



OFFICIAL REPORT
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Education and Skills Committee

Wednesday 13 January 2021

Session 5



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EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE

1st Meeting 2021, Session 5

CONVENER

*Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*George Adam (Paisley) (SNP)

*Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP)

*Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab)

*Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con)

*Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green)

*Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)

*Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con)

*Alex Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)

*Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Alan Armstrong (Education Scotland)

Richard Bell (NASUWT)

Jean Blair (Scottish Qualifications Authority)

Larry Flanagan (Educational Institute of Scotland)

Gayle Gorman (Education Scotland)

Jane Peckham (NASUWT)

Fiona Robertson (Scottish Qualifications Authority)

Seamus Searson (Scottish Secondary Teachers Association)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Gary Cocker

LOCATION

Virtual Meeting

Scottish Parliament

Education and Skills Committee

Wednesday 13 January 2021

[The Convener opened the meeting at 14:30]

Interests

The Convener (Clare Adamson): Good afternoon, and a warm welcome to the first meeting in 2021 of the Education and Skills Committee. I remind everyone to turn their mobile devices to silent for the duration of the meeting, please.

Since we last met, there has been a change to the committee's membership, with Oliver Mundell replacing Jamie Halcro Johnston. I thank Jamie Halcro Johnston for his work and wish him all the best in his new parliamentary duties.

I welcome Oliver Mundell back to the committee. Under agenda item 1, I invite him to declare any relevant interests.

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): Thank you, convener. I am pleased to be rejoining the committee. I do not have any interests to declare.

The Convener: Thank you very much. I highlight that Oliver is leaving the meeting briefly and will join us later.

Decision on Taking Business in Private

14:31

The Convener: Agenda item 2 is a decision on whether to take items 4 and 5 in private. Does any member object to taking those items in private?

As no member objects, we will take those items in private.

Covid-19: Learning and Teaching in the Senior Phase

14:31

The Convener: Agenda item 3 is our evidence session on coronavirus and education: learning and teaching in the senior phase. We will hear from two panels of witnesses.

I welcome our first panel. Larry Flanagan is the general secretary of the Educational Institute of Scotland; Richard Bell is a secondary school teacher and the national executive member for Scotland of the NASUWT; and Seamus Seanson is the general secretary of the Scottish Secondary Teachers Association.

We will move to questions directly, without asking for opening statements. I remind members to type R in the chat box if they want to come in on a particular topic.

Our first questions are on teaching and learning. I invite Rona Mackay to open those questions.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): I want to ask about vulnerable children and the children of key workers. My local authority is not categorising all children with additional support needs as vulnerable. Many parents of children with ASN have contacted me to express concerns about the practicalities of home learning and the considerable stress that that is causing them. What extra support are local authorities giving to those parents, and how do they access the support?

The Convener: I invite the witnesses to indicate whenever they want to come in. On this question, I will go to Mr Flanagan first and ask the other witnesses to type R in the chat box if they want to respond.

Larry Flanagan (Educational Institute of Scotland): It is difficult for me to answer on behalf of local authorities, as that is a question for them as the employers. However, additional support should be available when parents need it.

I think that all parents will find home learning stressful. It is not an ideal situation, but I agree with those local authorities that are not automatically designating someone as vulnerable because they are in an ASN setting. For example, a young person who has a physical disability that requires an ASN setting might be as capable of home learning as any of their peers.

One of our members' big concerns is ASN settings. In particular schools, close proximity with the children is often necessary because of the support that is needed for toiletry arrangements or for feeding. In some cases, the schools are closer

to a clinical setting than an educational setting. Staff in ASN settings have significant concerns in that regard.

Some councils have moved ASN schools on to blended learning approaches simply to reduce the number of people who are in the classroom—often, it is not only the teacher and pupils; there might also be three or four additional support staff present. Of course, pupil numbers will be smaller because class sizes are smaller.

We have raised a specific concern with the Scottish Government about addressing ASN settings in a different way from mainstream schools, because in lots of ways they are closer to the situation in care homes due to the close proximity of people. There is a strong case that, if any group of teachers were to be prioritised for vaccination, it should be those in ASN settings. There is a lot of concern about that among our members.

In relation to Rona Mackay's question, we recognise that, for some parents of children with additional needs, there is a need for support that goes beyond education and relates to how the family is coping with the young person's disability. That is a wider question than the education provision, and local authorities should address that.

Seamus Searson (Scottish Secondary Teachers Association): I will follow on from what Larry Flanagan said. There is a real concern that we are trying to accommodate children when it is probably best for them to be at home, because the purpose of closing schools is to restrict the virus and keep people safe. Any pupil who is able to work from home should be asked to work from home. It is difficult, but we are putting people at risk if we do otherwise.

There was a great deal of confusion at the beginning of term because of the changes to who would be in and who would not be in. We need to focus on that, because ASN settings are of real concern. I echo what Larry Flanagan said: ASN teachers are probably the people who are most at risk, because of how the children react and behave in those settings, so we need to ask what other methods can be used to support those children and their families. It is difficult not only for the parents of those children but for teachers who have childcare responsibilities. There is a major issue around making sure that what we expect to happen during this pandemic period happens.

Rona Mackay: Does Mr Bell want to come in?

Richard Bell (NASUWT): I echo the points that my fellow union representatives have just made—in particular, the point that Larry Flanagan made on prioritising ASN staff for immunisation, given the increased risk that they experience in their

day-to-day duties. The NASUWT has launched a campaign called vaccinate to educate, which is pushing that message, and we hope that it will be picked up by decision makers in due course.

There is a balance of risks and needs in this situation. The main issue around the closure of schools is about mitigating transmission. That needs to be looked at not only in relation to in-school provision for young people with additional support needs but in relation to the other ways in which they can be supported outwith the school environment.

Rona Mackay: My next question is about the equity audit that was announced by the cabinet secretary this morning, so I will wait and ask the cabinet secretary that one.

Alex Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Since we are at the beginning of the discussion, I will ask a general question. From the unions' point of view, what conditions need to be met in order for kids to get back to school and out of the current situation? Do we need more regular testing of teachers, to get the numbers down to a certain level or to make sure that everybody in a certain group is vaccinated? When do you see it being right and proper to have the kids back in school? What criteria need to be met?

