-based interventions at a much earlier stage.

Stephanie Callaghan: You touched on lots of big and important issues. Certainly, in other evidence, it has been suggested that we should be focusing mainly on the 30 per cent of our children who have additional support needs and that all children will benefit from that, which was interesting to hear.

To go back to what you said earlier, there has been a focus on wellbeing and on people in their places. There is a drive to co-locate services in communities. For example, North Lanarkshire

Council is looking at having hubs where lone parents can drop their child at nursery and then not go home and be isolated but get involved in education, exercise or a cafe and social events. Is that the right way forward? Should we be looking at that, to complement and support the work that is going on with schools and third sector organisations?

Maureen McAteer: Those conversations need to take place with local communities, because they will keep us right about what would or would not work. However, judging from the feedback that we have had from the families that we support, people definitely want non-clinical spaces in their local community to which they can go and get a range of different supports, from very light-touch signposting to more intensive support, in a way that is non-badged.

We would never badge any of our services. For example, we might get funding to support families who are affected by substance use, but we would never badge a service in that way, because we want to remove stigma. That is because—truthfully—families have a right to support. Any family can find itself in a set of circumstances whereby it needs a wee bit of extra help for a short or a long period.

The Promise challenges us all to think about what additionality we can bring to prevent families from being broken unnecessarily and about what we can do to strengthen families and keep people together. However, that will not happen without some additionality at an enhanced, universal level.

Stephanie Callaghan: That is great. I have no more questions but I will make a point. The pandemic has shown that the rug can be ripped from under the feet of any of us at any time and that we should not blame people but should hold out our hand to help them.

The Convener: Sah-ra—sorry—Say-ra. I keep wanting to say your name in the wrong way. I apologise.

Sara Spencer: It is a very annoying name, I know.

The Convener: No—it is me being very dense.

Sara Spencer: Money is important. Getting money into families' pockets is absolutely crucial to everything that we have been talking about. It helps with the mental health difficulties that I was talking about earlier; it reduces stress and pressure; and it means that families do not have to cut costs on things that nobody should have to cut costs on, such as essentials for their families. We also know that there is a direct, causal link between more money in families and children's outcomes and attainment. That is why a focus on income needs to be core to everything that we do.

There are good examples of partnerships in schools that look to boost and maximise incomes. In your previous evidence session, Laura Robertson from the Poverty Alliance mentioned the maximise project in Edinburgh. Some of you might be familiar with the financial inclusion support officers—FISO—project in Glasgow, in which those officers are based in schools and work in a range of ways with families. That has produced astounding financial gains for families and has had an impact on working relationships in schools.

Just anecdotally, I note that I was at an online conference-type thing the other day, and a teacher said that, in her primary school, there was a family for whom there were issues with attendance and various other things. The school tried absolutely everything to improve the child's attendance. The teacher said that the one thing that made a difference was having the financial inclusion support officer there—it is a primary school in Glasgow—who could do the benefits check and get more money to that family. She said that attendance was fine after that. There were quite practical barriers to the child getting to school on time. That is telling as regards the impact that such approaches can have.

There are a lot of straightforward and simple things that can be done in schools. There should be clear and open communication in schools about the financial support that is available, including subsidies for trips and so on. It is important that there is universal information sharing because, as Stephanie Callaghan said, the rug could be pulled from under any of us at any moment—that will always be the case.

There is a lot that can be done in schools, as I said. Lots of partnerships can be made to help families to get that money into their pockets. It is important that, when it comes to the financial information and support that is available, there is a consistent offer across schools and local authorities. That is probably not the case at the moment.

Jim Wallace: I want to follow up on Sara Spencer's point about money. At the moment, we have an initiative in Tayside that is funded by the Robertson Trust and the Corra Foundation. Our family support services provide emotional and practical support, but we wanted to add a dimension of financial support. That involves looking at families' benefits, working with welfare rights services and writing off some of the debt that families are engulfed in, a lot of which is public debt, such as council tax and rent arrears. Local authorities have discretionary powers to help families financially through the provision of moneys under section 12 of the Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968 and section 22 of the Children

(Scotland) Act 1995. There are opportunities to use that.

We are testing whether, as well as helping families emotionally and practically, we can help them to address the impact of poverty and debt and put them on a course in life whereby they will have sustained outcomes in the long term, rather than just helping them with difficulties in the short term.

It is very early days with that work, but we paid off some debt for a woman who had many issues with her children. She started to have a much more positive outlook, which involved trying to get different housing for her and her children and starting to train as a hairdresser. She had moved from a position of being in despair and having no hope to one in which she could see a future for herself. Living in a family that is constantly under the pressure of debt is a pretty toxic situation for children to be in, so it is important that we can address family finances.

