

Convener
Education, Children and Young People Committee
The Scottish Parliament
EH99 1SP

Our ref:

31 March 2022

Dear Convener

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE COMMITTEE INQUIRY ON THE IMPACT OF COVID ON CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Thank you for sharing the February Report from the Committee's Inquiry on the impact of COVID on children and young people.

I am now pleased to write and respond to the issues raised (see the annex to this note). This reply covers a large range of activity, which I hope offers an appropriate balance of clarity and detail. In particular, I want to emphasise the importance I place on delivering against our vision of excellence and equity as we continue to address the impact of Covid-19 on learning and teaching in Scotland.

As always, I am happy to expand on any specific aspect of this response if required.

Yours sincerely

SHIRLEY-ANNE SOMERVILLE

1. Measuring the impact of COVID

The Committee cites the importance of robust analysis regarding how different cohorts have been affected by Covid-19. I agree this is critical and, during the course of the pandemic, the Scottish Government has published a substantial body of quantitative and qualitative evidence of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on a range of different groups of learners. This includes, for example:

- the [Equity Audit](#), comprising an evidence review and a data collection from schools from all 32 local authorities;
- the [Attainment Scotland Fund Evaluation](#), which assesses progress in closing the poverty related attainment gap and focused on the impact of COVID-19 on school education for the last two years. This includes research with head teachers and local authorities on the impact of COVID-19 on the attainment gap in their schools and communities, and the school responses to support children and young people during school building closures and remote learning.
- [qualitative research on the experiences of vulnerable children, young people and parents](#) during the pandemic; and
- a range of official statistics on literacy, numeracy, senior phase attainment, attendance and absence (see [Achievement of Curriculum for Excellence \(CfE\) Levels](#) and [Summary Statistics for Attainment and Initial Leaver Destinations](#)).

Those Scottish Government official statistics include breakdowns by many of the groups of interest, including e.g. rurality, additional support needs, socio-economic background, ethnicity and sex.

In addition to those individual publications, the [2022 National Improvement Framework and Improvement Plan](#) combines a wealth of robust national data, which includes both attainment/achievement data and wider indicators such as health and wellbeing and school attendance. To complement this, the Scottish Government commissioned Ipsos Mori to undertake research with parents to understand the impact of school building closures for themselves and their children, and on what worked well and what could have been improved in remote learning. This was published as part of the 2022 National Improvement Framework and Improvement Plan.

Although national statistics provide helpful information on aggregate trends over the long term, to drive improvement in education systems we also need so called ‘small data’ which based on teachers’ professional observations, formative assessments and reflections of what is happening during teaching and learning. At a school level, teachers have had, and will still have, such data necessary to ensure they can assess the impact of COVID on the attainment of the children and young people in their classes and plan next steps appropriate for each individual. For example, the data for Insight – the tool used by schools for improvement in the senior phase – was released as usual in September 2021, and again in February 2022. As a result, schools and local authorities continue to have the same data available to them as in a “normal” year to enable them to drive forward improvement activity tailored to their own unique context.

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Taking a broader perspective, the Scottish Government [Research Strategy](#) supports the research infrastructure landscape and data access. This is another key mechanism through which we support the creation of independent research in Scotland. During the pandemic we have taken all opportunities to consider international and UK studies as part of our underpinning evidence. For example, in August 2021 the Advisory Sub-Group on Education and Children's Issues published a [summary of the evidence of the impact of COVID on children, schools and ELC settings](#) including international and UK evidence on the wider health and wellbeing impacts of the pandemic on children and young people.

More recently, the sub-group published an [updated summary of evidence](#), which takes a more detailed look at the educational, social, developmental, and wellbeing harms experienced by children and young people. Scottish Directors of Public Health (SDsPH) and Public Health Scotland (PHS) also produced a discussion paper [children-and-young-people-public-health-covid-19-impact-report-march-2022](#) setting out some positive, but mainly adverse, impacts of COVID on children and young people. These were crucial parts of the underpinning evidence considered when developing the guidance on routine protective measures for schools and Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) settings.

Finally, Committee members will be familiar with the [Covid-19 Education Recovery: Key Actions and Next Steps](#) paper published in September 2021. The final section of this describes the well-established monitoring and evaluation programmes designed to assess existing policies to improve attainment and wellbeing.