Larry Flanagan: There is a range of issues, the most critical of which is that the virus must be under control—the R number must be well below 1 and moving downwards. Opening schools can add 0.2 to 0.4 to the R number. Unless we want to be in and out, then in and out again with schools, we must suppress the virus in the community before we even think about reopening them.

Beyond that, there is a bigger challenge that is, in some senses, new. In-school transmission and the risk to pupils were contested areas pre-Christmas. One new challenge is the increased transmissibility of the new variant. It is fairly clear, although the evidence is still being worked through, that transmission has increased among young people—that drove the high figures in London and the south-east. They do not physically distance in schools, and, after they go back to households, the virus goes from households into the community. In the education recovery group, we will ask about the implications of that for how schools operate.

Schools might be able to reopen only if physical distancing of pupils is introduced, which would mean that we were back to where we were last August, when we had blended learning and part-time attendance. Blended learning is better than remote learning but not as good as full-time attendance. There is great concern about the new variant's implications for schools.

The final part of the jigsaw, which Alex Neil referred to, is the impact of vaccination on ensuring confidence about the safety of schools. We do not want to get into a competition about prioritisation for vaccines, but we have expressed concern about vaccine supplies, because we should not have competing priorities. If the AstraZeneca vaccine is not for profit and is fairly easy to produce, there is a big question mark over why we do not have 24/7 production and a subsequent 24/7 vaccination programme. We would like the answers about why more of the vaccine is not available and why various groups are not being vaccinated more rapidly. Vaccinating teachers would provide a big part of the jigsaw for operating schools safely.

The Convener: As well as Alex Neil, Mr Johnson wants to ask a supplementary question, but I will give Mr Bell and Mr Searson the opportunity to speak.

Seamus Searson: My comments follow on from what Larry Flanagan said about vaccination. A clear plan is needed for vaccinating not only teachers and support staff but pupils, because transmission is still possible after vaccination.

A bigger question is about what is expected to happen in the coming months. The Government has measures until the end of January, but we all expect that to be extended, because the conditions that we just referred to will not be in place by then or probably by the end of February. We need to say what the conditions will be for schools to return. As Larry Flanagan said, we might need to consider which children come back first and what measures to put in place to keep children and people who work in schools safe.

A complete return, as in August, is not possible under the current conditions, so we need a clear statement from the Government of the plan for getting children back into schools. What tests must be passed before we can move forward? We must be realistic that we are looking at remote learning for much longer than until the end of January. A clear statement of the plan and of the rules that will need to be in place before children come back to school would be useful.

14:45

The Convener: Mr Bell, do you want to come in?

Richard Bell: I would make similar points to those that have already been made, to be honest. The issue is connected to the wider incidence of the virus. You made a point about the testing regime. That really has any efficacy only once the virus itself has been pretty well suppressed, in order to ensure that it does not flare up again. I do not think that we are at that stage yet.

Reopening the schools needs to be done carefully. It could be argued that the full reopening in August was appropriate at the time, but that approach is certainly not appropriate when we are dealing with such a highly transmissible strain of the virus. In the First Minister's most recent address to Parliament, she noted that the new strain has an increased transmissibility rate that might add between 0.5 and 0.7 to the R number. Again, the issue still needs to be tested, but there is some evidence that that applies to young people, too, which suggests that schools are potentially a high-risk environment.

Previously, we had in place plans for a blended approach, which involves ensuring that maximum mitigations are in place. That must be considered carefully before schools return. Again, colleagues today have mentioned perhaps prioritising who comes back when.

The vaccination aspect is important. From our point of view, given the circumstances that teaching staff and other school staff are operating under and the difficulties that there have been until now in relation to there being a consistent approach to the guidance around health and safety mitigations in the school environment, we would like to see a prioritisation of school staff similar to that which applies with regard to health workers, when and if they are asked to go back into the school environment.

Alex Neil: On that last point, do all three unions agree that teachers should be prioritised for vaccination? Obviously, a percentage of teachers will already be in priority groups—I do not know whether any of you have any estimates of those numbers. Should all teachers be prioritised? Should only teachers aged over 50 be prioritised? What should the prioritisation be?

The Government is saying that the average number of cases per 100,000 among teachers across the UK is no higher than it is in the general population. How can we reconcile that with the idea that kids are spreading the virus in the community? If that were the case, you would think that they would be spreading it much more among teachers, given the number of kids that teachers come into contact with. How do we reconcile those two statements?

The Convener: We have limited time today, so I ask people to come in only if they have a point to make, and they should indicate that they wish to come in using the R function.

I see that Larry Flanagan has his hand up.

Larry Flanagan: I am not sure that we have worked out the chat function here yet, convener.

There are a lot of issues in Alex Neil's question, but I will make just a couple of quick points. The

most recent report of the scientific advisory group for emergencies indicates that teachers were at no greater risk than those in other professions. However, it also says that teachers had a higher rate of testing positive than people in equivalent groups. There are some contradictions there, but the key point is that all those figures relate to the previous variant of the virus. The new variant is a game changer in terms of in-school transmission. Although teachers try to physically distance from pupils, it is not possible to physically distance 30 teenagers in a normal classroom. That is the new risk. I have debated with the Deputy First Minister on a number of occasions the risk that was present in schools before Christmas, but there is a different dynamic now.

We are not saying that teachers should be a priority—it is for the Government to decide how big a priority reopening schools is, and, if you want to reopen schools safely, vaccinating teachers is one way of achieving that. We are not in a bidding war with other workers. At a Scottish Trades Union Congress meeting this morning, I heard the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers talk about the need to vaccinate shop workers. Our argument is that everyone should be vaccinated as quickly as possible. What are the barriers to that?

Alex Neil asked about the percentage of teachers who might be vaccinated as part of the normal programme. The majority of teachers are now under the age of 40, so there has been quite a big demographic shift. If we vaccinate the most vulnerable and then people by age group, I reckon that we will probably vaccinate between 30 and 35 per cent of the current teaching workforce.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): After that answer, I should remind the committee that I am a member of USDAW.

To some extent, what I was going to ask about has been covered, but I will go a bit further. This morning, Jeane Freeman basically said that we cannot prioritise any group in advance of what the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation will announce. Is it the witnesses' position that we should not ask people to return to work and come into contact with other people until they have been vaccinated? If so, based on what Larry Flanagan has pointed out about the age profile of the teaching workforce, when would it be possible, on the current timeframes, for teachers to return to work? The timetables that I have seen suggest that people under the age of 40 probably should not expect to be vaccinated until well into the summer—in other words, after the current school year finishes. Do the witnesses agree with those two reflections?

