

Education and Culture Committee

Notes from Round Table event on 8 September 2015

Chair: John Pentland MSP

Present: Nine officials representing Scottish local authorities, a mixture of Finance and Education Departments.

PTA

The first part of the discussion was dominated by reference to the policy on pupil teacher numbers. Points made included the following:

- Quality of teachers is more important than numbers and is the biggest factor in improving attainment.
- Focus on PTR affects efficiencies available without positive effects on attainment.
- A need for local flexibility to appropriately reshape services and identify opportunities not available while meeting the policy.
- Education is not just delivered by teachers, and the impact of savings is falling disproportionately on non-teaching staff including classroom assistants including at the lower end of those with ASN.
- The “artificial limits” are impacting on the quality of education.
- There are recruitment difficulties, particularly in rural areas without costly incentives. Suggestion some are recruiting poor/mediocre teachers in order to meet their ratios.
- Highlighted the ratio is historical and arbitrary and differs across the country. It is forcing inequality into the system.
- No evidence that this will improve attainment.
- Focus should be on quality, raising skills. However by reducing support staff places higher burden on teachers.
- Reduction in quality improvement officers risks teacher development, they can pick up on issues across a region and address
- Is only an input measure and not clear how it will improve attainment and outcomes.

Note one authority is considering ignoring PTR as the penalty is less than the potential saving their policies would accrue.

Knock on Effects on other services.

- Education has been protected from worst of cuts in the last few years.
- There was significant impact on other services across authorities from the protection of education budgets.
- Other services affected include community services, youth services, school support.

- With cuts to Community and Learning and development staff, affecting youths and adults alike. Biggest impact of these cuts likely to fall on most vulnerable, those needing most support.
- Impact is also on lowest paid workers as their jobs are more likely to be cut.
- Early intervention services being cut.

Further cuts?

- Likely, and as education is protected its share rises and future cuts hit even harder elsewhere.
- General no guarantees education can continue to be protected.

School Closures

- Difficulties around inefficient closing small schools, even if desire is to optimise classes and learning. Difficult to rationalise the school estate.
- No evidence small schools achieve better attainment.

Attainment and the budget

- Focus needs to be on recruiting quality staff and investing in learning and development of teachers.
- Focus must be on outcome, pre-school experience is vital to close the gap – home setting and a more holistic picture is required.
- Would be happier with a target to improve attainment (by x% perhaps) and given (full?) freedom to address.
- Wider issues are also relevant, economic development of the area, workforce planning and freedom to work will all ultimately improve child's learning.
- Head teacher role is critical. But can be hard to get good ones (for Primary) without lowering standards.
- Good deputy heads prefer to stay in larger schools than take over smaller ones.
- Inflexibility in pay scales?
- Local flexibility is key to improvement.

Flexibility to take action?

- Have in relation to moving spend and resources around region. Local action is best delivered by local knowledge of area, pressures and needs.
- A realigned school day could release resources (with no impact on attainment) but not possible to also meet PTR.
- National distribution resources not working (for all), in particular attainment fund does not address deprivation holistically and in particular misses pockets in areas.

- Suggestion could spend money better (more strategically?) if given freedom/opportunity.
- PI's drive behaviour and could focus activity on PI as opposed to outcomes.
- Suggestion of industrial relations impacts through jealousy of protection afforded to teachers.

Sharing services

- A few Local initiatives, heads of small schools secondary subjects.
- Clacks and Stirling have some but not significant reduction workload as different policies required to meet different administrations' needs.
- Needs to be grasped seriously or not at all.
- However local knowledge is vital.

Others

- Early years policies will require a huge and expensive investment in infrastructure.
- Focus on early years is required but hard with other existing constraints.
- Goes beyond classrooms and into poverty and deprivation generally.

DC

Sept 15.