2. Effectiveness of investment / interventions

The Committee asked about the outcomes of our interventions during the pandemic, with particular focus on how additional staff have supported children and young people with additional support needs; the provision of extra support for children and young people who have not been able to engage in online learning, have experienced anxiety &/or been through a transition during the pandemic; and other information regarding to ASN.

Crucially, throughout the pandemic we maintained a key ambition of prioritising those children and young people who needed most support. The importance of this approach is reinforced in Audit Scotland's report on '[Improving outcomes for young people through school education](#)'. A key pillar of that aim was to ensure that schools should remain open for vulnerable pupils (as well as children of key workers) to prioritise continued care and support for these pupils during the period of school building closures. It was agreed that decisions about which children and young people attended during those periods were best made by those working directly with learners. This included children and young people with additional support needs, and those with complex needs.

Schools and local authorities were supported in these decisions through [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): school and early learning closures - guidance about key workers and vulnerable children](#). First published in March 2020, and updated in July 2020, this set out the childcare and learning provision we expected for key workers and vulnerable children during the initial closures of school and ELC settings to deal with the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak. It supported those working directly with children and young people to identify those who required support, including attending hub provision in order to ensure their wellbeing, during the period of ELC and school closures.

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During this period, we continued to apply the provisions of the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 (as amended) (“the 2004 Act”) through education continuity directions. This included facilitating the continued arrangements for placing requests to be considered within a longer timescale rather than there being a default decision that the request was refused, requiring families to appeal to the upper Tribunal or Sheriff court.

[The Reducing Risks in Schools guidance](#) has consistently made clear that the individual needs of children and young people should be considered and support put in place where this is required. This is complemented by our [Continuity in Learning guidance](#), published in July 2020 and updated in March 2021, which sets out an approach to continue supporting children with additional support needs during school closures and throughout the pandemic. This guidance makes clear that support should be set within a model of inclusive learning policy and practice. Individualised provisions and interventions must be kept under constant review with robust tracking and monitoring of learning and wellbeing.

Further, working with key partners, in January 2021, we published [guidance to support children and young people with complex additional support needs](#). This guidance supplemented existing guidance on reducing risks in schools and schools reopening arrangements. It sought to highlight specific issues, safety measures and mitigations to support the management of risk towards ensuring a safe environment for the learning and teaching of children with complex additional support needs in mainstream schools, units and special schools during the coronavirus pandemic.

Throughout the pandemic, Education Scotland put in place a wide range of support for families, including specific resources to support families of children with complex additional support needs.

On the key point you have raised about transitions, I fully recognise the importance of good support for children and young people who are making the transition into primary school or from P7 to S1. It is, of course for education authorities to make appropriate arrangements to ensure a smooth transition between primary and secondary schools as well as into further or higher education, work or other post-school provisions.

To support this process, our [Term 4 guidance](#), published in April 2020, included information on supporting children and young people at key transition points and encouraged schools and local authorities to consider different and innovative approaches to transitions in relation to curriculum and wellbeing matters.

Education Scotland have developed a [range of resources](#) for practitioners to provide advice, guidance, signposting and practical resources to support children and young people through transitions in the context of COVID-19. These recognise that the pandemic has created a complex blend of transitions which may have a significant impact on children and young people, potentially affecting their wellbeing and ability to learn. The resources consider how these changes may affect children and young people and what we can do to mitigate any negative impact.

In February our Guidance on reducing risks in schools guidance was updated to reflect advice from the Advisory Sub Group on Education and Children’s Issues to enable school visits. In particular, the Sub Group emphasised the importance of enabling such visits for the purpose of supporting positive transition experiences for children and young people entering

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primary or secondary school. For children and young people who experience barriers to their learning, managing their transitions carefully and sensitively is vital and I am confident that those considerations are well underway.

As the Committee are aware education authorities have duties under the 2004 Act to identify, provide for and review the additional support needs of their pupils. The additional support for learning legislation supports the principles of excellence and equity for all and I am infinitely proud of Scotland's inclusive approach to education and the commitment of staff who support the needs of our children.

All teachers provide essential support to pupils with additional support needs, not just 'support for learning' staff. Figures published in December 2021 show that teacher numbers have increased for the sixth year in a row, rising to 54,285 in 2021. This means there now are more teachers than at any time since 2008, with the ratio of pupils to teachers at its lowest since 2009.

