Summary

- We are of the view that the Scottish Government has not made clear how the proposed governance changes will lead to improved educational outcomes and experiences for young people, especially for disadvantaged children. There is a significant risk that, without this necessary strategic clarity, reform of school governance structures will divert focus, energy and resource away from the overarching attainment priorities. This reinforces the importance of ensuring a strategic approach for the education reforms in Scotland.

- While the review starts from a presumption that decisions about children’s learning and school life should be taken at school level, consideration will need to be given to what this means in practice. In bringing forward the review we would have expected the Government to set out:
  1) What decisions about learning are currently not made at school level but should be; and
  2) how the proposed governance changes will facilitate decision-making at the school level.

- As the employer, local authorities are responsible for the appointment, transfer, removal and re-deployment of teachers. Teachers pay and conditions of service are determined by national bargaining. Given that there are no proposals to alter these arrangements, it remains to be seen to what extent changes to governance will enable head teachers to have more decision-making responsibility.

- In a context where there could be diverse levels of input and oversight, if funds are to be allocated directly to head teachers, consideration will need to be given to how they will account for use of these funds and to whom. This reinforces the importance of ensuring that accountability processes are clearly defined.

- Consideration also needs to be given to the extent to which school leaders are able to embrace greater decision making responsibilities and to the support they will require. It will be important to ensure that school leaders are not overburdened by administrative tasks. The experience of decentralisation of education provision in Sweden is instructive in this regard.

- We are clear that continuing effort is needed to build the capacity of the teaching profession and to develop a powerful and inclusive leadership culture. The success of Scotland’s education system depends upon these fundamental building blocks. If we are serious about supporting teachers to develop and improve continuously, this will require sustained funding and support.

- While we are very supportive of cluster approaches, it will be important to ensure that their development is led by schools. Clusters should not be mandated by centrally-driven policy as contrived collegiality is unlikely to be successful. While clusters may bring cost efficiencies, their focus must be on improving educational provision and outcomes for learners.

- We are firmly of the view that the Scottish Government has not made a case that necessitates the establishment of the proposed education regions. We are concerned that the Government has adopted a pre-determined commitment to their creation without making clear their purpose and in the absence of presenting evidence of their need.

- The Government is seeking to develop a funding formula for schools that is simple and predictable. This will be a formidable undertaking. A key challenge will be designing a formula which does not result in anomalies i.e. winners and losers. The weighting given to the factors and characteristics adopted in the design of the formula will be crucial.
Introduction

1 The Royal Society of Edinburgh (RSE) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Scottish Government’s review of school governance. This response has been prepared by the RSE’s Education Committee whose membership spans expertise and interest across schools, colleges and universities. We welcome the fact that the consultation has largely adopted an open-ended approach which has not sought to constrain the potential governance options. However, this approach has meant that some of the proposals, especially the presumption that decisions should be taken at school level, lack detail and clarity. There are also a small number of proposals, notably the commitment to create education regions, which adopt a pre-determined stance without providing the supporting evidence-base. The RSE strongly believes that the Government should keep an open mind, paying particular attention to the evidence it receives to the consultation process. Given the significance of this review, we firmly believe that there should be further formal opportunities for stakeholders to shape the reforms, particularly as the Government’s plans progress.

2 Recognising the significance of the issues under consideration, in October 2016 the RSE hosted a roundtable discussion bringing together more than 20 participants from a range of perspectives, including primary and secondary school head teachers, Scottish Government, local authorities (elected member and officer representatives), parents, colleges and universities, to discuss the governance review. The discussion report, which is available from the RSE website, has been submitted as a separate contribution to the consultation. Where we have considered it appropriate to do so, we have drawn upon the points made during the discussion in informing this response. In our response which follows, we have not commented on every question. Where we have felt it is useful to do so, we have grouped together related questions. We should be pleased to discuss our response with the Scottish Government and we look forward to responding on further iterations of the proposals.

Questions 1 – 3 relating to the vision, scope and principles underpinning the proposed governance reforms

3 Drawing upon the OECD report, Governing Education in a Complex World, page 5 of the consultation paper sets out what the Government perceives as being the key components of effective governance of education systems, including: a focus on processes, not structures; supports stakeholder involvement and open dialogue; capacity building; requires a strategic, whole system approach; and harnesses evidence and research to inform policy making. The RSE agrees that these represent the necessary elements of a strategic approach. It will therefore be very important that the Scottish Government considers the current governance proposals against these components.

