



**OFFICIAL REPORT**  
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

# Education and Skills Committee

**Monday 29 January 2018**

**Session 5**



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**EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE**

**4<sup>th</sup> Meeting 2018, Session 5**

**CONVENER**

\*James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)

**DEPUTY CONVENER**

\*Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab)

**COMMITTEE MEMBERS**

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP)

Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab)

\*Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green)

\*Richard Lochhead (Moray) (SNP)

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP)

Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con)

Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD)

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

\*attended

**THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:**

Laurence Findlay (Moray Council/Northern Alliance)

Maria Walker (Aberdeenshire Council)

**CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE**

Roz Thomson

**LOCATION**

The Rescue Hall, Peterhead



# Scottish Parliament

## Education and Skills Committee

*Monday 29 January 2018*

*[The Convener opened the meeting at 17:22]*

### Decisions on Taking Business in Private

**The Convener (James Dornan):** First of all, I apologise for starting late. We got caught up in another meeting.

I welcome everyone to the fourth meeting in 2018 of the Education and Skills Committee. I am pleased to convene a meeting of the committee in Peterhead this afternoon, and to welcome all members, witnesses and observers. I am very grateful that so many people have made the effort to get out on a cold afternoon to come here. It is a great turnout.

I shall provide some background. The committee is responsible for scrutinising the Scottish Government's education policy. In recent months, we have been taking evidence on the education reforms on which the Government is consulting. The result of the committee's work will be recommendations to the Government on the reforms, including how they should be changed and improved.

Today, we will hear from education authorities that sit on the northern alliance, which is a regional improvement collaborative that covers a huge area from Argyll to Shetland. The Government wants other areas of Scotland to follow the north's lead and to have more collaboratives of education authorities.

We know that teacher recruitment is a big issue in the region—it was one of the reasons why we were keen to come to the north-east today. After the meeting, we will have a more informal discussion on all the reforms. That will start at about 6 pm.

We have received apologies from a number of members, some of whom took part in other parts of our programme for today, including Ruth Maguire and Gillian Martin, who were with us earlier for local visits on the impact of Brexit and school reforms. We have also received apologies from Liz Smith, Tavish Scott, George Adam, Oliver Mundell and Mary Fee. Helen Shanks, from Aberdeen City Council, was due to appear as a witness: unfortunately, she is unwell.

Agenda item 1 is consideration of whether to take in private two items at our next meeting next

Wednesday back in Edinburgh. Are members content to take in private our consideration of our response to the Scottish Government's consultation on education reforms at that meeting?

**Members indicated agreement.**

**The Convener:** Are members also content to take in private consideration of our work programme at our next meeting?

**Members indicated agreement.**

## Education Reforms

17:25

**The Convener:** The second item of business is education reform. I welcome the witnesses to the meeting. Laurence Findlay is the corporate director of education and social care at Moray Council and interim lead of the northern alliance, and Maria Walker is the director of education and children's services at Aberdeenshire Council.

I understand that Laurence Findlay intends to make a short opening statement before we move to questions.

**Laurence Findlay (Moray Council/Northern Alliance):** Thank you very much, and good afternoon. The northern alliance is a collaboration between eight local authorities across the north, north-east and west of Scotland: Aberdeen City Council, Aberdeenshire Council, Argyll and Bute Council, Western Isles Council, Highland Council, Moray Council, Orkney Islands Council and Shetland Islands Council.

Our shared vision is to improve the education and life chances of our children and young people. In order to remove the barriers to learning and to improve children's outcomes, the collaborative seeks to build on the strengths of shared service development, to create professional networks and to deliver continuing professional development. The alliance exists to make a difference to the lives of children and young people by ensuring that the professionals who work with them collaborate for improvement and impact.

We aim to work together to reduce inconsistencies in the system, to strengthen the support that we provide to all schools and practitioners across the alliance and to make best use of our collective resources. It was required that regional improvement collaboratives be established by the end of October 2017, but it should be noted that the northern alliance councils have been working together on joint projects for a number of years. The alliance initially came together in 2015 to address some of the collective and wicked issues that we have faced, including teacher recruitment and retention, and it has evolved since then.