Larry Flanagan: I do not think that it is a binary choice. In August, schools reopened safely because the R figure in the community was low. If

the R figure is low, there is a different context. When there is heightened risk, vaccination is one of the ways of addressing the concern.

The other option is physical distancing. The introduction of physical distancing and blended learning would immediately make the environment safer. Schools could reopen and pupils could be in the classroom, but not all of them at the same time.

I do not think that it is a case of either/or. We are not saying that schools should not reopen until every teacher is vaccinated. That is not our argument. We are asking for the combination of weekly testing—which we were promised last summer but which is still not happening—the vaccination roll-out and consideration of the number of pupils who are in school.

People should be aware that I am a member of the education recovery group, of which there is a sub-group that is looking at a range of options for how schools might reopen safely. There are on-going discussions about all the different options.

Seamus Searson: The people who are most at risk at present are those who are supervising learning in schools. If we are going to keep schools open for vulnerable children and the children of key workers, those people might need to be included in the priority list.

The problem is that some secondary schools are using a rota of staff to come into school. We argue that that is an additional and unnecessary risk. If we are supposed to restrict the number of people who go into schools, we need to ensure that we do not expose more people to the risk. At the moment, we hear examples of different groups of teachers going into school every half day. That is an unnecessary risk.

If there are people supervising pupils in school, they will potentially be at risk, so, as well as putting in place physical distancing measures and doing everything that we possibly can, we need to focus on supporting them at a very early stage. I urge committee members to reinforce the “stay at home” message so that we reduce the number of people who come into contact with others at school.

There are a lot of ifs and buts at this stage, but we need to have some sort of plan for how we move forward.

Richard Bell: The key point is around risk mitigation and when we will have the appropriate level of that in place to deal with the increased risk presented by the new variant of the virus. That is the balance that we are looking for in the hubs or in the care that is being provided for young people at the moment in the school environment and that will be provided when schools attempt to go back

partially, in a blended model or otherwise. I think that Larry Flanagan has already made that point. However, vaccination is a part of that, as is social distancing.

Obviously, a big part of that is understanding the medical and scientific advice around it. I believe that those involved are still trying to work out exactly how transmissible the new variant is and what factors are leading to its increased transmissibility. All those things have to be in play for any decisions to be made going forward.

It really is about risk mitigation, and there is concern about that. Certainly, the guidelines that were in place previously, which I think have not been updated since December, are not in the place where we need them to be for what we are dealing with at the moment. They are predicated on the original virus, whereas, as I said, the new variant increases significantly the risk of transmission in schools. We need to have much stronger mitigations in place to ensure that people are protected in that environment.

The Convener: Can we come back to you, Mr Johnson, or are you finished?

Daniel Johnson: I am finished. I just wanted to ask about that one point.

The Convener: That is fine. We will move on to broader learning and teaching issues, with questions from Ms Wishart.

Beatrice Wishart: My questions are about teacher wellbeing and support. Throughout the pandemic, we have seen advice, guidance and support from central education agencies being shared late in the day. Just last week, for example, we had the Scottish Government issuing guidance for teachers at 17:37 on a Friday before remote learning started at 9 am on Monday. Can you give an insight into what that means for teachers? Do you have any impression of the scale of overtime that might result from those delays? With regard to the possible knock-on effects, are there any repercussions for learners?

Seamus Searson: Unfortunately, that has been the situation that we have faced since the outbreak began. We have all tried to learn from what has been going on, but late guidance is of no help, because it means that people have already planned and organised before these events take place. Last summer, for example, teachers were going away on their vacation on the understanding that we were going back to blended learning, but that changed and it upset all the arrangements and plans that people had been making. The same thing happened at Christmas with different changes.

Trying to keep people safe is the most important thing, but that does not always come across, and

the message has seemed to be that we need to focus on the education of the children. I would argue that the downside of all this is that teachers are at the end of their tether and are struggling considerably. They were struggling before Christmas and are struggling at the moment, because it is far easier for teachers to be in schools teaching than trying to work remotely, which only adds to the pressure. We heard today, for example, that Education Scotland will be investigating remote learning. That is an additional pressure on teachers that we do not need at this point.

We should be asking teachers what we can do to support them to deliver education. If we are not careful, the pressure that is being applied to teachers to provide remote learning and the expectations for the qualifications later this year will push a lot of teachers to the edge. We are looking at teachers, even though they are working at home, being off sick and not available to support learning.

We need to be realistic about what we can expect of teachers during this period. It is important that we continue pupils' engagement with education, but without trying to act as if everything was normal or expecting the same outcomes. Things have not been normal since last March, so we need to provide some breathing space to support and encourage teachers to keep doing the excellent job that they are doing, and try not to undermine and second-guess them at every opportunity, which appears to be the atmosphere that lots of teachers are reporting back to us.

15:00

Larry Flanagan: I agree with Seamus Searson's points. Workload has always been a pressure, and that has particularly been the case over the last period. I make particular mention of the pressures that have been brought to bear on school leadership teams, as headteachers and deputies have carried a particular burden over that period. For example, the default position on test and trace has been that Public Health Scotland has left it to schools. Outbreaks in schools have been a huge challenge—heads often work over weekends to contact parents about self-isolation, and the last-minute changes always mean an intense period of preparation.

We had the extended Christmas break, which gave a couple of days of leeway in which to organise the remote learning platforms. However, many teachers are also parents, and the challenges that all parents will face when working from home and having online schooling going on are particularly acute for teachers who have children in the house, as they are trying to deliver

both at the same time. Therefore, workload has been a significant concern.

The DFM may have made an announcement on the matter this morning, but I did not manage to follow it. We have members across the country who have been seeking supply work and who have found it difficult. I think that every teacher who is available for work should have been signed up and been in schools over the last period. I know that the Government will cite the 1,400 extra posts that were created, but if there are 2,000 teachers looking for work, 2,000 should be employed. We need all hands on deck to cope with the situation. In particular, we should be trying to carve out additional support for the children who are most disadvantaged. We have not assigned individual mentors to individual pupils, but we should have been looking to do so. We should have been looking to do that when pupils were in schools, and even more so now that they are working remotely.