Just this week, we had some links with the Wise Group, which is working with the big energy companies to get some debt written off for families. As well as the direct services that we provide, it is important that we help families by alleviating the financial burdens that they are under, as Sara Spencer said. If those issues are addressed, problems with children attending school can disappear overnight.

The Convener: I appreciate those answers. We now turn to Natalie Don, who will be followed by Willie Rennie. It looks as though he will be the final member of the committee to ask questions, because Oliver Mundell has not returned from his break from the meeting.

Natalie Don: I thank everyone on the panel for their comments, which have been very helpful.

I want to ask about wraparound care, which Stephanie Callaghan touched on, and the work that is done with different organisations. We know that poverty—lack of money—is at the heart of the poverty-related attainment gap. Families' benefits have been cut this year, and the cost of living is rising; food and fuel prices are going through the roof. I am worried about the impact that that will have on children.

11:15

Children cannot thrive in a difficult home environment. Although we say that the issue is poverty, other issues can stem from poverty. The following problems are not restricted to families on low incomes, but living in poverty can lead to drug and alcohol abuse, mental health issues, domestic abuse and other problems at home. Children

cannot concentrate when all of that is going on. Families need support.

Jim Wallace touched on this matter, but I would like witnesses to expand on it by telling us how they ensure that the work of their organisation is aligned with other services, such as social work and health. Do witnesses think that that could go further, into debt agencies and women's or addiction services?

Jim Wallace: You have articulated the size of the challenge. All those issues have a massive impact on children and their learning. It is important that we do not focus only on educational support. We believe that the hours when children are in school are a small part of it; it is also about getting the right support to families and addressing issues. Problems spiral. If families are under pressure, domestic abuse and addiction can start or get worse.

It is important that we work together. When I spoke about Dundee, I said that alliance and collaboration between the third sector and statutory partners needs to be encouraged. That is because there are challenges if we try to deal with things in silos. For example, there is often a challenge when adult care services are blind to what is going on for children and children's services do not think about adults. We need better collaboration to deal with the challenges that families face. Significant money is allocated to family support in Scotland, and it is absolutely essential that we hit the right spot for that.

A few years ago, a big revelation for us was realising that it is about not only what we provide to families, but when we provide it. We started services in which we support families during evenings, weekends and public holidays, because families told us that their problems do not wait until Monday morning. They need a responsive service. Sometimes, families need lots of support for a couple of weeks until things get better.

Key to addressing the myriad of problems that you articulated is rooting at the centre what families tell us will be useful for them and what they need to help them to address the challenges in their lives, and not being afraid to go into that space. We have staff who, early in the morning, go into homes to support families getting children out to school and, in the evenings, to support them with bedtime routines, as I talked about earlier. We need a flexible response for families and cannot be confined to delivering our work Monday to Friday, 9 to 5.

Natalie Don: It is important that organisations do not work separately with no overall consideration of all the issues that a family or child face at home.

I am not sure whether any of the other witnesses want to speak on that, but I would like Sara Spencer to respond.

Sara Spencer: The refreshed attainment challenge and the wider picture of tackling child poverty—the national mission to end child poverty—will probably be useful and make sense for our organisation. We cannot narrow the attainment gap or improve outcomes for children unless we do something to reduce child poverty at the same time. All partners across Scotland are contributing to meeting our child poverty reduction targets. What happens in schools obviously has an impact on families, and there is an interplay with wider policies on housing, childcare and social security. It is really helpful to recognise that improving outcomes and narrowing the attainment gap cannot be done single-handedly through the actions of schools; there needs to be a wider view.

Given that I have started to talk about reducing child poverty as a way of improving outcomes for children and young people, I should note that schools are doing that already. There needs to be more recognition that the drivers of child poverty in Scotland are inadequate income from employment or social security, and the cost of living. If schools look at what they do through a poverty-aware lens, ensure that they are not adding financial pressures to families and ensure that there are not any barriers to children participating in all the brilliant things that are going on in their schools, that will help to bring down the cost of living for families. If help with financial entitlements is provided in schools, incomes will be boosted. Therefore, each and every day, schools contribute to reducing child poverty. It is really important to situate such work firmly within the wider work and policies on ending child poverty.

Natalie Don: Thank you. That leads me to my next question, which is on the cost of the school day. We have discussed the huge challenges for those on low incomes and the barriers that our young people face in relation to the costs of the school day. In its written submission, CPAG welcomes the Scottish Government's commitment to policies on

“digital inclusion, curriculum cost removal”

and

“trips and activities”.

The local examples that were provided in the submission were also very helpful.