As the convener alluded in his opening remarks, the reach of the northern alliance is vast—it covers 58.4 per cent of the landmass of Scotland, but represents a small percentage of the population. However, the eight local authorities all share many similar challenges and, in response to the education governance review, the alliance has sought to develop the culture of collaboration further. That has resulted in the sharing of expertise in many areas, including curriculum

development, school estates management, early years and integrated children's services, and community learning and development.

Partnership working has enabled the northern alliance to deliver programmes on emerging literacy and leadership development, which are already benefiting schools, teachers and—most important—young people across the region. The raising attainment in literacy, language and communication workstream provides direct support to practitioners in 47 per cent of primary schools across the alliance.

A key strength of our alliance is found in its commitment to distributed leadership at all levels. That approach has allowed flexible and organic partnerships that cross professional and geographic boundaries to emerge. We advocate a bottom-up approach, which is reflected in the origins of a number of our workstreams—for example, the equalities group—and, more generally, in the practitioner-informed approach that shapes all our activities.

To summarise, we are a committed learning collaborative. As such, we aim to continue to develop and to learn as programmes are embedded and developed. We are committed to working in partnership nationally, regionally and locally, and we welcome wider collaborations and learning that develop impact and drive improvement across the country.

17:30

**The Convener:** Thank you very much for that. We have identified a number of themes for discussion: I will work through each in turn. I will kick off with a question under the first theme. Will you tell us more about how the northern alliance came about? You mentioned the literacy programme. What other ways does the alliance add value across such a wide geographical and diverse area?

**Laurence Findlay:** I am happy to start off the response to that question. The alliance believes in organic growth. We are very much a coalition of the willing, and we are keen to focus not just on education, but on wider children's services.

As I said, the authorities came together because of the teacher recruitment and retention issues that we were facing. However, we quickly realised that we could add significant value by coming together where our resources could be pooled to greatest effect.

We are keen on looking outwards in terms of system innovation and improvement. We are keen to encourage our colleagues in schools, our headteachers and leaders of learning to work in a borderless and cross-border way in order to focus

on some of the major issues that were challenging us all. One such issue is literacy. We considered that we could take a programme that focused on the early years and early-level literacy and upscale it across the region, which we were able to do by using additional resources that were given to us by the Scottish Government.

As eight individual local authorities, we would not all have been able to do that because of scale, cost and so on. The northern alliance allows us levels of development and innovation that we would not all be able to achieve individually.

We are all clear about our individual identities as local authorities and our individual areas of responsibilities, but we come together using our self-evaluation to focus on the areas where, as a collective, we can have the biggest impact and make the greatest difference to children's lives.

**Maria Walker (Aberdeenshire Council):** We have tried to focus on what the data tells us across the northern alliance. Laurence Findlay has talked about early literacy. There are also issues about how to define poverty in a large rural area and how headteachers support young people who are in poverty in affluent areas, for example. We also wanted to look at early numeracy—not for the very early years as we were doing for literacy, but more about what maths development happens at primaries 3 and 4 and in secondary schools.

We have, as far as possible, tried to focus on the areas in which we know, collectively, that we have an issue on which we can work together.

**The Convener:** The area is geographically wide and diverse. Does that give rise to any issues when sharing your work?

**Laurence Findlay:** That is a challenge for us, but we are very good at using technology as much as is possible. As I said, we cover almost 60 per cent of the country's landmass. We encourage our teams and colleagues to use videoconferencing, audioconferencing and so on as much as possible. There are times when people need to get together for development purposes, but we keep that to a minimum and encourage the virtual-meeting approach.

In our draft regional improvement plan, which will be submitted tomorrow, we are quite keen to extend that approach and the notion of the virtual classroom to workforce development and workforce planning, and to look at how to roll that out and extend it across the collaborative.

**Maria Walker:** We realised early on that we must be disciplined about having a structure. We started well because of our culture of collaboration—maybe that was happy chance. Within months, we realised that we needed to work out when to meet. The education directors

have a fortnightly meeting—they have a teleconference at half past 8 on a Tuesday morning. Everybody attends; it is the forum through which we clear a lot of our business.

We also meet once every six weeks in Inverness, Aberdeen, Orkney or wherever. That meeting is when we consider the bigger issues and look forward. We did not want it to be a directors club; we wanted to make sure that the leadership involves everyone else.