There is much more that can be done by increasing the staffing levels in schools to provide the greatest support possible to individuals, particularly pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Richard Bell: I think that the original question was about teachers—*[Inaudible.]*—but also young people, and how that is being supported, and also understood or monitored in the system. From the perspective of classroom teachers on the front line, there is a feeling that that aspect is not being considered effectively and that it is often lost in the sheer volume of work that they take on while trying to deliver as best as they can for their young people.

As I am sure you can imagine, the return to the classroom in August was not a normal return like in any other August. A lot of young people had been through an extended period of lockdown. There were lots of issues with young people being back in the social environment, and teachers were working with them as best they could to try to focus on wellbeing as well as the learning environment.

Things have changed again, and we are back into another period of lockdown. There is a shift to—*[Inaudible.]* I think that it was Seamus Searson who made the point. It is taking a toll, and it is something that we need to bear in mind in relation to the long-term sustainability of the situation and also—*[Inaudible.]*—workforce in teaching. A lot of people must be exhausted and demoralised at this stage, and we are potentially only at the beginning. There have been high-level initiatives on wellbeing and support, but they are not necessarily reaching the front line as a usable framework to support front-line teachers in what they are trying to do. There is often a plethora of

information, which becomes something else for teachers to work through; they need to navigate their way through competing information sources, documents and so on to try to understand what they need to be doing to best support young people.

I hope that we will come back to the specific subject of qualifications later in the meeting, because there are serious issues to do with the impact on the senior phase, given where we are at present with schools mainly being closed.

Beatrice Wishart: That is helpful. I had another question about the impact on teachers' mental health, but the witnesses have answered that question; there are great concerns about burnout among teachers and staff. I will leave it there, convener, and give other members a chance to ask their questions.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): In response to Beatrice Wishart's question, Seamus Searson rightly pointed out that things are not normal. An issue is the impact on teachers of what is currently expected of them. Earlier today, the Deputy First Minister said:

"Remote learning will not replicate in-school teaching in style, approach or hours of delivery".—*[Official Report, 13 January 2021; c 17.]*

Does that tally with what councils and schools have been expecting of teachers over the past week?

Seamus Searson: That is exactly the problem. The guidance that has come from the Covid-19 education recovery group, which the SSTA is not a member of, is being interpreted by headteachers and local authorities in different ways. We are being inundated by members contacting us to highlight what they believe are impossible demands being placed on them to try to meet the expectations of parents, pupils, politicians or whoever. The poor teachers are saying, "Give us a chance—our focus should be on providing education for the children," but there seems to be a great deal of intervention, such as trying to quiz teachers about what they are doing in order to catch them out.

We have to be realistic. Trying to run a normal curriculum and a normal timetable in a secondary school is not possible, for a whole series of reasons. One example is access to information and communications technology equipment. If teachers are working at home, they may need to supervise their own children's learning, and they will not be available at every minute during the school day. Parents who have children at school may have only one computer in the house, and therefore those children will have to wait until another time to participate. We are going to cause a problem for ourselves. Not everybody will be

able to access ICT equipment at the same time, so we need to find a range of activities and learning materials for children that can be accessed at different times.

We are worried that a lack of strict rules from the CERG is allowing people to interpret things in different ways. We have been told, for example, that every teacher needs to deliver a certain number of hours of live teaching every day. There are concerns about that, as it is not possible. That is the sort of thing that has been interpreted from the guidance that was originally produced by the CERG.

Larry Flanagan: Schools are far better prepared for this lockdown experience than they were last March, because that was the result of a sudden decision. However, that does not mean that there are not still issues to be addressed. The guidance from Education Scotland on remote learning is useful, because it talks about a balance of approaches. Without getting overeducational about it, I highlight that the pedagogy of remote learning is completely different from the pedagogy of in-class teaching. It would be totally wrong, therefore, for a young person, and a primary-age child in particular, to be in front of a screen for five hours a day; that would be detrimental to their wellbeing.

Most young people go into receptive mode when they are faced with a screen. I was watching BBC Bitesize as a way of relaxing during my lunch break. It is difficult to engage with Bitesize, because people let what they see on television screens wash over them. You need some level of interaction and direction from the teacher on a remote learning platform and you must also have activities that require some degree of independence. That changes according to age groups. The remote learning dynamic for pupils in the senior phase will be different from that for pupils in primary 1, 2 or 3. Schools are best placed to make that judgment.

As Seamus Searson said, there are some off-the-wall approaches. I have heard of secondary schools that have tried to replicate their usual 33-period weekly timetable. That is pedagogically unsound and it is unworkable. We have put examples of good approaches to timetabling on our website. A secondary school could organise an afternoon block of English or maths, with the teacher directing the learning within that.

It is Wednesday. We are at the start of remote learning in this lockdown. We must share good practice as quickly as possible and stamp out any of the nonsense that might pop up. It is in everyone's interest to ensure that remote learning works as effectively as possible. I know that teachers have put a lot of effort into getting that right for young people. They saw how some

particular groups were impacted during the previous lockdown and they do not want that to be repeated. If there are lessons to learn, we should share them. Remote learning cannot be as good as an in-school experience, but it can be effective for a short time and it can keep young people engaged in their learning journey.

Richard Bell: I agree with most of what has been said. We must ensure that the guidance is based on teachers' professional judgment. In a scenario—*[Inaudible.]*

The Convener: Mr Bell, I am sorry, but you are breaking up. It has become worse during the meeting. Is it possible for broadcasting staff to bring Richard Bell in without the video stream so that he can be heard? Can we have an indication in the chat box that that is possible?

Please come back in, Richard, and we will see whether we can hear you better.

Richard Bell: I think that I had a remote learning issue, which highlights some of our points.

I would emphasise the guidance on teachers' professional judgment and their agency when it comes to the sorts of pedagogy that are employed in these circumstances. When approaches are inconsistent, or in some of the more extreme examples that Larry Flanagan referred to such as schools attempting to run their normal day, some pupils and even teachers will not be able to access that.

It would be more rational to take an asynchronistic approach to delivering remote learning, rather than trying to synchronise it with the normal school day. I cannot say this strongly enough: teachers' professional judgment is the most appropriate pedagogic tool for delivering learning to young people.

The Convener: Ross Greer will not ask a supplementary question; I will come back to him later. Iain Gray and Jamie Greene have new lines of questioning.

