



The Scottish Parliament  
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

## EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE

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Dear John

As you may be aware, in anticipation of the Scottish Government's proposed bill on education reforms, the Committee has undertaken some preparatory work, engaging with external organisations and individuals. I am writing to you on behalf of the Committee to highlight the emerging thinking and themes from evidence at this early stage.

### **Background**

Since our preparatory work predates the introduction of the bill, the Committee has not undertaken a full and exhaustive parliamentary inquiry at this stage. The Committee has, however, had the opportunity of engaging with hundreds of people on the proposed reforms. On that basis, the Committee considers that it has built up a substantial evidence base to date and encourages the Government to take heed of the themes emerging from these discussions. The Committee will circulate this letter to all those people and records its sincere thanks to everyone involved. The Committee will seek their repeat engagement if and when the Government introduces a bill to take forward the reforms.

As further background, you may wish to note that the Committee's early scrutiny has included:

- Two evidence sessions with educationalists, where the Committee's focus was on the evidence base for the Government's proposals and what the evidence base suggests would be effective to promote equity and excellence in an education system. In particular the Committee was interested to know more about the OECD's wider work on the Scottish education system, the measurement of educational outcomes and what changes need to be made in Scotland to provide a more accurate dataset;
- An evidence session with Education Scotland to explore how its role will

change under the proposals and how the organisation would manage such a change;

- Two external visits, to Glasgow and Peterhead, to hear directly from young people, parents, teachers, and local authorities about the proposed reforms and the support that would be required for their effective introduction. The Glasgow school visit had a focus on primary schools and special education schools and the Peterhead school visit focused more on secondary schools.

This letter is certainly not a substitute for reading the evidence gathered. Links to official reports, submissions, and write ups of the informal meetings are included in an annexe to this letter. The Committee does not have a collective position on the proposed reforms at this early stage and sees its role in writing to you as feeding themes of evidence into the consultation response assessment stage of policy making. The balance of support for the various proposed reforms is best assessed by reading the attached evidence.

The most useful contribution the Committee can make at this point is to highlight some of the areas that stakeholders have suggested would benefit from further consideration and clarification. The Committee would appreciate a response detailing your current thinking on the issues below, as well as an assurance that they will be taken into account in the policy development process.

## **Issues**

### *Purpose*

Some witnesses and attendees suggested that the Scottish Government's consultation document could be clearer about the rationale for the proposals; exactly how they would improve attainment including helping to close the attainment gap; and how they would work in practice.

### *Process*

A number of focus group attendees questioned why the Regional Improvement Collaboratives (RICs) had been put in place before other elements of the reforms that require legislation had been scrutinised. This was considered perhaps to pre-empt the conclusions of the consultation process. The Committee would be grateful for the Scottish Government's views on this.

### *Accountability, roles and responsibilities*

A central theme that requires much greater clarity is to define the lines of responsibility and accountability between schools, the new RICs, local authorities and Education Scotland. It is not clear what role each has and whether the new structure is intended to supplement existing collaborations. . Linked to this is what level of collaboration will be expected on RICS, to what extent they will be strategic, to what extent they will be operational and how schools and individual teachers and other staff can be involved in meaningful collaboration. It should also be noted that there appeared to be a low level of awareness of the work of the Northern Alliance from teachers in Peterhead focus groups. This is of interest given it is often cited as a best practice model for reforms aimed at aiding collaboration between schools.

The improvement plans of the Northern Alliance and the West Partnership look very different. The Northern Alliance's plan is very detailed and specific, whereas the West Partnership takes a more minimalist approach. The West Partnership's improvement plan was very high level and explicitly stated that it was not the place of the West Partnership to supersede local authorities' improvement plans.

Education Scotland appeared to expect a much deeper model of collaboration between local authorities, perhaps on the Northern Alliance model, rather than the West Partnership's model and indeed the model envisaged by some of the educationalists. Education Scotland indicated that much of its curriculum support would now be at a regional level. There is a risk that there is a mismatch between what local authorities (and ADES) consider the role of RICS to be and what Education Scotland and the Scottish Government expect.