We have tried to make sure that our heads of service, our managers and the headteachers get a chance to meet in a particular way, too. It is necessary to have a structure—minuted meetings need to be held, and there must be clear areas of responsibility on the business side of things and on the more developmental proactive side.

**The Convener:** Surely it must be Ross Greer's turn to hold a meeting soon.

**Richard Lochhead (Moray) (SNP):** Good evening. A consequence of the fact that I have been in Peterhead since 10.30 am meeting lots of teachers is that I have about 5,000 questions, which I will try to distil down to two or three.

In our discussions with teachers over the past few weeks, we have considered the proposed education reforms, which include regional collaboration, and an issue that has come up is how deep that regional collaboration should go. We have education authorities, schools and the Parliament, which has a role to play here, too. How deep should regional collaboration go?

**Laurence Findlay:** I think that it should go very deep in taking the holistic view of a child's life that I mentioned earlier. From the early stages of our development, we were keen not to be seen as a collaborative that focused only on educational policy and development in the context of the national improvement framework. Although we must definitely focus on literacy, numeracy, health and wellbeing, employability, developing the young workforce and so on, as outlined in the NIF, many children and young people in our schools need different support, so it would be wrong to take a narrow educational focus. That is why we are committed to going to a further level of depth on youth work. The draft regional improvement plan is in with the committee's papers, and you will see that community learning and development runs through it.

The issue comes back to the idea that it takes a village to raise a child. It is not just about the school; it is about looking at all the services that local authorities manage: education, children and families, social work, CLD and youth work. We need to go quite deep and not just have a narrow focus on education.

**Maria Walker:** We also have to be clear about the different roles in education. We see ourselves as local authorities that come together to collaborate in those areas of work in which we are better together. However, that does not take away the responsibility that we have as local authorities to bring about improvement and work together to ensure that education plays a vital role for our young people and, in particular, those who are most in need of it.

For me, the issue is what added value the northern alliance provides, what bits are for me, as the director of education for Aberdeenshire Council, and what bits are the collaborative areas. If a school is being inspected or has been inspected and it needs a bit of support, I frequently need to consider who should provide that support. That is a key area that we need to think about. The local authority is there to support and to work with all of its schools, but through collaboration with other local authorities, we can make the learning for the teachers and the classroom practice deeper.

For me, the big issue is that we need to be clear about the different roles in education: the role of the local authority, the role of the regional collaborative and the role of Education Scotland. We also need to be clear about where policy ends and implementation begins. Those are areas that we still have to work on together.

**Richard Lochhead:** We have had some really good examples of shared best practice, which teachers in schools—particularly those in the north-east of Scotland—appear to have benefited from. That is good news, but the northern alliance has been going for three or four years. As you explained, it was instigated to tackle the number of teaching vacancies. As I am the MSP for Moray and Laurence Findlay is Moray's director of education, I want to ask what progress has been achieved by the new ideas and initiatives of the northern alliance on the on-going issue of filling vacancies?

**Laurence Findlay:** Since our initial summit in 2015, significant progress has been made across the northern alliance. We have worked closely with partners in initial teacher education—particularly the University of Aberdeen, the University of the Highlands and Islands and, now, the University of Dundee—on innovative routes into teaching, such as the distance learning initial teacher education, or DLITE, scheme; initial teacher education run by the UHI for remote and rural areas; and support for existing employees to retrain as teachers. We have shared various incentives, and, at times, we have gone into competition, because we are all trying to get teachers.

Most importantly, we have collectively raised the profile of the issue of teacher recruitment and

retention. Nobody was talking about it, but the north-east authorities—the former Grampian authorities—gave it a focus at the 2015 regional conference. We said that things were going to get worse and they have got worse. The issue is not just northern or north-eastern; we hear of schools across the country—including in the cities—not being able to recruit and retain teachers. We have given the issue a much-needed platform, and we are starting to see a fair degree of national action to address it.

**Richard Lochhead:** The Scottish Government is promoting more regional collaboration, and you have said that it is important that it is not an education directors' club. When I speak to the profession, many teachers ask how the bureaucracy of regional collaboration can be supported at the same time as local government faces cuts, as do the central staff who support schools.