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): My main line of questioning is on qualifications. Is it okay for me to move on to that now, convener?

The Convener: It is.

15:15

Iain Gray: Mr Searson, I saw the comments that you made in the past day or so on the national qualifications group's most recent update on the replacement framework for cancelled exams. You made a pretty clear plea for the Scottish Qualifications Authority to step out and leave the framework, which is to be based on teacher assessment, and to trust it. Would you like to

expand on that? Perhaps our other witnesses could then say where they feel we are on having clarity around how qualifications will be awarded this year.

Seamus Searson: I will respond to the point about my comment on the national qualifications group. We requested a place on that group, but the SQA believed that it was unnecessary to involve the SSTA. We find that hard to believe, because we represent secondary teachers, and it means that we are not aware of all the thinking that goes on in the group. It will be obvious to most people that we have been playing catch-up since the very beginning of the pandemic. Since early last year, teachers have been crying out for clarity on what is expected of them. Clarity does emerge, but it does so in dribs and drabs, which is a problem.

As I have mentioned, the reality is that it might be some time before children will be back in our schools. If that is so, teachers' assessments and the materials that they are expected to provide will become less reliable. I am concerned about that. A teacher could set a pupil work that might be regarded as a piece of evidence for the SQA, but they cannot guarantee that that piece of work belongs to that child. That is just one example of the difficulties that we face.

For this year, we need to rely on teachers' judgment. If they have supporting evidence, they can use it, but I feel that we currently have a number of stages at which there will be lots of moderation, assessment and verification—those are all terms that have been used. We will probably end up with a situation in which there will be more scrutiny of pieces of work than there would have been had we been relying on teachers' judgment.

An early decision on that issue would reassure not only teachers but pupils and their parents. Our concern is that pupils are worried about what will be expected of them. The longer that we are in the current situation, the less reliable the evidence is likely to be. We need to be able to move forward and suggest a better way of assessing our pupils, not only for this year but for the future.

Larry Flanagan: There is a lot going on concerning qualifications. It took a bit of time, but we eventually got a Government decision on the cancellation of the higher and advanced higher diet. Across all qualifications, we now have an alternative assessment model. The EIS supports that model, which we think is likely to offer a fairer system than the high-stakes tests that have been the mainstay of Scottish education. It is predicated on professional judgment of evidence produced by pupils. There can therefore be confidence about the outcome, because assessment will involve not an SQA algorithm or a factoring-in of past school

performance but evidence produced by pupils that will be assessed by their teachers and moderated by a quality assurance programme.

Seamus Searson has touched on an immediate concern that is caused by the latest lockdown and is currently exercising everyone's minds—not least those of young people themselves. January is not a critical month. The clear advice that has gone out is that the focus should absolutely be on learning through remote learning platforms, so that young people are making progress. During this remote learning period, there is no need to consider gathering evidence for assessment—in fact, there is a strong steer against doing so—for the reasons to which Seamus alluded.

There will come a point at which, if senior phase students are not back in school, some very practical difficulties will start to emerge around how to produce the evidence on which professional judgment is made. We need to be really clear that what has not been taught cannot be assessed. Teachers are not being asked to speculate as to the potential of an individual, but to make a judgment on the evidence that has been produced, so that there is a sound basis for the accreditation. If we were in a lockdown scenario until Easter, for example, there would be significant challenges around how we could progress even the alternative assessment model.

All the scenarios have to be worked through, and there will be a lot of questions in everyone's minds. No immediate answer is available because we do not know how long this is going to last. However, at the moment, I have a degree of confidence that the remote learning platforms will keep some level of engagement with senior phase pupils, who will be intrinsically motivated because they are on qualification pathways. I was going to say that I would not say this publicly, but I have just realised that we are on a public platform: senior phase pupils can probably survive a bit more didactic teaching, in the run-up to qualifications, than broad general education or primary pupils can.

We may be able to overcome some of the immediate barriers, but we will have to review, in early February, what the pathway is. I go back to some of Alex Neil's questions. It may be that, in any phased reopening of schools, senior phase pupils—in particular, fifth year pupils—should be prioritised, because some of their assessments will be critical. However, there are bigger discussions beyond that, because a lot of senior phase pupils are looking at qualifications for entry to university. We may need to delay the start of first year—university entrance—to allow for remediation processes over the summer.

A lot is going on with qualifications, but the key message is that, in remote learning, the focus is

not on assessment or on producing evidence; it is on continuing the learning for young people so that they are in a better position to produce the evidence later in the year, when, it is to be hoped, that might be more possible than it is now.

Richard Bell: On the changes that have been put in place by the SQA, I echo Seamus Searson's point about making sure that there is timely engagement with practitioners, both directly and through representative organisations, because in many ways that can help the understanding and mitigation of some of the issues of practicality around how to assess under such conditions.

The model that was previously in place has been overtaken by the lockdown, and I think that there is now real concern. That, in itself, has an impact on young people and on their teachers, who are anxious about how things are going to operate, particularly if that ability to gather evidence is not there. The previous model certainly suggested that, in effect, unseen examination material had to be used to generate evidence. That is not possible in a remote learning environment, so more creative thinking may be needed about how evidence can be gathered. Even if we are able to return to school before April, that, in itself, will cause a big issue, given the amount of work needed to run what would have been external exams in an internal context in schools, with all the preparation and marking that is involved.

Larry Flanagan is absolutely right: the focus at the moment should be on learning rather than on examination. However, I get the feeling that, because of that anxiety and concern, there is a danger that, in secondary schools, it becomes all about the qualifications and the exams, rather than about the wider learning that needs to take place not only in the senior phase but in BGE.

We need to put some urgent thought into how we will manage the situation in a way that will not overburden young people or their teachers. The one thing that I would say, given my past experience as a front-line teacher, is that when we get into issues around quality assurance and verification of internal processes, things often become extremely bureaucratic and overburdensome. There needs to be more of a focus on teacher trust and teacher professional judgment, rather than this constant checking-over-the-shoulder approach.

If you want to support the profession and the system, you really need to start looking at the situation with the teachers and the young people at the centre, instead of, as sometimes happens, there being a bit of a cascade, in a hierarchical sense, in relation to some of the demands and expectations.

