

Education and Culture Committee

Notes from Round Table event on 8 September 2015

Chair: Chic Brodie MSP

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

Factors which create the most pressure on the school budget:

- Most participants agreed that pupil numbers were the key factor in driving up costs.
- Some authorities indicated that, over the next five years their primary school numbers could increase by more than 30%, with secondary school number increasing by more than 20%. Because of the new pupil-teacher ratio commitment, any increase in pupils leads to an increase in teachers.
- Overall the pupil-teacher ratio took away flexibility for local authorities to adapt to their own local needs and circumstances.
- Participants mentioned positive aspects of GIRFEC, but noted that although schools now had excellent information on pupils' needs, they did not have the funds or flexibility to meet those needs.
- The Curriculum for Excellence and associated assessments also created a barrier to meeting pupils needs, although the main factor was, again, the pupil-teacher ratio commitment.
- Some rural authorities found the main budget challenge was around school maintenance, but that the pupil-teacher ratio meant that funds could not be transferred to maintenance and other programmes.
- In general, the pupil-teacher ratio was criticised as an input measure, and not one that focussed on outcomes for children. The point was also made that research indicates that outcomes are improved by quality of teaching, not class sizes.
- It was noted that the ratio was developed without any input from local authorities and that the ratio was set at an arbitrary, historical date that cannot be moved.

Whether councils can, or would want to, protect the current % of the council budget going to education, and what efficiencies can still be made:

- Participants questioned whether the existing % needed to be maintained to achieve better educational outcomes.
- Recognised Education largest area of spend, so protecting education means larger cuts elsewhere.
- Overall, view was the pupil-teacher ratio stopped councils pursuing efficiencies in service delivery.
- Main example was the wish by some authorities to stop the McCrone agreement on non-contact time.

- For those with recruitment issues in the North, feeling was GTCS controlled teacher recruitment too tightly, and should recognise some English and other qualifications.
- Detailed discussion on rural school closures. Group felt the independent commission had too much power to stop a closure, if the council, and most of the community all agreed it.
- Councils noted that already work ongoing to share services/work collaboratively in a number of areas.
- In rural areas, it was felt technology, broadband etc could have a big impact on efficiency of service, but only if the infrastructure was in place, which it currently is not.

On the “attainment gap”:

- Alcoholism was cited as a major issue for families that was not currently recognised to the extent that it should be, compared to drug addiction.
- It was felt that the attainment fund should invest in leadership not just in numeracy and literacy, as the impact of strong leadership on schools was potentially huge.
- The attainment fund was criticised for only focussing on urban deprivation, and not covering areas of rural deprivation.
- Need for joined-up working by all council departments and others and for early intervention.

Finally, one thing you would change in Scottish education:

- Vast majority mentioned the pupil-teacher ratio.
- Need to focus on outcomes not input measures.
- Recognise that variation and local choice is a good thing.

Allan Campbell
SPICe
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