It is clear that there is a lack of awareness among teaching staff about what the northern alliance does, what it has achieved and how its agendas are set. If the collaboration is bottom-up, how do teachers and staff in schools influence its agenda?

**Maria Walker:** It is true that teachers do not know much about the northern alliance. If you ask teachers about the early literacy project or ask headteachers about the work on poverty, they will know about those projects. I am concerned less about the fact that they do not know about the northern alliance and more about whether the products of the northern alliance have an impact on learning and teaching across the north-east. That is the work that we are trying to do.

We do not think that the collaboration will add to bureaucracy. We are trying to make sure that the best practice across the region has impact. The work is often done by a local authority member of staff in a local authority school. Local authorities are collaborating on materials development, curriculum development and teacher training for the numeracy work, which will impact on schools and classrooms. It does not really matter that it is a northern alliance collaboration—what matters is that teachers are getting the chance to have high-quality CPD on a particular area that is of concern to us.

**Laurence Findlay:** We have started to see examples of bottom-up development, such as on the equalities issues that I mentioned earlier. We collectively identified issues that we were all grappling with and needed to address, and staff came forward and asked what we were doing to support lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex young people across the northern alliance. Front-line staff said that we were not doing enough, and asked to set up and get

together in a group to start some focused work, which we gave permission for. We are seeing an increase in that sort of example.

**Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green):** I am keen to explore the issues of accountability. At the local authority level, it is broadly understood that decisions that are taken by the department for education children's services are scrutinised and overseen by elected councillors and other relevant representatives. How does that accountability work on the regional level when you are covering eight local authority areas?

17:45

**Laurence Findlay:** We have agreed a governance structure, which should be in your papers. We have a regional improvement forum that meets every six weeks, as Maria Walker said, and we have a regional improvement advisory forum that meets quarterly. That brings in colleagues from universities to give some academic oversight, and from Education Scotland and the Care Inspectorate to apply some scrutiny to our plans and the work that we are leading. We also have a convention of conveners that plans to meet twice a year. Those are our key political leads for education and children's services from the eight local authorities. We have a clear governance structure built in, although it is still in its early stages. We are currently developing ways of working so that we have clear lines of reporting on our improvement, measures and so on.

**Maria Walker:** The accountability remains with each of the local authorities. We have been very clear about that, and it is what the conveners wanted as well. There are different kinds of accountability. Because we are a collaboration of the willing, mutual professional accountability has to be built in. If someone says that they will do something, they have to do it. We all have particular areas that we lead on in the workstreams, so there is that kind of general accountability and there is light-touch governance by us as directors.

We agreed with the conveners that, although they would meet, if there was a big decision to be taken, it would go back to the local authority, and that is how we have kept it. The example that I always give is that, if a school in Aberdeenshire does not do very well in an inspection, that is an issue for Aberdeenshire and not one for Helen Budge in Shetland—it is for us to support and deal with and it is not part of the collaboration. We can draw on help from the collaboration, but the accountability still rests with the local authority. It is important that both officer and political accountability is worked out.

**Ross Greer:** I am keen to follow up on the idea of the northern alliance as a coalition of the willing. The northern alliance plan says:

“Given it is an alliance of the willing partners rather than a formal decision making structure, it will not be part of the formal governance structures of each of the eight authorities.”

Under the Government's proposals, we are not heading towards coalitions of the willing but heading towards legislative regional improvement collaboratives. What impact will that have on you? Will it be sustainable to maintain your current format for governance and accountability when you are no longer a coalition of the willing?

**Laurence Findlay:** I think that we would still be a coalition of the willing, and we have got such a clear structure that it would easily chime with what is being proposed in the suggested reforms.

**Maria Walker:** There is a danger that there would be a couple of tiers. It goes back to my theme that we have to be clear about what the different roles are in Scottish education and who does what. If there was legislation about the regional collaboratives, we would have to be very clear about that or there would be duplication. We also have to identify who is responsible for particular areas of the work. Both for our parents and for the wider community, and for you and other elected members, it is important that we understand who is accountable for what, because that has been difficult. It has been easy for us because we have grown organically, but we have remained local authorities that come together. What we are doing as the northern alliance is the added value, although, as Mr Lochhead said, we need to be clear about the added value that we are giving. We need to be careful or we could have duplication.

