

# A Class Apart: Shedding light on school hours

### FAST FACTS

- Freedom of Information (FOI) responses have highlighted that the amount of teacher contact time a pupil receives can vary by up to 149 hours per year in primary school and 245 hours in secondary school, depending upon local authority area.
- Calculated over the course of a full period of primary school, or five years at secondary, this can mean the difference of an additional year's schooling.
- Regulations state that local authority schools must be open for 190 days each year, though there is no minimum number of teacher contact hours and the law does not define the length and structure of a school day, week or year.
- While there may be good reasons for variation depending on local authority, Reform Scotland believes that there needs to be greater transparency and awareness on this issue to enable the public to hold politicians to account for these differences.

### CONTEXT

In February 2015, West Dunbartonshire Council proposed cutting two and a half hours from the primary school week in a bid to save around £1m for the council's budget.<sup>1</sup> Although the proposal was dropped, Reform Scotland was intrigued by what discretion councils had over the amount of teaching time, and what differences may exist between local authority areas.

Reform Scotland does not object to variations in school hours, there may be good reasons for different local authorities to provide differing amounts of teacher contact time. However, we believed that if variations did exist, these were not

obvious to the public and there wasn't the necessary transparency on the issue to allow the public to hold politicians to account.

As the Scottish Government is also considering attainment as part of its Education (Scotland) Bill, we decided to investigate the issue of school contact hours further.

### BACKGROUND

In March 2015, Reform Scotland submitted Freedom of Information requests to all local authorities in Scotland. We asked:

*“how many hours of teaching time per year do children in a) primary schools and b) secondary schools receive. By teaching hours, I mean contact time with a teacher not including breaks or lunch.”*

The table on the next page illustrates the FOI responses we received.

These responses revealed that just 15 councils in Scotland provide 950 hours per year in primary and 1,045 hours per year in secondary of teacher contact time. An additional four local authorities operated within a 10-hour variance of these figures over the course of a year.

Six council areas provided a higher level of teaching time for at least one stage of school, while seven offered lower.

The variance between the highest provision and lowest provision was 149 hours per year in primary and 245 hours in secondary, based on local authority area.

For primary school this variance was between Aberdeenshire and West Dunbartonshire offering 1,000 teaching hours per year and Moray offering 851 hours.

For secondary school this was between Aberdeenshire and West Dunbartonshire offering 1,100 teaching hours per year to Dundee and Midlothian offering 855 hours.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-glasgow-west-31169881>

Council	Primary hours (per year)	Secondary hours (per year)
Aberdeen City Council	950	1,045
Aberdeenshire Council	1,000	1,100
Angus Council	950 (though some P1-3 is 899.3)	1,045
Argyll and Bute Council	950	1,045
City of Edinburgh Council	975	1,045
Clackmannanshire Council	950	950
Comhairle nan Eilean Siar	950	1,045
Dumfries and Galloway Council	950	1,045
Dundee City Council	855	855
East Ayrshire Council	950	1,045
East Dunbartonshire Council	950	1,045
East Lothian Council	950	1,045
East Renfrewshire Council	950	1,045
Falkirk Council	941	1,036.1 (S1-4)
Fife Council	945	1,039.5
Glasgow City Council	975	1,072.5
Highland Council	950	1,045
Inverclyde Council	950	1,011 (approx)
Midlothian Council	855	855
Moray Council	851	1,040
North Ayrshire Council	950	1,045
North Lanarkshire Council	975	1,072.5
Orkney Islands Council	950	1,045
Perth and Kinross Council	945	1,039.5
Renfrewshire Council	950	1,055
Scottish Borders Council	975	1,072.5
Shetland Islands Council	950	1,045
South Ayrshire Council	877.5	975
South Lanarkshire Council	950	1,045
Stirling Council	950	950
West Dunbartonshire Council	1,000	1,100
West Lothian Council	950	1,045
<b>Variance</b>	<b>149</b>	<b>245</b>
Difference over time at school (7 years primary, 5 secondary)	1,043	1,225

In light of the level of variation across the country that the Freedom of Information responses had indicated, we asked the Scottish Government whether there was a minimum number of contact hours a pupil should receive per year, what guidance was there and what flexibility local authorities had on the issue.

We were told that there is no minimum number of hours and, while Section 5 of the Schools General (Scotland) Regulations states that local authority schools have to be open for 190 days each year, within that framework the law does not define the length and structure of the individual school day, week or year.<sup>2</sup>

### **POLICY RECOMMENDATION**

Reform Scotland was surprised by the variation in our findings. However, there may well be good reasons for the differences in contact time in different local authority areas, so we would caution against simply calling for a minimum number of school contact hours.

Reform Scotland believes that it is important that the public is aware of the differences, to enable debate to take place and ensure that politicians can be held to account on the issue.

When cutting school hours was considered by West Dunbartonshire Council, it was done as part of a strategy to save money from the council's budget. Reform Scotland believes that the issue of school hours and local control over raising income are linked. Unless councils have full control over at least some of their tax income, if savings have to be made services have to be cut as they have no ability to increase tax. As a result, as was suggested in West Dunbartonshire, school hours could be affected. Equally, if councils wish to increase the number of school hours, without control over tax income and greater local autonomy, they would struggle to do so.

Therefore, Reform Scotland believes that it is vital that local authorities are given full control over council tax and business rates to ensure that they have the ability to take local needs and priorities into account. Further information on Reform Scotland's recommendation for greater local financial accountability can be read in our Local Tax Bulletin which will be published this Autumn.

---

<sup>2</sup> Freedom of Information response from the Scottish Government, 29 May 2015