However, with the cost of living soaring, I feel that the barriers will only be strengthened. Will Sara Spencer expand on the areas relating to the cost of the school day that she believes should be a priority? We talked a bit about stigma earlier, but that was more about stigma for parents. I am

interested in policies being carried out in a way that focuses on reducing stigma for children, too. Could you elaborate on that?

Sara Spencer: Oh gosh!

Natalie Don: I am sorry—I know that there was a lot in that.

Sara Spencer: Where do I start? There are things that would have an impact at different levels. At a national level, we welcome the Scottish Government's commitments to policies that will reduce barriers for children and young people at school. There is an urgent need to roll out universal free school meals in primary schools. As you know, that had been promised for August, but it has been delayed. We cannot overestimate the value of that support for families, especially in the context of the cost of living crisis, as you mentioned, and pressures from all sides for families. It is really important that that support be provided with speed and urgency, along with all the other commitments that have been made at a national level.

Regarding what might be helpful at a local level, we have quite a lot of learning about what helps to embed and sustain some of those approaches. I would like to see that being spread, shared and understood so that it can be taken on. There should be senior leadership at council level for that kind of work and resourcing to push the work forward in local areas. Those things are really important.

Although each school is individual and the challenges are different in every school and every area, there are some shared challenges with the cost of the school day. Sharing solutions at local authority level can be really helpful. Local leadership can support the great work that is already going on in schools. If there is no local approach, there is the risk of having pockets of good practice or of schools working in silos. There can be great practice but it might not get spread. There should be more sharing.

You mentioned reducing stigma for children and young people in schools. That is absolutely critical. In our work around the cost of the school day, we talk about reducing costs and the financial pressures on families. Part of that is about stigma for children. It can be hugely damaging to feel different or "other", or to feel unable to take part in things with peers. Reducing costs is part of that, because it would create fewer opportunities for children to feel different. Getting everyone to do the same kind of thing might be about reducing or covering the cost of trips, activities and clubs for children and young people. The way that schools do things has a direct impact on the stigma that children feel. Being aware that stigma can exist for

children and young people from households on lower incomes is a critical first step.

I have one last point. I think that, if adults decide how we should reduce stigma for children and young people, we are probably going to be on to plums. I think that the pupil voice, pupil equity and social justice groups that exist in schools, which I already mentioned, will be best able to tell us how stigma is reduced for them. That is an area that we would like to look at more with children and young people.

That was a broad and long answer.

Natalie Don: That is really helpful. The idea of stigma is important. You mention free school meals. The way that things are done in practice in schools matters. I remember that, when I was at school, you got a free school meal by standing in a separate queue and getting a dinner ticket, and you were in a small group of people who got one. It is nice to know that things like that have been phased out. It is important that we continue to work with young people, as you have said, to discuss how we can ensure that stigma is reduced.

I am conscious of the time. I can leave it there if other panel members want to come in.

The Convener: I appreciate that. Our final round of questions will be led by Willie Rennie.

Willie Rennie: Thank you for all your evidence. It has been compelling.

I am interested in being precise about what we want to change about the attainment funding. We are spending hundreds of millions of pounds. We need to know that that is working effectively. I take all the points that have been made about the wider society, but hundreds of millions of pounds is being spent directly with councils and schools and we need to ensure that it is being spent effectively. The written submissions refer to things that could be done and improvements that could be made, and I would like to draw them out. Perhaps I can start with Louise Goodlad. What precisely would you improve about how attainment funding is used and allocated, Government policy and so on? What would you like to change?

11:30

Louise Goodlad: I would like more transparency and clarity about where the funding has gone and what impact it has had. I would caveat that by saying that that information might well be out there somewhere but, if it is, it is not easy to find. If it is out there, it should be made easier to find so that we are really clear about what works and what is having an impact.

I would also like greater connectedness between the education system and the third sector. That happens in pockets; we heard in the previous session about the northern alliance and the Dundee alliance, which are great, but we need more consistency and greater visibility with regard to how the third sector can be part of the conversation.

Willie Rennie: Is that what you mean when you refer to “regional or national forums” for sharing best practice? Why do they not exist just now?

Louise Goodlad: The regional improvement collaboratives already exist. However—and I am speculating here—I have often found that education looks within, not outwith, education. Going back to what Bob Doris said, I think that this is about striking a balance between enforcement, which we do not want, and encouragement. Perhaps there needs to be stronger encouragement to work with the third sector and to understand what it can offer and bring.

If I were First Minister for a day, I would be looking at whether the third sector should have a direct route to the attainment challenge. For me, the question is: how do we stop talking about funding and start thinking about the best opportunities for young people? If there were enough funds for interventions that we can see work, schools would not necessarily have to have them imposed on them but could choose to put them in place, and some third sector organisation would not have to go to four different places to try to fund them.