**Ross Greer:** How does your regional approach work in practice if you do not have unanimity among the eight local authorities? Have you proceeded with five, six or seven authorities?

**Maria Walker:** Yes.

**Laurence Findlay:** Absolutely. Eight local authorities make up the northern alliance, but we do not all need to be involved in all our improvement projects at the same time. Equally, if I decided that my council should work with Falkirk or Stirling for a specific project, that is allowed—no one would give me a row for doing that. The alliance is about encouraging partnership and a sense of looking outwards to where the best practice is that would best meet local needs.

**Ross Greer:** It is a voluntary regime.

**Laurence Findlay:** Yes.

**Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab):** You have talked about a coalition of the willing. We have just

come from a focus group with primary and secondary school headteachers. The majority of them have had no dealings with the alliance; they were also not very clear about what you do. Where they were clear about your role, they were not exactly enthusiastic. They mentioned that the alliance has produced 16 workstreams. There seemed to be a sense in which those are in conflict with other bits of policy aimed at driving down responsibility into schools. How can that circle be squared?

**Laurence Findlay:** We have tried to look at a number of issues at the same time. We have looked at the fact that, as local authorities, we are getting smaller; we are losing resources and our capacity for improvement to support schools is reducing. There are also a number of national improvement initiatives that we are all struggling to resource and drive forward. We also have the teacher recruitment and retention issues and so on.

We have tried to identify the areas that we are collectively struggling with and, where we consider that we can, we will pool our collective resource—limited though that may be in some areas—to start adding value. We are still early on in that process. Although we have been together for a few years, a lot of the early focus was on teacher recruitment and retention. It is really only in the past year or so that we have started to look at the improvement programmes.

We are very conscious that we must involve people at school level. The literacy project is a prime example of that. The next steps in that project will be to look for our local leaders of literacy, because having one person leading that programme across all the schools that we have in the northern alliance is unmanageable. We need people locally in order to drive forward the programme, so that we have the bottom-up approach and distribute that learning and leadership across the piece. That is something that we have to get better at doing.

**Johann Lamont:** With respect, the message in the rest of the approach is that the leaders on literacy are the leaders of learning in schools—that is, headteachers. You do not need to get someone else to do that; there already is someone there to do it.

Is there a difference between a coalition of the willing and a coalition of the legally obliged, which is what you are now going to have?

The coalition is massive—everywhere I have ever been on my holiday in my life is contained in the area covered by the one coalition—and I get that it came together out of necessity. Would the model work were it to be imposed?

**Maria Walker:** That is an issue. I am also pondering your comment about the teachers.

It is really important that we focus on those areas where collaboration will make the difference when we are trying to do this work. There is no point in coming together for things that we are already doing well on or that are working well within local authorities.

I understand completely what you are saying about the teachers and the headteachers. However, I point out that a lot of the council officers responsible for implementing and developing policy, such as additional support needs work and community learning and development, have come together willingly. At the beginning, we focused on teacher recruitment and some curriculum issues, but those officers wanted to come together because they were learning a lot from one another and they were trying to find efficiencies in how they were supporting practice or developing action plans and so on.

An area that we need to think about is how a local authority functions in supporting its schools. A lot of that is to do with the middle-tier officers, and in that regard the northern alliance is—

**Johann Lamont:** It seems to me as though there is an inconsistency between authorities voluntarily coming together and having a structure that they are obliged to engage with at the same time as having an approach that says that some responsibility will be devolved down to schools. Do you accept that there is a contradiction? If you acknowledge that, we can move on. We are doing something slightly different here—we are testing a proposal that is not quite what you are doing.

**Maria Walker:** Yes, I accept that point.

**Johann Lamont:** I have a question about accountability that relates to the role of Education Scotland. I presume that Education Scotland does not drive the northern alliance. Do you think that, as the lead player on regional improvement collaboratives, it should?

**Laurence Findlay:** No. Education Scotland is a key partner. We already have a regional lead officer from Education Scotland, who has provided significant support as we have put the plan together, and we have had other support on some of the key developments that we have been leading on.

