

Letter to City of Edinburgh Councillors 11th February 2023

Dear Councillor

I am writing to you concerning the recently published budget proposals. Given these only went live last week, there has been very little time for proper scrutiny, or for detailed consideration of their likely impact on pupils and staff. Indeed, I think it could be fairly argued that basic democratic oversight and engagement has been rendered virtually impossible by this compressed timeframe (something I will expand on later). Thus, this email and the accompanying documentation will not be as thorough and detailed as I would like. Nevertheless, I aim raise to some very important points, and I hope you will give them your full consideration. In an effort to aid you in your deliberations, I intend to divide this into three main sections: concerns around, and evidence related to, some of the specific proposals; questions I think need to be answered before you make any final decisions; concerns around timeframes and democratic engagement. I am, of course, happy to discuss all of this with any of you, either individually or in your political groups, at any time, and it is the intention of the EIS to make a deputation to the full council on 23rd February.

Specific proposals contained within the budget

Note that the limited timeframe means that there has not been time to consult as widely as I would wish with experts who would have insight into the likely implications of each proposal. Thus, I am confining my comments to a few key areas. It should not be inferred that other proposals are unproblematic – the only conclusion you should draw is that you are basing essential decisions on limited and partial evidence from a small group of people, and that these proposals have not been subject to the levels of interrogation and oversight that the citizens of Edinburgh are surely entitled to expect.

Transition Teachers

“The role of the transition teacher is to support learning across P5 to S3 in relation to closing the poverty-related attainment gap. The successful candidate will work with the cluster school team to analyse data and plan interventions to support pupils and will work with the QIEO for Transition to ensure that we have consistency across the city in P7/S1.”

This quote is from a CEC advert for a permanent transition teacher post from December 2022 (the fact that CEC was appointing people into these posts in January of this year raises a whole other set questions – you can find the advert here <https://www.myjobscotland.gov.uk/councils/city-edinburgh-council/jobs/class-teacher-transition-dean-park-primary-school-310215>). You will note that there is absolutely no reference to covid recovery etc. CEC created these roles in an attempt to address one of the key reasons behind the attainment gap – the failure of many children (especially those from the most deprived backgrounds) to make a successful transition from primary to secondary education. The attached paper “Transition teachers – theoretical underpinnings” gives a very brief overview of some of the reasons why the creation of these permanent posts was a welcome initiative, and an additionality that should be maintained.

In ECS6, where the reasoning behind this cut is laid out, it says:

These posts were allocated to provide additional support during the pandemic and can now be removed without impacting on core teaching activities or core support activities. This proposal has been subject to consultation with Head Teachers and they have advised that these are areas that they would prefer to target over other core activities.

The EIS would like to make the following points:

If this was additional pandemic support, why were people being appointed to permanent transition roles within the last month or so (let's set aside for now the morality of appointing people to posts that, presumably, senior officers knew might cease to exist within a few months, and where the successful candidates will have resigned from other jobs in order to take up a transition role)? Further, the job description and advert made no reference to pandemic support.

Within the last few weeks, the EIS has been involved in constructive and positive discussions with CEC officers, and with the transition teachers themselves, about how to ensure that the best use could be made of their talents, expertise and experience. We were all working on the assumption that this was a new, permanent role that would take time to develop properly, but that had enormous potential to make a real difference to children. There was recognition that the problems with transition are long-standing, and that the approaches tried by CEC – and many others – over the last few decades had not worked. Way back in 2003, when I first started working in Edinburgh, I was involved in various cluster-based initiatives that sought to address this problem – that they did not succeed was chiefly due to the fact that we were all trying to do this work on top of our core roles, and thus had neither the time nor expertise to give this the attention it needed. The appointment of staff who really could focus on this was, we all felt, a long-overdue recognition of the importance of this area. The issues around transition exist for many reasons, but the problems of working across secondary and primary, with their varying approaches to pedagogy, curriculum and even timetabling definitely contribute, and there was a clear understanding that it would take time for transition teachers, and staff in the schools, to overcome those difficulties. Thus, we all felt that it would take time for the full benefits of initiative to bear fruit – but we also felt that, if that time was given, and if the best practice that was already developing could be shared across the city, then the possibly impacts on pupils could be huge. The attachment “Edinburgh transition teachers – case studies” gives some examples of what has already happened – to remove these posts now, when there has not been time to ensure these initial first steps can be consolidated and built on, seems perverse.