Clarity on these issues would also provide assurance in relation to the potential for duplication of bureaucracy, something that has been seen by many teachers as a damaging influence on their ability to deliver the Curriculum for Excellence. In addition, it would be useful to understand in more detail the roles and responsibilities under the reforms including for education authorities. For example there was some concern expressed about the proposal to remove the requirement for local authorities to develop separate local improvement plans, to be replaced by the new requirement for regional improvement plans. In addition, there was concern about the geographic size of the areas covered by a number of plans (Northern Alliance) and the population size of other areas (the West Partnership).

Another question that was raised was what happens to the relationships between organisations such as colleges and third sector organisations that currently engage at education authority level with the education system, for example in relation to supporting young people deciding their future pathways. Under the reforms would colleges, youth organisations and others require to make contact with all local headteachers?

There was also uncertainty from those who support or deliver the education of young people who are outside of formal educational environments of schools or colleges, such as Community Learning Development practitioners, on what the position of these settings would be under the proposed structures.

### *Headteachers' Charter*

The Committee heard that the capacity of headteachers and their schools to absorb additional responsibilities will, of course, not be uniform across the country and there is a potential risk to effective implementation if the correct support is not provided and the capacity of a school, or school education as a whole, to implement reforms is not assessed. A central question raised in discussions was whether the impact on different types of schools has been assessed, including smaller and larger schools, schools from different geographic areas and areas of different levels of deprivation, and of course between primary, secondary and special education schools.

The distinct pressures of primary and secondary schools and also special education schools were clear in visits to Peterhead and Glasgow, including the impact of resources and staffing levels on the ability to introduce changes (this includes

current teacher shortages in some areas, the lower complement of staff in primary schools compared to secondary schools and the ability of schools to employ or pool a business manager to provide support on financial and other matters). For example, a point raised in sessions with both headteachers and academics was that many, particularly primary, headteachers teach on a weekly basis. This is either because they are Teaching Heads and their working week is predominantly class based or because they are providing cover due to current staff shortages. It was unclear how more responsibilities could be managed by teachers working in these circumstances.

Linked to this is whether the level of pressure a school is under will be taken into account before changes would be introduced, and whether the Government would introduce changes on a 'lockstep' basis.

Other specific points raised included:

- whether some or all elements of the charter will be in the legislation or whether the legislation will be limited to the creation of such a charter. In this respect, some teachers noted that much of the Scottish education system is based on guidance from agencies;
- how headteachers would be accountable for delivery of the terms of the charter such as in relation to parent, pupil and community involvement in school life. At present this could be covered in the performance appraisal process with education authorities and also in school inspections. Some parents questioned how the new duties were enforceable if there were issues with a lack of parental involvement in school life;
- whether the charter amounts to a material change to the role of heads that impacts on the terms of their employment and, if so, whether the ramifications of this has been assessed;
- whether focussing a charter on headteachers reflects the collegial nature of running schools and whether refocussing it as a schools charter has been considered;
- whether new responsibilities becoming part of the role of headteachers might unintentionally deter some teachers from seeking promotion to this level;
- how inspections will change to reflect the additional flexibility offered to headteachers, for example in relation to the Curriculum for Excellence; and
- whether more autonomy over staffing, which was welcomed by a number of headteachers, would have any wider employment law implications.

#### *Education Workforce Council for Scotland*

The strength of opinion on this particular proposal was notable from teachers, headteachers, other affected professionals and a number of parents. Themes included support for the GTCS model, the historically significant role the GTCS has performed in establishing teacher standards and the standards the GTCS currently sets. Another common observation was the value of having a professional body specifically for teachers as this guards against a diminution of the perception and status of teachers with parents and wider society. It should be noted that these comments were often made in isolation meaning that the wider merits of registering other professions was not assessed in as much detail. In one committee evidence session experts questioned whether this issue should, in fact, be on the face of the bill. The suggested changes are extensive and complex and might be better dealt with separately.

## *Communication*

The Committee appreciates that its contact with many of the young people, parents and teachers that it met was the first opportunity that people had had to consider the reforms. As you can see above these discussions generated a lot of constructive comments but also raised a number of questions on how reforms would work in practice.

