Submission from the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee

The Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee considered the Finance Committee’s structured consultation paper at its meeting of 30 April 2008, and agreed to write to you with a summary of its views.

The Committee noted that there were some long standing frustrations with regard to subject committee scrutiny of the Scottish Government’s budget. These were not necessarily specific to the consideration of the 2008-09 budget which the Committee completed last year, but were related to wider issues of transparency and accountability. The Committee felt that it has traditionally been difficult accurately to track expenditure in a given year, partly at least as a result of the way in which the information is presented. The Committee considered that the Finance Committee should give thought to how the overall process could be improved to make it more transparent, and to make tracking expenditure more straightforward. The Committee also felt that the Scottish Government should be encouraged to respond positively to subject committees’ suggestions for improvements to the way in which information is provided to support the scrutiny process.

With regard to the budget process 2008-09, the Committee felt it faced many of the usual difficulties in terms of transparency and tracking expenditure, which made it difficult to hold Ministers properly to account. The Committee also felt that the budget process 2008-09 had provided some additional difficulties, particularly with regard to tracking education spending by local authorities. The Committee scrutinises the Scottish Government’s budget in respect of education, lifelong learning and culture. However, there is relatively little central expenditure compared to the sums spent on education by local authorities. Government support for this expenditure is provided through the local government settlement and is scrutinised by the Local Government and Communities Committee. Nonetheless, previous education committees found the GAE information helpful in enabling it to gain some understanding of the budgetary implications of provision of education services across the country. The 2008-09 budget documents did not include any GAE figures due to a change in arrangements with local authorities, and the Committee felt this was an unhelpful step which further hindered, rather than improved, the budget process. The Committee asks the Finance Committee to consider this issue as part of its review.

The Committee also expressed concern that the presentation of outcome agreements may make it even more difficult for committees to determine comparative levels of investment in services in different local authorities.

I hope you will find these comments helpful and constructive.

Karen Whitefield MSP
Convener