The justification says that this support can be removed without impacting on core teaching and support – even if one accepts that premise, the whole point is that this is a vital additional measure that has the potential to do something that Edinburgh says it is committed to doing, and which core teaching and support, as currently funded, clearly, cannot do (after all, we have been trying for several decades). If CEC is serious about closing the poverty-related attainment gap, and genuinely wants all children to fulfil their potential (with all the long term benefits that would bring) then we have to go beyond core activities and fund additionalities that are rooted in good research evidence and that are given time to bear fruit.

It is also said that Head Teachers would prefer to target this area over other core activities – basically, all this is saying is that this is seen as the least worst of a range of possible evils. This is *not* the same as saying it is a cut that will not impact on outcomes for pupils.

A few further points, relating to this area...

In the proposal to remove the Wellington Monies (ESC4) it is stated that:

Successful implementation of this project will require schools to be working effectively across their Learning Communities and pooling resources to ensure best value.

Yet, at the same time, CEC is proposing removal of one of the key resources aimed at promoting work across those Learning Communities. This is, surely, problematic.

I have focused on the transition *teachers*, who are working across the primary/secondary estate. However, I note that the proposal also references additional support for P1-3. The only reason I have not talked in detail around this support is because the ridiculously short timeframe given for consultation on these proposals has not allowed time to gather evidence on the impact of the work being done here. But many of the same arguments apply to this. To quote one Head Teacher who has been in touch with me:

Likewise the additional PSA for P1-P3 which has been an immense support for us this year.. I thought that was an Early Years initiative/priority re play and nothing to do with covid...?? Teachers cannot deliver the expectations of play based learning approaches without appropriate levels of staff that nurseries have as well as supporting needs of ASN.

If you want your schools to be able to deliver around things like play-based learning; if you want them to be able to deliver on inclusion; if you expect staff in P1-3 to be able to help children overcome the many barriers and challenges they face and develop core skills of numeracy and literacy, then you have to find the funds for additional support. We cannot do it on the basis of the, already inadequate, core resources we have.

Devolved School Management Allocations

Once again, school budgets are being cut. Once again, this is being presented as some sort of technical accounting exercise, rather than what it is - a further reduction in budgets that already completely insufficient. The proposal (ESC6) references underspends – but, as one HTR said to me recently “I’ve been desperately saving money to try to replace expensive items that are massively out-of-date and, in one case, possibly unsafe. Items that cost too much for me to be able to replace from a single year’s allocation. Now, it looks like that money will simply be clawed back – or the underspend used as evidence as to why I do not need as much money next year. How am I supposed to invest, and to develop. I’m in despair”.

The justification for the proposal also says:

This measure will not impact on core Pupil Teacher ratios and the statutory requirement to provide an education that meets the individual needs of all pupils will remain.

That there is a statutory *requirement* to meet individual pupil needs is not in doubt. That our schools are already falling well short of actually delivering on that requirement is the reality that many are facing every day in classrooms across Edinburgh. This is not for want of trying: staff are working *way* above their contracted hours; are dipping into their own pockets to buy basic resources; are doing work that is way outside their core job descriptions; are working themselves into ill health and breakdowns – all in an effort to try to meet the needs of the children in front of them. Without increases in PSA hours, without money to buy resources, without increased staffing to free up time for planning etc, this will not change. To cut these further, as will happen with this proposal, will mean an already bad situation will become much, much worse. I fear we are reaching a tipping point, and risk a cascade of failures as people who have been working under intolerable strain for far too long finally break.

In delivering this requirement schools will continue to meet any needs arising from protected characteristics. There is no evidence that the proposed budget reduction will impact disproportionately on any group with protected characteristics.

A cynic might well point out that the only reason this might be true is that the negative impact of cuts are, indeed, being felt by all pupils. Though, as always, those families with access to more resource will

be able to employ tutors; pay for private assessments regarding dyslexia, or other needs; fund appeals etc.

The Council has also invested heavily in the implementation of its Empowered Learning digital strategy to support changes in how Education and support can be delivered more effectively, taking advantage of improved connectivity and the allocation of 1:1 digital devices across the learning estate.