Iain Gray: When things went wrong with the alternative certification model last year, one of the big concerns was around fairness and equity. I remember that, at the start of the first lockdown, when schools were closed, Mr Flanagan gave evidence to the committee and stressed how important it was that we audited the impact of the school closures on the attainment gap, or the achievement gap. That equity audit was promised—it was due at the end of last year; it did not appear then, but has been published today. I realise that it was published only a few hours ago and it is about 106 pages long, but have any of the panel members had a chance to look at it, and, if so, what is their reaction to it?

Larry Flanagan: The last time that I appeared in front of the committee, we made the call for an equity audit to be carried out. The thrust of what has been produced today is welcome, although one of the points that we made to the writers of the report in the course of their evidence gathering was that it was not meant to be a long-term research project; it was meant to try to address that inequity in the system in a fairly timely fashion.

There is a bit of a challenge around how much we have done in a year to address some of those challenges. One of the concerns that we continue to have around accreditation this year is that although the most disadvantaged students benefit from internal assessment as opposed to external exams, they are also the students who are most likely to have had their learning disrupted through repeated lockdowns and repeated periods of isolation or because their communities have had higher infection levels.

There is still an equity challenge, not necessarily in the process but in terms of ensuring that access to learning has been equitable across the year. The big difference between the alternative assessment model this year and the use of professional judgment of estimates last year is that, last year, that had to be added to the system when pupils were no longer in school, so teachers were working on the evidence that had been produced in the normal course of the year. This year, with the alternative assessment model, teachers are aware that the classroom evidence will be the basis for the assessments and pupils are aware that the work that they are producing is not just for a teacher to mark but will count towards their assessments. I hope that that will mean that there is greater engagement from the pupil cohort so that they are able to perform at their best.

Seamus Searson touched on this. We think that school-produced evidence is a better system overall, and you will see that in the international council of education advisers report, too. The use

of high-stakes testing already loads things against young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, for a whole range of reasons. I hope that, in the longer term, a better assessment model will be used for accrediting young people's learning in schools.

15:30

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): Good afternoon to the witnesses.

A lot of ground has been covered. Unfortunately, I am going to jump back and forth a bit between themes that we have covered already, due to the questions that have already been asked.

To keep things topical, I will start with the current theme, which is the alternative assessment process. Earlier today, the Deputy First Minister spoke more about that in the chamber. He seemed—at least from where I was sitting—to be quite confident that everything is in place for the alternative assessment model, and confident about the timing, quality and volume of guidance that has been produced for teachers. What are your views on what teachers saying? How confident are they about this year's model and the plans for assessments, and what concerns do they have that you think ought to be raised?

Richard Bell: My simple answer to that, as a classroom teacher among other classroom teachers, is that we are not confident. We are not confident for the simple reason that everything has changed because of lockdown. That is predicated on points that I made earlier about how long the situation continues and how we will be able to get the evidence to support assessment that is required by the SQA. There are concerns about how that will be done practically and about the potential workload implications for young people and teachers when we are actually able to do it.

There is no clarity, but that is pretty much because everything has changed so drastically over the past while. I cannot remember how long—has it been 10 days since we moved into the new lockdown situation? It might have looked as though there was a clear plan and set of steps—certainly from the top down—but, from where we now find ourselves, it is not so clear how we will take that forward.

Larry Flanagan: Richard Bell touched on this. If I were to sum up in one word the feedback from members on what is expected by the SQA, it would be “workload”. There is huge concern about the workload implications of teaching students effectively with the addition of assessment. One of the messages that has not got through is about the limited range of evidence that is being looked for. There has been a little bit of banking of

evidence, which in my view was unnecessary. That has happened because people were not sure about what the system would be. Now we have some clarity about what should happen.

However, one of the workload drivers is the quality assurance mechanism. The straw that broke the camel's back when it came to units—when we had those previously—and workload was not necessarily the units themselves; it was the quality assurance procedures around them, which are quite labour intensive for staff. Cross marking, double marking and standardising are all time consuming for teachers, and there is a challenge in doing those remotely if we stay in lockdown for a long time. Facilitation of that process is more straightforward in school.

That has been the biggest concern. The EIS is involved in national qualifications groups. We are part of the conversation.

I know that representatives from the SQA will be speaking later; we could do word bingo on how many times the word “co-creation” will pop up, because it seems to be the “in” word at the moment. There is still a lot of contested opinion around messaging, so there are tensions around the level of quality assurance, trust and professional judgment. As a system, we want to get that right, because we want young people to be accredited appropriately. However, it would be wrong to suggest that there is a simple solution; there is a lot of hard work involved in delivering that, which an extended lockdown period will make even more challenging.

Jamie Greene: Before we move on to other witnesses, I note that we will, as Larry Flanagan is aware, shortly be talking to the SQA. Obviously, there was a tremendous amount of upheaval last year in relation to the professional judgments of teachers and what the SQA did with those judgments. We are not yet sure what moderation will take place; as we know, the work that the SQA did was reversed by ministerial intervention. If the SQA representatives are listening to this session, what would be your biggest ask of them, with regard to this year's plans?

Larry Flanagan: I am sure that they are listening. We already have a commitment that there will be no algorithms and that, although the SQA is the final arbiter, any dialogue that is required on standards should predate the final submission. Last year, we said that the SQA should, if it found that a school's figures seemed to be out of line, have professional dialogue with the school, but the SQA could not do that because of time demands. We think that all that professional dialogue has to happen beforehand.

Ultimately, in an evidence-based awards system, if people disagree with the outcome, it is

for the SQA to deal with the appeals process, to look at the evidence and to make judgments. I have repeated it in several meetings, so it will not surprise the SQA to hear that our key ask is that it trusts the professionalism of teachers and works using that as the foundation of the system instead of trying to caveat the process in terms of its own procedures, which can be seen as bureaucratic by practitioners in the classroom.

Seamus Searson: Last Easter, the SSTA called for the 2020 examinations to be cancelled. Soon afterwards, we said that the exams for 2021 should also be cancelled. Our view was that that would be the fairest way forward because the situation in schools had been so disrupted. Unfortunately, we have had to wait for steps to be taken for cancellation of examinations, which we finally got just before Christmas.

We are aware that the difficulty was that, even though our advice to everybody was to focus on pupils' learning, teachers were already under pressure from their schools and authorities to start collecting evidence. The message that was going out from the SQA and others was being ignored. Many teachers spent a lot of time collecting evidence and started to do moderation exercises, not only within their own schools but across schools. Obviously, those exercises had to be done, but the focus should, as far as possible, have been on pupils' learning.