4 The school governance review forms part of the Government’s ambitious Delivery Plan for Scottish education which seeks to improve attainment overall, while also closing the gap between the most and least disadvantaged children. Given the scale and range, and number of actions within the Delivery Plan, a coherent strategic approach is required to ensure that the actions are managed holistically. It will be important to guard against an approach that leads to the atomistic pursuit of multiple work streams. This was recognised by the OECD report on Curriculum for Excellence (CfE), which states, “With so many measures in place, the review team suggests the value of ensuring that synergies are made and strategic threads developed so that their total effect is more than the sum of the individual parts.”

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1 Empowering Teachers, Parents and Communities to Achieve Excellence and Equity in Education: A Governance Review; Scottish Government; September 2016 http://www.gov.scot/EducationGovernanceReviewConsultation
2 More information about the RSE Education Committee is available from: https://www.rse.org.uk/policy/standing-committees/education-committee/
The governance review needs therefore to be considered against this backdrop. We are content with the principles which have been identified for the review. Crucially, however, we are of the view that the Scottish Government has not made clear how the proposed governance changes will lead to improved educational outcomes and experiences for young people, especially for disadvantaged children. Without this necessary strategic clarity, there is a significant risk that reform of school governance structures will divert focus, energy and resource away from the overarching priorities. Therefore, there needs to be clarity of purpose for reforming governance as there will be significant opportunity costs associated with the changes. This clarity is also essential in terms of shaping the governance and accountability structures required. Without a clear rationale for the proposed changes there is also a risk that we substitute a new set of constraints and challenges for existing ones in a way that does not address the attainment imperatives.

One of the arguments put forward by the Government for the review is that the time has come to review the broad framework for school education which is underpinned by the Education (Scotland) Act 1980 (as amended). We can understand the logic of this given that 36 years have passed since the Act was introduced and arguably it might no longer reflect the needs and circumstances of schools today. However, before embarking upon disruptive structural reform, it would be worth exploring to what extent the flexibility of the current system has been exploited and what are the barriers to more diverse approaches.

Changes to governance will inevitably have implications for different parts of the education system. While ‘empowerment’ is a positively-loaded term, empowerment of one key actor may mean the weakening of another. It is therefore important to consider the overall power-balance of a governance system and to be specific about which actors should be empowered over which aspects of school education.

We would also argue that while the governance review focuses on matters of structure, consideration must be given to the culture of Scottish education. Indeed, it has often been said that culture trumps structure. The governance review presents an opportunity for close attention to be given to cultural values. This would include the need to consider what society is looking for in terms of outcomes for learners and enabling them to make informed choices about their learning pathways. Ultimately, meeting the needs of learners must be the key success criterion of any school reform.

The results of the international PISA (2015) assessments have of course been published recently and they provide an additional context for the governance review. The relative decline in Scotland’s performance is clearly very disappointing. However, in itself, the PISA results do not give an indication of the causes of the worsening Scottish performance. It is possible that Scotland is pursuing the wrong policies. It is equally possible that it is pursuing policies that are broadly appropriate but implementing them ineffectively. This serves to highlight three main points: First, it is important that Scotland’s response to the PISA results does not result in ill-conceived or knee-jerk reactions. Rather, the focus must be on ensuring clarity of purpose and a strategic approach for Scotland’s education reforms, as we have stated above. Secondly, it calls for careful attention to be paid to using appropriate processes for bringing about change within complex systems. It is clear that the implementation of CfE has suffered profoundly from inadequate attention having been given to how change should be managed. The governance review process will need to consider how the proposed changes are to be brought to fruition. Thirdly, the PISA results reinforce the RSE’s long-standing position on the need to ensure reforms are evidence-based, whereby independent research and evaluation are considered essential features of education interventions.
Questions 4-5 relating to supporting decisions about children’s learning and school life being taken at school level

10 The review starts from a presumption that decisions about children’s learning and school life should be taken at school level. This is a worthy ambition. However, consideration will need to be given to what it will mean in practice, especially the extent of the decision making power at this level. Decisions about learning and school life can relate to: setting the strategic direction; implementing policy; resourcing schools; and what happens in individual classrooms. Many operational decisions relating to learning are already made at school level, for example, detailed curriculum design and provision; meeting the needs of individual learners; engagement with families; and improvement aims and targets. This raises the following two key questions: What decisions about learning are currently not made at school level but should be? And, how will the governance proposals facilitate decision-making at the school level? We believe it was incumbent upon the Scottish Government to proffer responses to these questions in bringing forward the consultation paper as they would seem to be at the heart of the debate.