I do hope that all councillors are fully aware of the current problems around ICT provision in Edinburgh's schools. Problems that are certainly not yet resolved. Until they are, the potential of digital to deliver savings will not be realised – indeed, currently, schools are encountering greater costs, as they double-plan, print etc to compensate for IT issues. Until the reality within classrooms matches the rhetoric, extra funding will be required to support this area.

Given the nature of Devolved School Management Headteachers will have the ability to divert resources locally if they feel that there is an ongoing need.

I hope all councillors are regularly visiting the schools in their wards, and talking to the staff, and to the Headteachers. I hope you all have an insight into what it is like to be a Headteacher whose “ability to divert resources locally” means, in reality, having to choose between things like putting the only available PSA into a classroom to support a child whose physical needs mean they need constant 1 to 1 support, or put the same PSA into a different classroom to support a child whose emotional trauma means they can flip and start attacking others with no notice. Or, perhaps, to choose between replacing the non-functioning whiteboard in the classroom, or the unsafe playground equipment that is currently taped off. Or a myriad of other impossible choices that they are facing on a daily basis.

Our schools are already chronically underfunded. Please do not labour under any misapprehension that what is proposed here will do anything other than make an already bad situation worse.

Educational Welfare Officers

There are a number of concerns around this proposal. Whilst other, non-teaching, unions will have greater insight into some of the specifics, I would like to raise the following questions and make a few key points.

The report says:

Some schools also make use of an Education Welfare Officer whose remit is to enforce the policy and refer to the Children's Reporter where no improvement has been made. This methodology is intrinsically punitive and does not support the child-centred vision for improving attendance or inclusion.

And this is set out as being in contrast to how Pupil Support Officers work.

- Were Educational Welfare Officers to be removed, does that mean that there would be no referrals to the Children's Reporter? Clearly not. A different mechanism will have to be devised. Thus, the “punitive” aspect of the system will be retained, regardless of who is specifically charged with making that referral.

- How many referrals to the Children’s Reporter are made under the current system? Is it enough to justify the inference that, somehow, EWOs are not, generally, working in the intensive support model that is being cited as best practice?
- PSOs are school-based staff. If, despite their best efforts, attendance does not improve, is there a risk that it will be seen to be the school, rather than CEC, that is making a referral, thus undermining the relationship between the school and the family?
- If PSOs have to take on more responsibility for attendance, that will be at the cost of other work they currently do. And, as outlined above, schools are already far short of the support needed to make inclusion work. Unless there is increased funding for PSOs in schools, this is, in effect, yet another cut to support.
- Where is the evidence that EWOs are not already following best practice, and using a supportive and inclusive model of practice? In the day or two after this proposal was announced, I spoke to several Headteachers and Support for Learning teachers who described how their EWOs were busy arranging for food bank deliveries to families, or supporting them in getting help with heating, or... All in an effort to build relationships, and remove barriers to school attendance.
- The proposal says that PEF monies can be used to fund PSOs. It would be interesting to go through the various CEC budget proposals of the last few years to see what else PEF is also supposed to pay for. Certainly, it cannot cover all the different things that are being cut elsewhere. There are also problems in how PEF is distributed across the school estate – many schools where pupils face significant barriers receive less PEF funding than others. Thus, for some schools, this will be yet another “unfunded mandate” and they will need to scabble around to try to find ways of improving pupil attendance – with the likelihood being that this will mean reduced support for those pupils who are in school, but need help to be successful...

It is also my understanding that the different gradings of EWOs, PSOs etc mean that the “rationalisation” of posts that is referred to will not be straightforward.

Review and Alignment of Inclusion and Support

That there is a desperate need for more, and better, support for inclusion is not in doubt. At the moment, in far too many of our classrooms, inclusion is not working – and, in our primary schools in particular, the consequences of this include: highly distressed behaviour; attacks on pupils and staff; classrooms being destroyed; pupil needs not being met; staff becoming increasingly demoralised; increased absence rates – the list goes on. Any review that has the potential to improve this situation has to be welcomed – though the EIS is clear that the focus of any review must be, firstly, improved support for pupils – any budgetary savings should be a welcome bonus, and not the primary goal.

