

PE1581/V

COSLA letter of 10 January 2017

COSLA responded to this petition in early 2016. At that time we noted that a challenging budget settlement meant local authorities were faced with difficult decisions in the setting and balancing of budgets. Whilst noting increasing pressures on other areas of local authority provision (such as social care due to an ageing demographic), we noted that education budgets would be protected as far as possible and that some local authorities might choose to protect school library services, and make cuts in other areas, whilst some might choose to reorganise their school library services. We provided a couple of examples of the merging of school and public libraries. Our earlier response also noted that locally elected Councillors make these difficult budget setting decisions. COSLA remains fully committed to the principle that these decisions are taken locally.

More recently, in December 2016, the COSLA President publicly highlighted that the Budget Settlement of 2016/17 had resulted in the loss of 7,000 jobs across local government. As Scottish Government policies provide a form of protection for school teachers over other local authority staff, it is these other staff including librarians who have lost their jobs in the setting of balanced budgets.

The use of technology both in schools and in the home is increasing and this can allow children to access a wide range of reading materials. A number of libraries now provide books in e-reader formats such as "Kindle" where books are downloaded, this means people who use these services don't need to physically visit a library. The Scottish Government is currently developing a Digital Learning and Teaching Strategy and we know that Education Scotland are developing a number of resources to support this. We would encourage the petitioners to liaise with the Scottish Government and Education Scotland on this.

In an ideal world every school would have a library with a qualified librarian. We would agree with most of the benefits of such provision outlined by those lobbying the Petitions Committee. However, our members are also aware of the benefits attributed to other areas of educational provision, such as early intervention, learning foreign languages, learning Gaelic, taking part in sport, receiving instrumental music tuition, all of which also help to raise attainment.

A National School Library Strategy which calls for the ring fencing of school library spend and sets a central hierarchy of priorities would put other areas of local authority services under even greater pressure. It would also further undermine the role of locally elected Councillors in making budget decisions and would be a further erosion of local democracy.