11 Given that the Government’s objective is to devolve decision making and funding to schools, it would be instructive to consider how devolved school management (DSM) is currently applied in Scotland. DSM enables local authorities to pass control of a proportion of their education budgets to head teachers. The main issue with DSM is not the size of the budget that is devolved, but the extent to which head teachers are able to exert control over the devolved budget. While head teachers notionally have control over 80% of the school budget under DSM, in practice the majority of this is already accounted for as it is tied to staffing which is the responsibility of the local authority and not the head teacher. At the roundtable which the RSE hosted on the governance review, it was commented that head teachers might have direct decision-making authority for only 1-2% of the devolved budget. There was also concern that the bureaucracy associated with head teachers accounting for their use of the devolved budget can be vastly disproportionate given the limited budgetary autonomy they have.

12 The Deputy First Minister has made clear that local authorities will continue to exercise democratic control over Scottish education at a local level. As the employer, local authorities are responsible for the appointment, transfer, removal and re-deployment of teachers. There does not appear to be any intention within the review to alter this position. Indeed, any change to this would likely carry significant legislative implications. Nor does there seem to be a desire to reconsider national agreements on teacher numbers and salary levels. In these circumstances, it remains to be seen to what extent changes to governance will enable head teachers to have more decision-making responsibility.

13 If funds are to be allocated directly to head teachers, consideration will need to be given to how they will account for use of these funds and the internal controls that will need to be put in place. In a context where there could be diverse levels of input and oversight (potentially including national government as a direct and indirect funder of schools, local authorities, school clusters, new education regions, strengthened parent councils and Education Scotland), it remains unclear to whom head teachers would be ultimately responsible. Multiple funding streams also have implications for accountability mechanisms. This reinforces the importance of ensuring that accountability processes are clearly defined.

14 In addition, it will be crucial to consider the implications of greater devolved responsibilities on school leaders. The review document appears to assume that all head teachers will have the capability and capacity to take-up the new responsibilities envisaged. However, consideration will need to be given to the extent to which school leaders are able to embrace greater decision making responsibilities and to the support they will require. The OECD has been clear that developing school leaders “requires clearly defining their responsibilities, providing access to appropriate professional development throughout their careers, and acknowledging their pivotal role in improving school and student performance.”

Schleicher, OECD, 2012
In this context it would be useful to consider international examples of decentralised education systems. Swedish education underwent extensive decentralisation in the 1990s, with much of the key decision-making and budgetary responsibility being devolved to schools. In that time the performance of Swedish students in the PISA assessments has declined dramatically. A recent OECD review of the Swedish school system (which was conducted on a similar basis to that for Scotland) found that head teachers there are overburdened by administrative tasks which limits their ability to prioritise pedagogical leadership. The report comments that “... the current approach... is not delivering consistent steering or support for improvement, and responsibility for education appears diffuse”. The report goes on to say that “There is a lack of capacity and clarity in roles and responsibilities at various levels of the education administration, and local autonomy is not matched with adequate public accountability. These are key challenges for improving student performance.”

The preceding points make clear the need for a full cost / benefit analysis to be undertaken before any large-scale changes are made in Scotland. The points we make in response to question 13 on the need to build professional capacity are also relevant to this section.

**Question 6 on the role of children, parents, colleges and universities in school life**

**Role of young people**

The success of any education system is ultimately dependent on the extent to which learners are engaged and motivated. It will, therefore, be important to consider their views. There is a tendency to treat learners as a product of the education system and passive recipients of its output as opposed to them being the central actors. It will be important that the role of young people in relation to empowerment and decision making is recognised in the review to ensure that any structural changes are made in the best interests of learners.

**Parental Empowerment and Engagement**

As was observed at the RSE roundtable discussion, there appears to be some ambiguity as to whether the focus here is on improving parental engagement with schools in relation to their children’s learning or if it is about strengthening the role of parents in the running of the school. Presumably, it is the latter since the review is considering governance arrangements. However, the contributions made at the RSE roundtable did not indicate that there is a strong desire on the part of parents to run schools. Inevitably, individual parents as well as representative bodies including the Scottish Parent Teacher Council (SPTC) and the National Parent Forum of Scotland (NPFS), will make submissions to the review and they should be carefully considered. We recognise that in parallel with the current review the NPFS is undertaking a review of the Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act 2006, the results of which will be considered by the Government in the context of the governance review.