To further support local authorities to help them meet the individual needs of children and young people, we have invested an additional £15 million each year since 2019. Figures published in March 2022 show that 1,036 extra pupil support assistants were recruited in 2021 using this additional £15 million. This builds on the increase of 1,354 from the previous year and again exceeds our Programme for Government commitment to deliver 1,000 new support assistants. We will continue to support local authorities by investing an additional £60m over the next four years to further enhance capacity to respond effectively to the individuals' needs of children and young people.

The Committee will be pleased to note that work is progressing to develop a national measurement framework. This aims to provide a consistent approach to measuring and reporting outcomes for children and young people with additional support needs. The framework and its measures will reflect Angela Morgan's recommendations that we value and increase visibility of the diverse achievements that young people achieve and develop a mechanism to ensure that these are fully recognised and celebrated. The framework will be relevant for children and young people, parents and carers, schools, health and social care partners, and local authorities.

Furthermore, we have continued our support for children and young people's mental health and wellbeing through the provision of counselling through schools. This is now in place across Scotland and is being evaluated through bi-annual reporting. This goes hand in hand with a new professional learning resource introduced in June 2021 to help school staff to better understand and recognise the range of mental health and wellbeing concerns that young people may experience.

This was followed in August 2021, by guidance to support whole school approaches to mental health and wellbeing. This complements the work that education authorities and schools do to support children and young people's mental health and wellbeing and we continue to work closely with the Mental Health in Schools Working Group to embed these approaches across Scotland.

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The Committee also noted the Morgan review, and highlighted that implementation of the recommendations is required as a matter of urgency.

Despite the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic the Scottish Government and COSLA have continued to work collaboratively with partners to progress the actions we set out within the [Additional Support for Learning \(ASL\) action plan](#), originally published in October 2020. As the Committee will be aware, in November 2021 we published a [joint progress report](#) and [updated action plan](#) which set out this progress made within the first 12 months. This highlighted that through positive and sustained collaborative working, 8 of the actions were completed fully within the first year. This included the development and publication of the vision statement for success. The vast majority of the other actions are ongoing and on track.

I absolutely recognise that there is more to do towards meeting the scale and ambition of the recommendations made by Angela Morgan. To achieve the meaningful change that she envisioned we all must maintain the visibility of children and young people with additional support needs through continued co-creation and collaboration with them and their families.

The [Additional Support for Learning Implementation Group](#) (ASLIG) have played a key role in ensuring that we continue to deliver on the actions in the action plan. ASLIG published a [response](#) to the Scottish Government and COSLA progress report in December 2021 setting out their perspective on progress against each of the core improvement themes and recommendations identified in the ASL Review.

I want to emphasise that the Scottish Government and COSLA remain firmly committed to delivery of the ASL Action Plan. However, we also must acknowledge the impact that Covid-19 continues to have on children and young people, their families and professionals. We have therefore committed to continuing to work closely with our partners in ASLIG to review the current action plan, take stock of what we have achieved, despite the challenging circumstances, and agree the priorities for the future to ensure that meaningful change is realised. As part of this, we will collaborate with ASLIG to identify opportunities to re-engage with families and professionals to ensure that their voices inform the agreed priorities for the future.

As we move forward with partners to manage COVID-19 in a proportionate manner, I hope the information shared in this letter demonstrates our commitment to deliver excellence and equity in our education system as well as highlighting the on-going delivery of expanded high quality ELC, proactive promotion of health and wellbeing including mental health for pupils and the workforce and the additional support for learning on offer to ensure every child and young person has the best opportunity to thrive and succeed.

I want to reiterate that I fully recognise the importance of monitoring and reporting outcomes. This is crucial to ensure we maintain transparency and openness on the progress being made. The Scottish Government, and partners, have set out our commitment to this shared aim and the intention to identify at the earliest stage where any additional work or change of course is required. This is set out in the [Covid-19 Education Recovery: Key Actions and Next Steps](#) paper but, where possible, more detail has been provided in this reply.

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3. Digital support

Since the outset of the pandemic, the Scottish Government has provided funding for over 72,000 devices and 14,000 connectivity packages and the latest information we hold from councils indicates that almost 280,000 devices have been, or are in the process of being, rolled out to children and young people across Scotland. We are now committed to ensuring every child has access to a device and connectivity by the end of this parliament. Across 2,500 schools and 700,000 learners, this is a complex and ambitious commitment that requires significant partnership working with local government. In addition to the provision of devices, we recognise that improvements are required to schools' digital infrastructure, that appropriate online services must be available to all learners and teachers, and that the right support is in place for the teaching profession. We are convening a Scottish Government/local government partnership board to oversee the work.

