

## **EIS Response to the ECYPC Report on the Impact of Covid 19 on Children and Young People**

The Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS), Scotland's largest teacher trade union, representing teachers in all sectors and across all career stages, welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Committee's report on the impact of Covid-19 on children and young people.

The comments provided below relate to the sections of the report as sub-headed.

### **Online Learning**

Whilst recognising that the report is focusing on the impact of COVID-19 on children and young people, this section fails to acknowledge the Herculean efforts of teachers in meeting the needs of pupils during lockdown. Teachers responded quickly, with many developing new skills, to ensure educational continuity through online learning, at a time when they would undoubtedly have been responding to their own COVID-related challenges.

Paragraph 19 of the report refers to the focus of national and local government on support for 'quality, accessibility and effectiveness' of remote learning, without balancing this with the collegiate practice and commitment demonstrated by our members, in ensuring that teaching and learning with a key focus on health and wellbeing was being delivered when learners needed it most, with little external support in place.

The ['One Thousand Women's Voices'](#) briefing and recording provides an insight into some of the challenges which they faced.

### **Scottish Government Action**

The EIS has judged the Scottish Government's Education Recovery Plan to be woefully inadequate in terms of ideas and additionality of resources provided. Vast swathes of the funding listed within the Plan had already been committed through other workstreams and so, had been allocated to address issues highlighted previously and not specifically for Recovery.

It failed to get to the nub of what would impact positively and decisively on children and young people's educational experience: smaller class sizes to enable a strong focus on wellbeing and recovery with individual children and young people in our classrooms, immediate implementation of reduced class contact time for teachers to address the chronic workload and wellbeing issues that teachers are facing and which must be overcome as an element of Recovery, dedicated funding to bridge the gap between promise and practice in ASL and the immediate expansion of free school meals provision to all children and young people.

Although the Scottish Government has pledged to provide a digital device to every school aged child by 2026, this fails to address the current issues in terms of

digital poverty, fuel poverty and the digital skills gap. The [EIS Briefing on Digital Poverty](#) provides more information in this regard.

This section of the report cites existing policy commitments which the Scottish Government believes will help to contribute to recovery, referring to the abolition of fees for instrumental music tuition and the full rollout of 1,140 hours of high-quality Early Learning and Childcare.

*Abolition of fees for Instrumental Music Tuition* – whilst the policy is welcome, it is only likely to have the intended impact on recovery if sufficiently funded. To ensure access is universally available for all pupils who wish to play a musical instrument, there will require to be substantial investment in Instrumental Music Services, resulting in service expansion. Otherwise, waiting lists will grow or class sizes will increase, with the consequential detrimental impact on provision. We have yet to see the expansion of Services needed to facilitate free access for all and indeed, in some areas, are seeing Services contract. Further investment in this key policy area will, therefore, be needed if the positive contribution of Music education is to have the intended impact on pupils' health and wellbeing, achievements and attainment, in the years to come.

*Expansion of 1,140 hours of high-quality Early Learning and Childcare* - whilst the expansion of high-quality Early Learning and Childcare is cited as another key policy to support recovery, we would question how this policy objective can be fully realised given the paucity of GTCS registered teachers currently in ELC settings. We believe that there is a need for significant additional investment in the employment of GTCS registered teachers to work alongside colleagues in other roles within ELC.

The Improvement Service Report, 'Early Learning and Childcare Expansion Delivery Progress report', published in May 2021, evidences the significant reduction in the number of GTCS registered teachers in ELC settings, with teachers forming only 2% of the local authority ELC workforce as of April 2021. In the last ten years, there has been a 52% reduction in the number of nursery teachers employed in ELC settings, but only a 2% reduction in the number of children attending.

Early Years Teachers:

- are the specialists with knowledge of the curriculum and its application, not only in ELC settings but in the primary context;
- have a strong understanding of play pedagogy, its place in learning and development, and model effective practice;
- play a key role in identifying and supporting children who require additional support for learning, in co-ordinating this support and in implementing early intervention strategies.
- act as bridging professionals, supporting transitions at all stage and importantly from nursery into Primary 1;
- promote good relationships with parents to foster richer home learning environments as a critical element in interrupting the cycle of poverty; and

- crucially in addressing the social and emotional impact of the pandemic on child development, are equipped to lead Trauma Informed Practice within settings.

Against this background and in the context of Recovery, we might have expected to see an increase in investment in GTCS registered teachers in ELC but with current Scottish Government policy only pledging 'access to a teacher', what has increasingly emerged across Scotland is an extremely diverse model of provision. The average nursery teacher to child ratio is 1:223. This can hardly be regarded as meaningful access, particularly in the context of Recovery.

The Committee heard evidence from the EIS of the distressed behaviours which are manifest in our youngest learners since the return to in-school learning and the need for more dedicated support to address the underlying causes.

If the policy objective in the Report is to be met, then the EIS would recommend that there is a review of the current model of provision and sufficient investment allocated to ensure that appropriate support from GTCS registered teachers is provided to address the negative impacts which COVID-19 has had on children in ELC and support effective transitions to Primary school.

### **Assessing initial need and measuring the impact**

**'The Committee therefore recommends that the Scottish Government should commission research utilising quantitative and qualitative methods, as a matter of urgency, to provide an analysis of how different cohorts have been affected by COVID.'**

The Equity Audit, called for by the EIS in the early stages of the pandemic, and published in January 2021 provides insight into the impact of school closures during the first lockdown and highlighted that those pupils from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds were most badly affected.