It is clear that parental engagement is crucial to making progress on improving the attainment of disadvantaged learners. However, it remains uncertain how changes in governance will secure the kind of parental engagement that helps to raise standards, especially among disadvantaged children. A key issue relates to how to reach those parents who are currently less engaged in their children’s learning. This has clear implications for securing equity and, in turn, addressing attainment. Parental engagement has tended to be an extremely challenging area in which schools can feel that a lot of energy is expended for very little return. Indeed, there is a need to unpick what is meant by ‘parental engagement’ and how it can be assessed. Clearly, parental engagement extends far beyond more formal engagement mechanisms like parent council involvement and attendance at parents’ evenings.

It is worth noting that education is not the sole responsibility of schools. It is a shared enterprise which requires consideration to be given to the support for young people (some of whom may not be attending school regularly) and their families that is available outwith school. Any new model of school governance will therefore need to take account of the broader education landscape, including combined service provision (for example, education and social work services) that support the needs of learners and their families. This also has implications for the way in which services are funded, particularly in relation to facilitating partnership working.
Colleges and universities

There is substantial goodwill among Scotland’s colleges and universities towards working with schools. It is clear that ongoing priorities on widening access to university and the agenda set by Developing Scotland’s Young Workforce (DSYW) will ensure that universities and colleges continue to work with schools. Indeed, DSYW will increasingly influence school education, especially in the senior phase of secondary schooling. Consideration will need to be given to how the proposed new education regions are meant to align with the college regions. This emphasises the need for a strategic approach to the developments, as we have called for in the opening sections of our response.

Question 8 on encouraging and incentivising effective collaboration among teachers and practitioners

While this is an important question, it is not immediately clear to us that it is relevant to school governance. Time availability, particularly when there is a shortage of teachers in some subject areas and difficulty obtaining supply cover, is likely to be the most important factor in terms of facilitating collaboration among teachers. Other related barriers include education authority budget reductions and the demise of education authority subject advisers.

The RSE is familiar with the online teacher-led networks for Biology, Chemistry, Computing Science and Physics which enable professional collaboration among subject specialist teachers, including the sharing of experiences and teaching materials. We are also aware of more generic professional collaborative teacher communities, including ‘Pedagoo’. The establishment of these bottom-up, teacher-led networks suggest that more centrally-run environments may suffer from trust and credibility issues.

The points we make in the next section in relation to the collaborative approaches promoted by school clusters are also relevant here.

Question 9 on school clusters

As recognised by the review, collaboration and partnership working are already strong features of Scottish education with school clusters operating throughout Scotland. There is of course a broad spectrum of cluster activity with some being based on fairly informal connections among local schools, while others have shared funding in order to deliver specific projects. However, there does appear to be a growing recognition of cluster working, particularly for ensuring more effective pre-school to primary to secondary liaison and transition. We note that the OECD report on Scottish education made the case for a move towards higher quality collaborative practices with a view to having positive effects on student learning. Cluster working is a means of facilitating teacher professional dialogue and development; and for promoting the sharing of innovative approaches within and across clusters. Clusters could be an effective means of enabling schools to pool resources, including teachers, particularly in shortage and specialist subject areas. Indeed, eventually, they could provide for the pooling of management and leadership capacity within the school cluster rather than being disbursed among individual schools.

The RSE is very supportive of cluster approaches. However, it is important to note that there is no single cluster model and the cluster approach adopted should be appropriate to the needs and circumstances of the schools involved and the local communities which they serve. We believe that further encouragement to develop school clusters should be based on a bottom-up approach, led by the schools and the communities themselves. Clusters should not be mandated by centrally-driven policy as contrived collegiality is unlikely to be successful. While clusters may bring cost efficiencies, they should not be driven by this imperative. Rather, their focus must be on improving educational provision and outcomes for learners.

Notably, a number of education authorities have decided to use clusters as the formal means of structuring their schools. In East Renfrewshire Council all schools are organised into seven clusters comprising a secondary school, associated primaries and nursery facilities. Clackmannanshire and East Ayrshire Councils have very recently begun introducing innovative cluster arrangements in a way that seeks to transfer authority and accountability to school clusters managed by head teachers, supported by a management board, thereby changing the traditional relationship between schools and the education authority. These developments are at a very early stage and could therefore be considered as pilots. We certainly believe that the impact of their introduction, particularly on school improvement and raising standards of attainment, should be considered very carefully.
Questions 10-11 on the establishment of education regions

28 The RSE is firmly of the view that within the review document the Scottish Government has not made a case that necessitates the establishment of education regions. It is not clear what this proposed structural change is seeking to achieve that cannot be addressed by less disruptive means. As we have stated at the outset of our response, we are concerned that the Scottish Government has adopted a pre-determined commitment to create education regions without making clear their purpose and in the absence of presenting evidence of their need. The review document is also silent on what form of relationship will exist between local authorities and education regions, particularly as to whether new education regions have the potential to weaken the democratic accountability of local authorities. Before this proposal is taken forward, the Government must provide more clarity and detail on what is envisaged.