The northern alliance would welcome the decentralisation of resources from Education Scotland. A complaint that I hear regularly from my schools in Moray is that Education Scotland has had a strong focus on the central belt. It would be useful to have the development function decentralised and spread more equitably across the country. We see Education Scotland as an

active partner, but there are other partners. I am thinking of other nationally funded agencies that could provide a more efficient and effective service in a regional manner, such as the Scottish Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research.

**Johann Lamont:** You have talked about inconsistency. Do we not celebrate diversity? Is there not a danger that, in tackling inconsistency, we will impose uniformity? That goes back to the contradiction between devolving power down to schools and empowering headteachers to make decisions.

**Laurence Findlay:** There is inconsistency in the support that we can offer to schools. Because the local authorities vary in size and have different financial situations, the improvement offer that is provided can sometimes be variable across the piece, which will result in some schools performing really well and others performing less well. It is consistency of support that is required, which can be achieved through collaboration rather than uniformity.

**The Convener:** I have a question that leads on from that. How might the day-to-day job of a headteacher change as a result of the proposed reforms? How do you see the relationship between the regional collaboratives and headteachers taking greater control of their schools?

**Laurence Findlay:** The role of a headteacher is huge. It is evolving and it is demanding, and it can be achieved only through distributed leadership. I say that as a former secondary headteacher.

The northern alliance is keen to identify who our champions are across our headteachers. We have 569 primary schools, 92 secondaries and 18 special schools. Across the northern alliance, we have a huge number of schools and a huge pool of talent. Equally, we have many teaching headteachers who are struggling to release themselves from the classroom to lead their schools and to innovate. We are keen to identify who our champions can be when it comes to leading learning and to get them buddied up with one another. The notion of twinning headteachers is important. The headteachers in Moray all work well together, but sometimes they need to get out and meet people from Aberdeenshire or Highland to share practice and to openly challenge one another on their practice. That is extremely important.

**The Convener:** How will that impact on headteachers' day-to-day job? Will the process that you have described make life easier for headteachers in doing that job or more difficult?

**Maria Walker:** To answer that, we must ask what the role of the local authority is. The big

issue—I am sure that this explains some of the feedback that you have received—is that, at the moment, the local authority is the body that headteachers identify with and the one that provides most of the support. How does the local authority fit in with the regional collaboratives? We do not just have regional collaboratives and headteachers; the local authority, too, has a role to play.

**The Convener:** I accept that. However, as the draft regional improvement plan is written, it is clear that headteachers will have much more control in their schools and much more focus on what they are able to do. When we have the regional collaboratives, the local authorities will still have a role but it will not be the same as the role that they have at the moment. How will that impact on the day-to-day running of a school by a headteacher? I am not saying that we should forget the local authorities, but their role will change. Will that change, along with the other changes, make the job of the headteacher easier or harder?

18:00

**Maria Walker:** A number of issues must be clarified. What are the regional collaboratives doing? Are they adding value to local authorities? Are they doing the bits of work that local authorities are better doing with other local authorities? What about local authority functions such as supporting schools and quality assuring schools? Will those functions remain or will they go to the regional collaboratives? Work needs to be done to clarify what the different roles are.

The short answer is that what headteachers should expect from the regional collaboratives is more support on curriculum development and teacher education. Those are areas in which the regional collaboratives can add value. However, there are other areas that are to do with being part of a local authority that must be clarified.

**Johann Lamont:** What is the balance between the school improvement plan and the regional improvement plan? Anxieties were expressed in our focus group that, once a regional improvement plan with 16 workstreams is in place, it must impact on and direct the school improvement plan, leading to the loss of the energy that presumably drove the idea of devolving responsibility to school level. Is there a limit on school-level decision making?