Thus, we would ask the following:

- That all the unions are involved from the outset – and not just in the Impact Assessments and Organisational Reviews that will be needed once proposals are brought forward
- That the terms of reference of the project board and review are shared, and open to scrutiny
- That there is sufficient time given for consultation with all stakeholders about proposals
- That such consultation is *meaningful* – in other words, people are not simply presented with a single option and asked “how do we make this work” but are given proper time to look at a range of options, so that we can work together to make a real difference for the children of Edinburgh.

Questions around the proposals as a whole:

The following are some general questions relating to the proposals. I would hope that the vast majority of them are ones you, as councillors, have already been raising, and you are confident that you have the answers to these. After all, COSLA makes it clear that one of your key roles is challenging and scrutinising the work of the council, so raising such questions, and not approving proposals until you are confident about the answers, is basic.

There are many references to Integrated Impact Assessments. Have those IIAs been shared? For some, e.g. PL1, there is simply a statement saying it has been carried out, without sharing the findings. There is little more detail in others. Are the full IIAs available to all councillors, and to the public? Further, has there been opportunity to interrogate the methodology? What training has been given to those carrying out the IIAs? Are they separate to the people who have made the proposals being assessed? If not, where is the objectivity and oversight? What Audit and Quality Assurance processes are in place around IIAs? In particular, are you, as a councillor, confident that the IIAs fulfil CEC's statutory requirements under things such as the Equality Act (Scotland) 2010, and do not leave the council open to legal challenge?

There are many references to consultations with different groups of employees (e.g. headteachers). How confident are you that these consultations have been fully representative? I certainly have not had time to speak to all EIS headteacher members about the proposals, and to gather their views, and I have not claimed that any of the views quoted above give the majority view. The same caveats do not seem to appear in the budgetary proposals, so I would hope you would be triangulating what is being presented to you as representative views of employee groups against your own experience, and against evidence of conversations you are having with employees, trade unions and others. Also, where it is stated that "X felt that this proposal was the best option" what questions are being asked about what other choices were on offer? After all, it is possible to get people to agree to almost anything if the alternatives are even worse... Also, what efforts have been made to gather the views and insights of groups of staff beyond managers?

Much as has happened in earlier years, there are many claims about how certain proposals will not have negative impacts. Where is the assessment as to whether earlier cuts have been as painless as it was stated they would be? If the current proposals are carried, what are the plans to monitor their impact over the next few years? And against which metrics? If a cut is found to have had negative impacts that were not foreseen, or which was stated would not happen, will that cut be reversed? How often has that actually happened?

Timeframes and democratic engagement

These are significant proposals. Their implementation will have major impacts for huge numbers of citizens, right across the city. Yet there has been almost no opportunity for oversight. It is clearly impossible to hold public hustings in the time between publications and voting – surely a major failure in basic democratic engagement? Nor is there time for either interested parties, or yourselves as the people charged with making such consequential decisions, to interrogate the proposals, consult experts and stakeholders, look for alternatives etc. Further, the proposals are presented with no alternatives – how can you, or others, make a proper assessment unless you know the range of options open to you.

I appreciate that the current mechanism by which Scottish Government lets councils know what budget they will have is unsatisfactory. And that is aside from the fact that the monies themselves are wholly inadequate to properly fund the tasks that councils are charged with carrying out (I hope to be in touch with you separately about this). Nevertheless, it surely should be possible to devise a better method than this to enable proper scrutiny. What about sessions held in November that look at the envelope of likely spending, and at options that need to be considered given that envelope? These could be run as hustings or, perhaps more productively, could use a Citizens' Assembly model. There could be workshops with groups of employees, but also with the wider community – these could be locality based, but they could also use virtual approaches, as a way of reaching some usually excluded groups. Even the earlier publication of papers – and with those papers laying out alternative proposals – would be an improvement. I would ask all the political parties to consider ways of ensuring this insanely rushed and superficial consultation process is not repeated in future years. Motions committing the administration to earlier publication of options would be very welcome.

As I said, this submission is not as comprehensive, nor as fully evidenced, as I would wish. However, I hope you will give it your full attention, and debate the points it raises within your political groups as you work towards making your final budgetary decisions. I am happy to talk to you at any point about the points it raises, and about how we can better serve the children of Edinburgh.

Kind regards

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Domestic abuse an issue? Go to <https://www.nationaldahelpline.org.uk/Contact-us> for help.