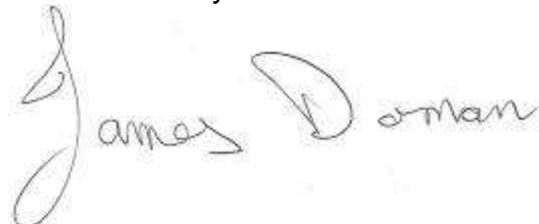
Understandably teachers, parents and young people had concerns about the impact of reforms given the pressure on the teaching workforce at present in some areas and the associated experiences of young people in schools. On that basis, in considering the evidence, the Committee would also invite the Government to give priority to ensuring lines of communication with these groups are as strong as possible and future documents on reforms are as accessible as possible to ensure a clearer understanding develops of what is being proposed. In addition, there is a need to set out to these key stakeholders what the positive impacts might be; how any impact of bringing in changes on capacity would be mitigated through support; and what form that tangible support would take. Ensuring this is articulated and this support is prepared would be fundamental to bringing in any reforms successfully.

## **Conclusion**

The Committee hopes that you find the above feedback based on our preparatory discussions of use to you as you consider what steps to take next. I reiterate that, in providing you with this note, we have not as a Committee taken a collective view on the issues raised with us. The Committee is keen however, at this stage, that you take the views expressed to us into account and we look forward to working closely with the Scottish Government in the future on the subject of education reform.

The Committee looks forward to receiving your reply.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "James Dornan". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'J'.

**JAMES DORNAN MSP  
CONVENER**

## Links to the work of the Education and Skills Committee on education reform

### Evidence from educationalists

The Committee took evidence from two panels of educationalists on 29 November 2017 and 6 December 2017.

#### *Official Reports*

- [Official Report of the meeting of the Education and Skills Committee on 29 November 2017.](#)
- [Official Report of the meeting of the Education and Skills Committee on 6 December 2017.](#)

#### *Submissions and correspondence*

- [Royal Society of Edinburgh, 23 November 2017 \(Amended 4 December 2017\)](#)
- [Tracey Burns, Senior Analyst, OECD, 23 November 2017](#)
- [Frank Lennon \(personal submission\) 29 November 2017](#)
- [Danielle Mason, The Education Endowment Foundation, 29 November 2017](#)

### Evidence from Education Scotland

The Committee took evidence from Education Scotland on 13 December 2017, primarily on its changing role under the proposed reforms.

#### *Official Report*

- [Official Report of the meeting of the Education and Skills Committee on 13 December 2017.](#)

#### *Submissions and correspondence*

- [Education Scotland 7 December 2017](#)
- [Commission on School Reform 1 December 2017](#)
- [Educational Institute of Scotland 4 December 2017](#)
- [Colleges Scotland 6 December 2017](#)
- [Royal Society of Edinburgh 6 December 2017](#)

### Evidence taken in Glasgow and Peterhead

The Committee visited Glasgow on 15 January 2018 and Peterhead on 29 January 2018. The Committee held a series of visits to schools and other meetings at both locations and spoke to hundreds of young people, parents, teachers and others. The Committee also took formal evidence from representatives from local authorities in the West Partnership and the Northern Alliance in Glasgow and Peterhead respectively.

### *Official Reports*

- [Official Report of the meeting of the Education and Skills Committee on 15 January 2018 \(Glasgow\)](#)
- [Official Report of the meeting of the Education and Skills Committee on 29 January 2018 \(Peterhead\)](#)

### *Visits and focus groups*

- [Notes of visits and focus groups undertaken on 15 January 2018 in Glasgow.](#)
- [Notes of visits and focus groups undertaken on 29 January 2018 in Peterhead.](#)

### **Other submissions**

The Committee's received a number of submissions on this topic.

- [Youthlink Scotland 4 July 2017](#)
- [Simon Needham 27 November 2017](#)
- [Lorna Forsyth 11 January 2018](#)
- [Colleges Scotland 24 January 2018](#)
- [Banchory Academy Parent Council 29 January 2018](#)
- [Port Glasgow High SSTA 30 January 2018](#)
- [Arthur Cormack 1 February 2018](#)