**Maria Walker:** The school improvement plan should be for the school to develop, and, as we know, that plan should be based on the headteacher's self-evaluation. The regional improvement planning that we have been trying to do looks across the northern alliance area and

identifies where we have big issues that it would be better for us to collaborate on, on the basis of good, hard evidence. I accept that it is still early doors, but the hard evidence showed that we definitely had to do something about early literacy, particularly early literacy teaching in the classroom; that we definitely had to do something about numeracy, particularly in the middle stage of primary 3 and primary 4; and that we definitely had to do something about the broad, general teaching of maths. There were things that we could see by looking at attainment—

**Johann Lamont:** Did that apply everywhere? Did you look at every secondary school?

**Maria Walker:** No, we would not ask every secondary school. However, when we look at the totality of the northern alliance's data, we see a definite issue. Of course, that does not apply in all schools—

**Johann Lamont:** It may be a definite issue at the local authority level or it may be a definite issue at the school level; the question is from where the issue should be resolved and from where the resources are to be directed. The focus group wanted to know what has primacy. If resources are drawn on the basis of a plan, is it the local plan that draws the resources? An issue may matter in one school but not affect any others. Are you saying that the resources must be directed where there is a bulk concern across the massive area that the northern alliance covers?

**Laurence Findlay:** We will target the collective resources where they are most needed. If we focus on numeracy—

**Johann Lamont:** The school plan does not have primacy.

**Laurence Findlay:** It would still have primacy because, if a school identifies a particular issue, we have a duty collaboratively to provide the support that is required. The school would have an ask of the regional improvement collaborative, if you like.

**Johann Lamont:** The school can ask, but it is not guaranteed an answer. The policy that we are testing recommends both regional collaboration and schools having self-determination. Am I right in thinking that those two aspects are in conflict with each other?

**Laurence Findlay:** I do not think that they are in conflict with each other. We just need to be clear about the difference between what we can achieve regionally and locally. I strongly believe that a policy direction such as developing the young workforce is best pursued locally, because, as the region is diverse, the employment needs of each area are very different. We can share practice

regionally, but the development must take place locally.

We are looking to make improvements in maths attainment in secondary schools across the piece—across all eight local authorities—and we think that we can better pool our resources to support schools, because most of our schools are looking for support in that area.

**Ross Greer:** I would like to take a step back to where your plan comes from. Some of the headteachers to whom we spoke today told us that your plan essentially came out of the blue. They suggested that the most effective way in which to build a regional plan was to start with a local plan, which could potentially be a cluster plan or a local authority plan, and to draw up the regional plan from those plans at a school level and a council level. They said that that was better than having a plan that is imposed regionally. What process produced your plan? Did it come from those individual school-level plans?

**Laurence Findlay:** We looked at all the major issues that I mentioned earlier, which we were all struggling with individually as eight local authorities and in relation to which we felt that we could collectively make a difference. We then looked at our individual national improvement framework plans, which were due in by the end of August and which are, obviously, local authority-level plans, and we used the key themes from them to produce the regional improvement plan. You should bear in mind that we have not had a long time to pull the regional improvement plan together. The next stage, after we submit the draft tomorrow, is to carry out testing by getting views from parents, young people, teachers, headteachers and so on, so that the final plan that we submit in the autumn takes full cognisance of everyone's views.

**Ross Greer:** Am I right in saying that the ability of your plan to be drawn from the individual school plans depends on the local authority plan having done that?

**Maria Walker:** Absolutely.

**Ross Greer:** Has that happened in all eight local authority areas?

**Laurence Findlay:** Absolutely.

**Maria Walker:** If you look, you should be able to see a thread between a school plan, the local authority plan and the original plan.

**Ross Greer:** The headteachers to whom we spoke expressed the concern that that thread was not at all obvious.

**Maria Walker:** I think that that is probably right, given the timescale that we have had in which to produce the plan, but we have to start somewhere.

We are trying to guard against the plan being another added plan with boxes that teachers and headteachers have to tick. We are taking issues from all the local authorities and from what we know we need to be doing.

**Richard Lochhead:** Earlier, we discussed how the northern alliance is a collaboration that covers about half of Scotland's landmass. I assume that its agenda is dominated by rural issues, given the local authorities that are involved in it. We also discussed the pupil equity fund. The number one education policy priority of the First Minister and the Scottish Government is closing the attainment gap, and the people equity fund, which appears to be a popular fund, is clearly a part of that.

