

Chair: Mary Scanlon

## **Budgetary pressures**

The main theme to emerge from this group was the budgetary pressures being experienced by local authorities, particularly around—

1. The Scottish Government's policy on **maintaining teacher numbers**, which seriously restricts local authorities' ability to take flexible decisions. Protecting teacher numbers can have a serious knock-on effect on other budgets and it was noted that teacher numbers cannot be touched even with falling numbers in some secondaries. A possible alternative approach would be to negotiate a minimum staffing standard across Scottish schools. This would still provide confidence that teachers were being retained in the classroom;

The constraints experienced by local authorities because of the teacher number policy was described as being akin to "financial planning in a straitjacket".

2. The difficulties involved in **closing schools**—
  - it was noted that strong political leadership was vital if some less viable schools were to be closed (which, on occasion, could be done easily with political buy-in). There's also considerable bureaucracy and cost involved in closing a school;

There may be a relative measure of protection for education but further cuts would still impact "to a very considerable extent" on education—

- "there's nowhere else to go"
- "we can't get through the next two years unless something else gives".

It was considered that teacher support services (particularly around ASN) would be cut.

Further challenges will arise though inflationary pressures and having to fund pension increases. It was pointed out that some senior officials can spend three times more of their time on budgets than other matters, which is "ridiculously disproportionate".

Finance officials stressed that questions should still continue to be asked about the value for money being delivered given the amount of money spent on education.

## **Early years**

Investing in the early years was described as being the 'best bang for the buck' that local authorities could enjoy.

However, the current approach was characterised as placing too much emphasis on the number of hours provided. Instead, there has to be much more focus on supporting families and on making schools ready for children, rather than the other way round (as is currently the case). Where families are struggling, sometimes the very worst thing to do is take their children away; the family has to be supported.

### **Shared services**

There was an agreement that some shared services, for example, around payroll, could be “done tomorrow”. However, it was stressed that any financial savings arising would be very small in comparison with the far greater pressures discussed above. It was further noted that efforts to share services could create difficulties, for example, around giving away power and decision-making, and taking into account each local authority’s statutory duty to provide education.

### **Teacher recruitment**

There is currently a serious national problem with recruiting qualified teachers and with workforce planning; this has “see-sawed between feast and famine”. Some local authorities have attempted to recruit from abroad, for example, from Germany and Dubai.

There was a general agreement that the quality of teachers coming through teacher training recently has been significantly better.

### **Testing**

There was some discussion about the proposed introduction of national assessments, and some concern about the use to which these would be put; assessment should be done for diagnostic purposes. The quality of teaching will make a difference, not testing.

It was also asked why, if there is supposedly such a decline in attainment, more children are getting higher. Various criticisms were made of the Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy.

On a broader note, it was considered that there was too much focus on educational inputs rather than outcomes; “the pre-occupation with inputs holds us back from being great”.