This was echoed in the EIS submission to the Committee. That evidence provided a national picture of the current level of need, particularly in relation to those who are most severely challenged as a result of socio-economic deprivation. The experience and evidence of the challenges which our members have reported provide a clear indication of the need for additional investment in ASL.

We know from Scottish Government data that ASN teacher numbers have fallen by a staggering 19.5% in the last ten years, against a backdrop of rising need. In 2020, 226,838 children are recorded as having additional support needs; nearly a third of pupils in our schools. We know that the impact of the pandemic has led to increased need of increased complexity and is likely to continue in this vein in the years to come as the health and educational impacts of the pandemic continue to be felt and levels of poverty in Scotland continue to rise.

Whilst the EIS understands that the information, gathered from the research proposed by the Committee, may assist in considering the impact of the pandemic on children with protected characteristics (we know that BAME families were at higher risk of financial difficulty during the pandemic; LGBT organisations have

raised alarm around the mental health impact of many young people having to hide their sexuality at home; and those already living with domestic abuse have experienced further isolation), we would question what action will be taken to address any findings, which identify gaps in provision. We already know that there is rising and complex need and chronic under-funding of provision. We would wish to see immediate investment in ASL now, as part of a long-term resourcing strategy, resulting in reduction of class sizes and significantly enhanced availability of specialist ASN support and expertise within schools, and from specialist partner agencies. To address the equality impacts of Covid that we're aware of now, further resource should be provided to anti-racist education, the implementation of LGBT inclusive education and further equality related efforts, including high quality professional learning opportunities and proper time for teachers to engage.

We note that the Committee has referenced the Achievement of Curriculum for Excellence Levels ('ACEL') data and other data gathered for the NIF and has stated its intention to consider the issue of attainment later in 2022. We are disappointed to note the focus which is being placed on narrow attainment in Literacy and Numeracy, and that the report fails to acknowledge the significant shortcomings of the SNSA and ACEL data, highlighted by the OECD in its review of the Curriculum for Excellence.

We would suggest that the focus should, instead, be on achievement of all children and young people, including those with additional support needs, to include attainment as appropriate, rather than solely on attainment. In the context of Recovery, regard should be had to wellbeing principles and a more inclusive ethos adopted, to ensure that the achievements of all children and young people are celebrated.

### **Additional Staff**

**'The Committee agrees that setting outcomes, and clearly explaining how success can be measured, is critical to assessing the effectiveness of any intervention. The Committee would therefore welcome more information from the Scottish Government on the outcomes achieved as a result of the resources it provided to support children and young people during the pandemic, including the specific issues highlighted above.'**

**'The Committee notes the work on the findings of the Morgan review. Given the impact of the pandemic on children with additional support needs, the Committee considers that implementation of the recommendations is required as a matter of urgency.'**

Whilst the implementation of the national measurement framework will be helpful in acknowledging achievement and in promoting inclusion, it will not address the chronic underfunding in ASL which has been prevalent for so long and is referenced in the EIS written and oral evidence to the Committee. The full implementation of the recommendations of the Morgan Review, while helpful if

taken forward in the right spirit, will not suffice in ensuring that all children and young people with additional support needs get the support that they need. The Review barely addressed resourcing, since the parameter of the Review were set in such a way as to exclude issues of resourcing.

## **Food**

The EIS acknowledges the efforts of the Scottish Government and local authorities during lockdowns to ensure the provision of food to children entitled to free school meals, including the agility with which some local authorities moved to providing families with cash payments in lieu of school meals served in school canteens when circumstances could not allow this. The EIS has been somewhat disappointed and frustrated by the lack of commitment by the Scottish Government to adopt the learning from this experience within its plans for the expansion of free school meals to all Primary pupils- the EIS sees no reason why cash payments could not be made in lieu of sit-down school meals for children in P6 and P7 for whom there is currently no universal provision. In spite of rising levels of poverty and now the cost of living crisis, the Scottish government has no plans to extend universal provision of free school meals to all Secondary-aged pupils and has cited practical reasons such as lack of canteen space and capacity for this. Again, the learning from the lockdown phases of the pandemic should be applied: where school canteens are unable to accommodate increased capacity, families could be provided cash in order that all young people have access to food during the school day.

## **Digital Support**

**'The Committee encourages the Scottish Government to ensure that the work to roll out devices to children and young people recognises the wider requirements, as detailed above, to ensure that the policy achieves the desired outcomes and contributes to closing the 'digital divide'. This wider work should recognise that access to the internet may be more challenging in rural locations.'**

The EIS welcomes this recommendation and would highlight the links between digital exclusion and fuel poverty. With 311,000 households living in extreme fuel poverty, it cannot be assumed that, even if a device has been provided by the school or local authority, the family income will stretch to keeping the device fully charged. There are also issues in relation to inequalities in digital literacy skills, which can mean that some parents are at risk of missing out on opportunities to work with their child's school to support their learning and enhance their outcomes. The [EIS Briefing on Digital Poverty](#) provides more information in this regard.

## **It's not over**

The EIS concurs with the conclusion of the Committee that 'the public health emergency posed by the pandemic is not over' and agrees with the Scottish Government that keeping schools open and education continuing has to be one of our highest priorities.

To enable the realisation of that priority, however, the EIS is of the view that Covid safety must also be a priority and all that can reasonably be done to keep infection rates low within school communities, should be done, otherwise we risk school closures. To this end, the removal of mitigations at school level should be phased and appropriately paced rather than a whole-sale removal of all at once, with other measures remaining in place indefinitely, such as the provision of free Lateral Flow Tests for teachers and any young people who wish to use them, effective ventilation measures and enhanced cleaning within school buildings.