There has been a lot of positive feedback on the fund, and schools are using it differently in different areas, which is perhaps to be expected. However, I would have thought that one of the key roles for the northern alliance would be to consider that kind of issue and ask what the best way is to close the attainment gap in rural areas and what lessons can be learned from the use of the fund. Is work in that regard under way, or is it something that you are planning to do?

**Laurence Findlay:** That work is certainly under way. On 7 March, an event that Mr Swinney is coming to speak at will bring together headteachers from across the northern alliance to examine best practice around the use of the pupil equity fund.

Members of the northern alliance believe that being poor in a rural area can be extremely challenging in terms of issues of accessibility, transport and so on. We are aware that there are moves afoot nationally to examine how funds such as the pupil equity fund are distributed, because Scottish index of multiple deprivation data is not always appropriate in our context, as it looks at a mass of population that does not always exist in a rural area. I am aware that a group is considering those issues nationally. We are represented on that group, and I hope that it will report positively.

**Richard Lochhead:** Related to that is the wider debate about the impact of poverty on attainment. Clearly, not all issues can be sorted out by teachers and staff in our schools. There are wider societal issues. For example, if children are not fit to learn when they come to school, for various reasons, the things that we are trying to do cannot be addressed through education. Are those issues being considered as part of the rural agenda as well?

**Laurence Findlay:** Absolutely. You will see that the issues of community learning and development, youth work and wider children's services run through our draft plan. That goes back to my opening remarks about the fact that we

are not looking at education in isolation as a school entity; we are looking at all the factors that can support a young person's journey through school and, therefore, improve their attainment, including parenting and so on.

**The Convener:** We are coming to the end of the session—time seems to have flown. Before we finish, I would like to hear from both of you what your general views are on the headteachers charter, over and above how it touches on day-to-day work.

**Laurence Findlay:** There seems to be a disparity between primary and secondary teachers, particularly in local authority areas in the north and the north-east, where there are a lot of teaching headteachers. There seems to be a feeling in some of the literature that we impose curricular policies in schools. However, we do not; we provide guidance to schools, and many of our headteachers welcome that guidance, because they are teaching headteachers who do not necessarily have the time available to innovate, develop and so on. However, in a secondary setting, there are very often headteachers with larger teams around them, who can develop the curriculum and so on. Across the northern alliance, headteachers already recruit their own staff and have flexibility with regard to the make-up of their teams, their promoted-post structures and so on. Therefore, my view is that there is not a huge amount in the charter that we do not already empower our headteachers with.

**Maria Walker:** I agree with that. I will get back on my hobbyhorse and say that it would be helpful to clarify the roles and responsibilities in each of the areas within education in Scotland. We want headteachers to feel that they are part of the local authority but that, within that area, they have as much power and responsibility as they need. If the charter enables us to be clear about that, that is a good way forward. However, the devil is in the detail.

**The Convener:** That is absolutely true, and it is why we are trying to get as much feedback as possible through evidence sessions such as this one.

One thing that came out of the focus groups that we spoke to today was that the flexibility that headteachers have seems to vary from local authority to local authority. How does that work within something like a regional collaborative when it comes to rolling out best practice?

**Laurence Findlay:** I return to what I said earlier: we are not looking for uniformity across the piece; we want to celebrate diversity and all the differences that our schools have, but we want to provide a vehicle to enable our headteachers to look outwards. We have not been very good at

doing that, traditionally; instead, we have been good at doing things 32 times over as individual local authorities. We are providing a way of encouraging people to look beyond their local authority boundaries to another part of the country where they might get support or potentially create a professional learning network of practitioners in a particular subject area.

**The Convener:** However, if the local authority is telling teachers that they cannot look beyond their area because they do not have the necessary flexibility, that does not give them the opportunity to do that. Is that right?

**Laurence Findlay:** That is right, but the message that we are giving out corporately is that we want our teachers to be able to look outwards and innovate with their colleagues. That might not be the view across Scotland, but it is certainly the aspiration of the northern alliance.

**The Convener:** I thank you both for the evidence that you have given us, and I hope that you will be able to stay for the informal discussions on the reforms.

That is the end of the formal meeting. I thank everyone for their attendance.

*Meeting closed at 18:11.*

This is the final edition of the *Official Report* of this meeting. It is part of the Scottish Parliament *Official Report* archive and has been sent for legal deposit.

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