The downside is that most of the work that has already been done and most of the evidence that has been collected are probably of no real value, because we have been informed by the SQA that, of the four pieces of evidence, the only mark that will be recorded is the mark for the best piece. There are questions about why the SQA needs four pieces of evidence, other than when it does not agree with the teacher's judgment.

At the moment, it seems that the evidence is more important than teachers' judgment. I was trying earlier to say that the evidence should support the teacher's judgment. Because of how it is organising things at the moment, the SQA is worried about the number of appeals with which it might have to deal.

Unfortunately, although last year we advised the SQA that, in order to iron out the difficulties, it should have engaged with schools before the results were published, it thought that that was not appropriate at the time. We need engagement with the SQA on what is realistic and what can be achieved. The evidence should support the teacher's judgment—it should not be the other way around. That would take a great deal of pressure off pupils and teachers.

Jamie Greene: I appreciate that answer, which was very frank and insightful about what has happened so far.

Obviously, the situation is that remote learning is the main plan, except for pupils who are fortunate enough to have access to face-to-face teaching because they are children of key workers. As you know, remote learning does not replace in-class learning. I think that someone said previously that you cannot assess what you have not taught. Young people have lost a lot of contact hours, and I suspect that they have not learned as much.

What do teachers need? What have they asked for that they did not get? The reality is that all our inboxes are full of messages from parents who are concerned about what is on offer. I do not for one minute think that that is the fault of teachers, who are struggling with the workload. As was said, the assessment workload will only increase that. How do we get remote learning working, if it is to be the norm for the foreseeable future? What does the Government need to give schools and teachers, or local authorities, to ensure that they can deliver meaningful remote learning for everyone and anyone?

Larry Flanagan: Over the past year, one resource that has been prepared, particularly around the senior phase, is the national e-Sgoil offer from Education Scotland, which essentially provides core coverage. It also covers broad general education, but initially it was focused on the senior phase. I have always been told that it can be scaled up quite quickly, because it had been primarily used for students who had to self-isolate for a time and by schools that had had to use remote learning for an extended period. We want the e-Sgoil offer to be scaled up, so that there is strong national core provision for all the qualifications. We would like it to be scaled up for BGE, as well. However, it is critical in relation to qualifications.

Beyond that, the big thing is time, which the Government cannot give us. That is always a pressure.

The Government could also be looking at additional mentoring arrangements for young people who are clearly identified as having suffered from disrupted learning because of Covid. Some families might be able to afford a private tutor for their child if the school has been off for two weeks; if other families cannot afford that tutoring, should the state provide it? There might be retired teachers who do not want to come back into school but would be willing to help youngsters with particular subjects.

That kind of mentoring has been somewhat in the background, and has not been formulated into

a scheme. That would be a way to provide practical support to disadvantaged youngsters. In schools that have more staff, there might be people in the school, aside from teachers, who could provide additional support for targeted groups.

Beyond that, there is no easy solution for the situation in which we find ourselves. We just need to have an honest conversation about what can be delivered. E-Sgoil has already trimmed back some of the demands around assessment, but there is a limit to how much can be trimmed out of a course before the qualification does not carry sufficient weight for the next step in the learner's journey.

All that is being actively looked at, as has been said, but ultimately we need to do the teaching first, and youngsters need to engage in learning first. If they cannot do that, we have to step back and think about how we recalibrate timescales for the longer term.

In short, people too often talk about lost learning, but it is delayed learning—nothing is irretrievably lost. It might mean that we have to work hard to catch up, but if we are committed to the idea of lifelong learning, we should not give the message to young people that it is the end of the world if their exams do not work out in the way that they had hoped they would this year.

As a teacher for 33 years, I have never said to a youngster, "You failed your O grade and you failed your higher. That's you—you're done." There are always ways to recover. We should be fairly positive that we can, although there are big challenges, address disadvantage that emerges from the current situation—in the long and short terms—if we are committed to doing so.

15:45

Jamie Greene: That message is really positive. Committee members have spoken to many young people throughout the pandemic, and there is a feeling of despair and gloom among many of them about everything that has happened, which has been tough on them.

On the idea of catching up and helping disadvantaged pupils—especially those who have struggled to access online learning—through whatever means, including mentoring or tutoring, we spoke earlier about the supply teachers who are looking for work and retired teachers who are desperate to help. I cannot for the life of me understand why the Government has not already taken charge of getting that scheme up and running in the second phase of lockdown. We can take that up with the cabinet secretary.

The Convener: We are running short of time, so it would really help if people could be succinct in their questions and answers.

Seamus Searson: The teachers need support. It is difficult enough to teach in the classroom with the children there. It is far more difficult to engage all pupils all the time when they are away from the teacher and one does not have the normal control that one has in a classroom, where one can control everything that goes on.

Jamie Greene highlighted a point about supply teachers and retired teachers, but I would go much further than that. Larry Flanagan mentioned finding time, and the Government can find it by taking away all the exercises that people are doing that are not focused on learning. A number of people in schools who do other functions should be reallocated to supporting children who are losing out as a consequence of the current situation.

I would go even further, although it might not go down too well with others. Many qualified teachers in the SQA, Education Scotland, the Government and local authorities should be reassigned to support learning. We are in a national crisis and children are losing out, so if we want to close the gap, we should consider where teachers are and who is qualified. The General Teaching Council for Scotland has on its books a large number of qualified people who are no longer teaching. Can we put them back into teaching? Teachers in the classroom would say that that step being made a national priority would be important.

The other obvious step would be to ensure that every teacher and pupil has the right ICT equipment, but we are a long way from that at this point in time.

Richard Bell: I will be as succinct as possible. It is right to focus on support and learning and to cut unnecessary bureaucracy. We try to replicate some things—the reporting bureaucracy, for instance—because they have always been done that way, but to try to do such things remotely is difficult, and the process of remote delivery is often a process of continual feedback, anyway.

Larry Flanagan's point about e-Sgoil was well made. The system needs to be populated so that all subjects are supported, because at the moment coverage seems not to be complete. The actual ability to access remote learning across the board, in relation to the infrastructure—IT and broadband—is another aspect that needs to be considered.

It comes down to that point about time and space. Larry Flanagan is right: we cannot create time, but we can create a bit of space around professional judgment, through support for

teachers and young people, and through having realistic expectations.