I know that I am not giving you a direct answer, but—

Willie Rennie: No—your answer had good precision. Do you want to come in next, Jim?

Jim Wallace: It presents a difficult challenge with regard to governance, given the fact that it has been taken to such a low level—that is, the level of every school. If local authorities had had the money and were then accountable and had to report to the Government on how it had been used, with more clarity in that respect, that might have been useful. However, the danger with such an approach is that it might have robbed individual schools of control.

My feeling, therefore, is that you cannot have your cake and eat it. If you want higher-level governance, you will need a mechanism that involves reporting back through all local authorities on what each initiative is doing, and I am not sure that that is there at the moment. We can report on the things for which we are funded, whether they are successful and what their benefits might be, but how is that sort of information assembled at a more macro level? I am not sure how that works. What are the key, global measures of success? I

suppose that the main one is whether the attainment gap is narrowing, which is something that is measurable.

I think that it would be quite hard to wind this back. It was decided that decision making should be put in the schools, with the headteacher having the power to choose the best way of spending the money. However, what we really want to know is how things are being affected at a macro level. There is, for me, a wee governance loop that is missing.

Was that helpful?

Willie Rennie: It was very good. Do you want to respond, Maureen?

Maureen McAteer: My response will probably highlight some of the same themes and things that have already been mentioned.

First, we need longer-term funding, as that will allow us to embed change in school communities over time and to make that strategic link at local authority level so that we can use the totality of our resources in a strategic and coherent way that makes sense.

Willie Rennie: Bob Doris rightly pointed out that the PEF will have three-year funding, but in your submission, you say that it is not clear whether that will feed through to you yourselves getting three-year funding.

Maureen McAteer: That is right.

Willie Rennie: Why is that?

Maureen McAteer: Because I do not think that there would be an expectation on schools to commit to that three-year funding approach. The idea that if something is not working, you should stop it and try something else is very much woven into the guidance. Nobody is going to advocate throwing good money after bad, but the fact is that there is no quick fix to some of the complex issues that some of the children and young people and their families have. It takes a long time to build relationships and trust and to get the right support in place to take the child or young person and their family on a journey that ultimately improves their outcomes.

Willie Rennie: That probably brings us back to the sharing of good practice and collaborative working that Louise Goodlad was talking about. Is it a question of ensuring that headteachers, third sector organisations and everybody else involved share the understanding that, now that there is an opportunity to commit to longer-term funding, it needs to be seen perhaps as an example of best practice?

Maureen McAteer: Yes, and I think that some of the measurement with regard to SAC has been weighted in favour of academic aspects such as

literacy and numeracy. A lot of headteachers have told me that they are desperate to focus on health and wellbeing, but not long after they returned to their schools post pandemic, they were being asked to provide tracking information on children's literacy and numeracy. No one is saying that that is not important, but, as soon as you are forced to report on certain things, it can weight where you put your attention. We need to take a balanced approach to that, because the pandemic has had an enormous impact on the health and wellbeing of our children and young people and we have to think of ways of retaining a focus on that.

Willie Rennie: Sara, would you like to come in?

Sara Spencer: If we are talking about having an awareness of poverty—*[Inaudible.]*—facing and also action to tackle some of that in schools. I could go on for ever about good examples in schools and the many different interventions that have been designed to improve participation for children and young people. As far as awareness and action are concerned, I think that, through the attainment challenge, there has been real progress over the past few years on getting that understanding and on having the motivation to put things in place. The SAC evaluation said similar things about the progress that has been made on awareness, but it also made it clear that there were still gaps and that, in schools in areas where perhaps there are fewer children in poverty, there was less awareness of these things.

We need an on-going process of embedding these ways of working, and we need to continue to have a strong focus on that. Sharing learning on what works, too, will be helpful.

Willie Rennie: Thank you very much. I just want to finish with what, for me, summed up how PEF funding can work very well. When we visited the school in Dundee on Monday, we talked to a wee boy who described what he was like before and after the intervention. He said that, when he used to get things wrong in class, he would lose his temper, stamp his feet and be out in the corridor, shouting and bawling; now he just rubs the wrong thing out and starts again. I thought that that brilliantly summed up how that kind of intervention can work and make a real difference for young people. We just need more of that.

The Convener: That was a fantastic anecdote, and I cannot think of a better way of concluding this evidence session.

I thank Jim Wallace, Maureen McAteer, Sara Spencer and Louise Goodlad for their evidence to the committee's inquiry into the Scottish attainment challenge. With that, I conclude this morning's meeting. I ask members to reconvene in private on Microsoft Teams to consider the other items on our agenda.

11:40

Meeting continued in private until 13:04.

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