29 At the RSE roundtable it was suggested that given the wider implications of the governance proposals, the Government now needs to develop a view on the future of local democracy. This brings into sharp focus the need to consider the role of local authorities not only in relation to education provision, but more generally.

Question 12 on the delivery of services and support at a national level

30 The Scottish Government’s role in relation to education is to provide strategic-level direction and to resource education provision, ensuring that there are appropriate accountability measures. Government should not seek to micro-manage the delivery of education. The expectation is that the Scottish Government will base its strategic policy decisions and choices on the best available evidence, particularly that which has been generated independently of the policy process. While it is permissible for the Government to make political decisions that do not accord with the available evidence, it should at all times make clear the basis of its decisions.

31 The RSE welcomes the fact that the national education agencies and organisations, including Education Scotland and the SQA are within the scope of the review. The performance of these bodies has recently been scrutinised by the Scottish Parliament’s Education and Skills Committee. We trust the Scottish Government will carefully consider the governance-related issues raised during the evidence sessions. The RSE would wish to highlight the following key points in relation to the operation of Education Scotland and the SQA.

Education Scotland

32 Prior to Education Scotland’s formation in 2011 and subsequently, the RSE has questioned the appropriateness of a single agency having both policy development and quality assurance responsibilities. This is the case where Education Scotland carries out the development work and has responsibility for evaluating those developments. Its independence as an evaluator needs therefore to be questioned.

33 A crucial question that needs to be addressed is how Education Scotland balances meeting the needs of schools and teachers with its responsibilities for delivering Scottish Government priorities. There is concern that Education Scotland’s role has become increasingly politicised, with the implication that it prioritises the needs of Government over those of schools and teachers.

34 It is clear that the volume and lack of clarity of CfE-related guidance from Education Scotland has contributed to unnecessary workload. It is somewhat disconcerting that the Scottish Government has tasked Education Scotland with remediing problems to which its actions were a contributory factor.

35 Education Scotland refers to its unique combination of roles and capabilities, with the ability to blend guidance, support and constructive challenge. However, the combination of different roles and blending of a variety of functions can lead to uncertainty, confusion and unease on the part of those who encounter Education Scotland’s services. Consideration also needs to be given to whether Education Scotland has the capacity, capability and resource to provide the support schools require, particularly as its own staffing resource has contracted in recent times as it has had to re-balance its priorities. In short, there is a clear need to review the functions and operation of this agency.
Scottish Qualifications Authority

36 It is clear that the introduction of the new qualifications has involved an unintended and unsustainable level of work for learners and teachers. The assessment arrangements have been disproportionate to need and excessively time consuming. As the single provider of qualifications and assessments in publicly-funded secondary schools in Scotland, we believe consideration should be given to strengthening external oversight of the SQA’s operations. While the SQA has undertaken its own evaluation and review activities, greater external and independent input could help provide reassurance and confidence in its performance.

Question 13 on building professional capacity

37 The RSE is firmly of the view that continuing effort is needed to build the capacity of the teaching profession and to develop a powerful and inclusive leadership culture. This would include the importance of ensuring that there is a focus on developing leadership capacity at all levels of the education system. The success of Scotland’s education system depends upon these fundamental building blocks. If we are serious about supporting teachers to develop and improve continuously, this will require sustained funding and support. In the absence of a clear rationale for the governance review, we are concerned that the current proposals could deflect attention and resource away from this overarching priority.

Question 14 on establishing a fair and transparent needs-based funding formula for schools

38 We recognise that the Scottish Government is committed to establishing a funding formula for schools, with detailed proposals to be brought forward in March 2017. A case could be made for developing a core funding formula for schools across Scotland, reflecting deprivation, additional support needs, looked after children and rurality, among other aspects. While the Government seeks to design a funding formula that is simple and predictable, we are concerned that the Government could be underestimating the scale of what will likely be a formidable undertaking. It will be incredibly challenging to design a formula of this kind which does not result in anomalies i.e. winners and losers. The weighting given to the factors and characteristics adopted in the design of the formula will be crucial.

Additional Information

This Advice Paper from the RSE Education Committee has been signed off by the RSE General Secretary.

Any enquiries about this Advice Paper should be addressed to Mr William Hardie (email: whardie@theRSE.org.uk)

Responses are published on the RSE website (https://www.rse.org.uk/)

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