Beyond the education commitment, the Scottish Government's digital inclusion programme, Connecting Scotland is tackling digital exclusion in Scotland more broadly across the country. So far our programme has brought 60,000 digitally excluded people online since programme launch. Connecting Scotland are now actively scoping out an extension to the programme to reach 300,000 people by the end of this Parliament.

4. Contingency Planning

Management of the pandemic demands a flexible approach and an ability to respond quickly and decisively across all education settings. We know that there remains a continuing COVID-19 risk to learning and teaching which may need to be managed in the future. There is no absolute certainty in what lies ahead, but by carefully monitoring the situation and having in place effective contingency plans, we can continue to ensure any risk to delivery of education and learning is managed in a proportionate and less restrictive way.

Our [Routine Protective Measures guidance](#) continues to highlight that schools and local authorities should ensure readiness for a range of scenarios, in view of the uncertainty around the path of the virus in the future. That guidance sets out shared expectations in respect of readiness to deal with those scenarios, and the actions that should be taken to minimise education disruption as a result of COVID-19.

More broadly, the recent update of the [Strategic Framework](#) (published on 22 February 2022) assesses where we are in the pandemic and sets out Scotland's approach to managing COVID-19 and its associated harms effectively for the long term as we prepare for a calmer phase of the pandemic.

Within that document, we highlight that we will continue to work with partners to develop and implement clear outbreak management plans, with appropriate supporting legislation and guidance, at institutional, local and national level so that people and organisations can understand what may be required and in what circumstances, and can respond accordingly. This approach explicitly recognises the ongoing uncertainty inherent in the pandemic. It also sets out a clear framework that maps potential response categories to future threat levels.

Aligned to that national picture, we are working towards a 'pandemic proof' education system to minimise any future disruption to learning and teaching.

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This includes:

- Reiterating that our priority remains to deliver excellence and equity, with the health and wellbeing of pupils, and the education and childcare workforce, at the forefront of our plans.
- Ensuring that by the end of this Parliament, every school child will have access to the technology they need to support their education through digital devices and connectivity.
- Continuing to evolve and improve the National e-Learning Offer to make sure it best supports the changing needs of schools and learners.
- Building system resilience through the recruitment of additional teachers and support staff.
- Reinforcing the strategic priority of keeping schools and ELC settings open and safe (i.e. including an ongoing requirement for baseline measures), in line with advice from the WHO and the joint publication from UNICEF, UNESCO and the World Bank.
- Ongoing work to support good ventilation in schools and ELC settings.
- In ELC, work to address the long-term sustainability of sector, develop the ELC workforce and deliver high-quality childcare, noting the impacts of the pandemic on the development of young children.

Officials continue to engage with SQA to ensure that the impact of Covid and any variants is considered in the delivery of the National Qualifications.

All schools and local authorities have contingency plans in place to deal with any disruption to learning, not least as a result of Covid, but also other events e.g. weather, property related. Primarily this approach ensures pupils can continue to learn, and the impact of the pandemic is minimised.

It is worth noting that important aspects of school life such as engagement with parents, including feedback on pupil progress, have been amended to ensure important relationships with parents/carers can continue through online meetings and other communications. Indeed for some parents use of technology has seen engagement with school to increase.

A significant area of the planning has been around health and wellbeing. This has included arrangements to provide direct payments for those entitled to free school meals when pupils are not in school. There has also been significant planning (often with partners) to ensure all aspects of health and wellbeing are considered. A range of specific plans have been put in place e.g. Easter study support, additional staffing to support pupils most affected by lockdown, digital opportunities for learning.

In addition to providing resources/support directly through NeLO and website, Education Scotland have maintained high levels of engagement with all LAs throughout the pandemic. The purpose has been to provide support where it is most required (at school/locality level) but also to gather intelligence on the impact on learners in each LA, and whether their plans are appropriate. This has included providing direct resources, but also advice on how to deal with particular situations e.g. where schools are closed/partially closed.

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It is also an opportunity to share good practice and encourage collegiate working. HM Inspectors of Education have also carried out a series of thematic reviews and published these reports to share learning and support improvement. An example of these would be the series of reviews on remote learning leading to publication of a set of remote learning entitlements for all learners.

As we move out of the pandemic Education Scotland are building on this approach in the context of pupil progress. For example, there has been dialogue with LAs regarding ACEL outcomes, in terms of absolute performance, the poverty related attainment gap and 'value added'. This will lead to particular arrangements for support at school and LA level with the aim of improving performance. Additionally HM Inspectors will carry out a series of recovery visits from March 2022, engaging in professional dialogue to support continuity of learning, wellbeing of staff and learners and safeguarding.

The Committee further asks about comparative assessment of qualifications across the last two years. As you are aware, SQA has implemented different assessment approaches to adapt to the cancellation of exams and the varying circumstances arising from the Covid pandemic in each of those years. The approaches put in place have ensured that young people continue to have their achievements recognised, and that the results awarded are robust, valid and credible within and across years.

2020 National Qualification (NQ) results were based solely on teacher and lecturer estimates due to the cancellation of the exams nearer the end of the academic session, and the decision not to collect and mark coursework. 2021 NQ results were derived using the Alternative Certification Model: teacher and lecturer estimates based on evidence of demonstrated attainment gathered during the year. These differ from previous years whereby grades were based on external assessment, including exams and coursework. As a result of these different approaches to certification the results for 2020 and 2021 are not directly comparable to each other or to those of previous (or future) years. Any comparisons of 2020 and 2021 NQ attainment results with previous and future years should be performed with an understanding of the differing underlying assessment methodologies.

5. Engagement of Children and Young People

The extent of engagement of young people in the development of policy during the pandemic that directly impacts them was a central theme in the evidence the Committee took, including that communication and consultation with children and young people was variable in earlier phases of the pandemic. Whilst we welcome recent progress made in this regard by the Scottish Government and its agencies, as well as by local government, there is both the need and the opportunity to continue improving such engagement and work in partnership with young people as policy responses to the pandemic continue to evolve.

It is essential that the voice of children and young people helps to challenge and to shape decisions about the education system. This is even more important as we incorporate the UNCRC into Scots Law. We have taken a range of steps to ensure that children and young people helped to shape and influence decisions over the past 18 months, including Liam Fowley MSYP, who is a member of both the Covid Education Recovery Group (CERG) and the Scottish Education Council (SEC). Liam recently tweeted that "*CERG was a collegiate, whole system and respectful body that had to have some incredibly difficult discussions during its time*" and encouraged other young people to take advantage of similar

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opportunities saying “*I may have been one of the first young people to do this sort of thing..... but I certainly won't be the last. Never underestimate the power of young people.*”

Working with Young Scot and Children in Scotland we also established a dedicated Education Recovery Youth Panel which helped to input to recovery issues between Nov 2020 and June 2021. The Panel helped to shape the Scottish Government’s COVID-19 education recovery work, ensuring young people from a range of backgrounds and experiences were included in the Coronavirus (COVID-19) recovery plans for education.

The Scottish Youth Parliament continue to be represented on the SQA National Qualifications Group, and SQA are also engaging with young people through their Learner Panel to ensure that they are engaged in ongoing developments around the National Qualifications. SQA are also working through these channels to ensure that communications are developed and delivered in as clear and accessible a way as possible.

I am pleased to inform the committee that we have committed to fund a new project which will reframe our engagement with children and young people across education policy, and will build upon our learning over the past two years to strengthen the voice of children and young people.

You may recall that in June 2021 I announced the creation of a dedicated Children and Young People’s Education Council. Following feedback from Children’s Rights experts and children and young people’s organisations we have decided to adapt our approach to ensure more meaningful, sustainable engagement going forward. We are working alongside a collaborative of children and young people’s organisations to firstly undertake internal mapping of our own activity across Education Policy, before working with children and young people to co-design a new mechanism for participation.

This is an exciting new approach, which will ensure that children and young people will be front and centre of policy development.

We are committed to learning from and improving on past engagement with children and young people to develop our listening practices. It is our intention that young people’s voices form the bedrock of our policy making, which is why we have listened to the expertise of those who work with young people every day in adapting our approach. We are mindful of [WHO guidance on participation with young people to inform policy and practice](#). We intend to adopt a genuine co-production method to ensure the meaningful participation and engagement of children and young people.

We are committed to working in partnership with children and young people’s organisations to review the way we currently engage with children and young people to co-design a more meaningful, strategic and impactful feedback loop. Through taking this child and youth led approach, the shape and structure of any feedback loop will be determined by children and young people themselves. We will continue to work systematically within Scottish Government to ensure that children and young people continue to feed into policy decisions in any intervening period, whilst these new arrangements are designed and co-developed alongside children and young people.

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