I also get the point that Larry made about the balance between the currency of a qualification and its content. Given that the SQA had made adjustments on the basis of the previous lockdown and that we are moving into a new one, we might need to revisit how expectations can be realistic and sustainable for the volume of learning that has to take place, and for how that learning is assessed. Realism and sustainability are key aspects.

The Convener: Ross Greer, Daniel Johnson and Oliver Mundell all want to come in, and I want to finish at 4 o'clock, if possible. I will try to get through everyone, but it would be helpful if everyone could be succinct.

Ross Greer: I will roll both questions into one, as one of them is smallish.

Yesterday, the SQA announced that subject-specific guidance for highers and advanced highers would come out next week or the week after. That follows some pretty significant delays between August and December in getting out subject-specific guidance for national 5s. What impact do those delays have on teaching, particularly given the challenges of moving to online teaching?

With regard to Education Scotland, it was mentioned earlier that, on the back of the DFM's announcement, inspections will be reintroduced in some form. It would be useful to get a brief overview of how you feel that Education Scotland has fulfilled its other role of supporting teachers, particularly in the August to December term.

Larry Flanagan: Any delay in guidance has an impact, but those delays will probably be less critical, in a sense. From the national 5s, people already have a sense of the shape of what the alternative assessment model will look like for highers. It was frustrating for some people previously that they had done work on areas of the course that were then set aside when it came to assessment. Clearly, we would like the guidance to be out as early as possible, because that allows for some planning.

On Education Scotland, I know that there is meant to be a light-touch call-in to schools on the remote learning platforms and that there is a Government direction on that. We are quite sceptical about the value of that because, if only a range of schools is sampled, what will be seen will be a bit hit and miss.

Local authorities should be responsible for ensuring the quality of the delivery of remote learning in their areas. We would prefer Education Scotland liaising with local authorities rather than

contacting already hard-pressed senior leadership teams in schools. We think that it will be done at that senior leadership level, partly so that there is a reporting back function to Parliament, and we understand the need for that. However, for a lot of teachers it just feels like a big brother approach rather than a supportive approach. The EIS has certainly made that view clear in our comments on that.

More broadly on Education Scotland, there is a lot of material on the glow network, which still gets a mixed response from teachers with regard to its efficacy as the education intranet. With regard to BGE, there is a demand for more resources to be populated across all the levels. We have indicated to Education Scotland that we want more resources there.

One of the big points to make is that we do not need to reinvent the wheel across 32 local authorities and thousands of schools, and that people can share best practice and share lessons when they have been effective on remote learning platforms. That is a big challenge, and Education Scotland can play a role in ensuring that we communicate examples of good practice in all the different areas across the school system, to ease the workload a little bit for staff.

Richard Bell: I want to reiterate briefly the points that have just been made. We are dealing with a national emergency across the board, including in education. Education Scotland's role must be one of support, as opposed to its more traditional roles in quality assurance and so on. That needs to be a primary focus.

Additionally, I think that the resources and materials that Education Scotland has provided have been a bit of a mixed bag so far. Again, that is perhaps an aspect that needs to be significantly ramped up. As a classroom practitioner, part of the issue is that, in a remote setting, you have to completely revamp your materials and methods of teaching. That, in itself, is a massively time-consuming exercise, as is getting to grips with the information technology, giving feedback and all the other aspects associated with such provision.

It is not only the SQA guidance that needs to be timely; the support that the SQA is able to give needs to be timely. I will give a practical example. On the back of the national 5 guidance, the SQA released a national 5 paper, which is a useful tool for classroom teachers to use in creating assessment material, instead of our having to source that ourselves. We would hope that such guidance would also be available for highers. However, again, it depends on the subjects—some practical subjects maybe need a bit more guidance and support on how to gather evidence. A really basic ask is that materials be provided along with the exam papers. I will give an example

in my subject area. Obviously, Ordnance Survey maps are quite important for us in utilising an exam paper, but those have not necessarily been forthcoming.

The message really has to be that there should be as much support to the front line as can be provided, as quickly as possible.

Daniel Johnson: I want to raise an issue that has been touched on in the previous couple of answers. As we move through this lockdown, particularly if it goes on for any length of time, the importance of the effectiveness of e-Sgoil and the other online resources will become much more acute. I want to ask a blunt question. Are those resources up to the job? Larry Flanagan said that they can be if they are scaled up and expanded to cover subjects and levels more comprehensively. Will the witnesses give us a sense of how those resources worked through the previous autumn and whether they are in a position to deliver what we need them to deliver, particularly if home learning has to continue into February and even beyond?

Larry Flanagan: E-Sgoil can work effectively. It was originally designed as a platform for the Western Isles and the islands, where people had difficulties accessing some subject-specific areas. Where it has operated during local closures, it has provided an effective platform. However, rather than being a national broadcast service, e-Sgoil's general method of operation is to have an enlisted class of pupils. The challenge is in how much it can be scaled up. For me, if the offer is there, it is an additional resource for schools rather than a substitute for them. It is useful for teachers to be able to say that they have available an e-Sgoil lesson on the use of fractions or on a particular poem that their class is studying, for example. However, a teacher will still be engaged with his or her class in teasing out people's understanding and learning.

The offer has to be there. It largely supplements what schools are doing or fills a gap if there is a time pressure. The point about scaling up is that that promise was made. I think that there has been an element of scaling up already. We have to keep that going so that there is a clear offer. E-Sgoil could even be used for students who want to do extra work. It would be a good point of contact for learning reinforcement or deepening understanding.

I am not overly critical of e-Sgoil; I just think that its real test will be how it stands up when additional demand is created through lockdown.

The Convener: I do not see anyone else wanting to come in, so I will move on to a question from Oliver Mundell, which will be the final question in this evidence session.

16:00

Oliver Mundell: It is just a brief question. I wonder whether the support across the different local authorities has been consistent on some of the issues that have come up. There have certainly been quite a few teething issues in my constituency. Have the different local authorities across Scotland been providing the same sort of support to front-line teachers? Have there been any differences in that regard that have led to a different understanding of expectations?

The Convener: Larry Flanagan talked earlier about sharing best practice, so I will go back to him on that.

Larry Flanagan: I know that that is the last question, so I will be brief.

The challenge constantly is inconsistency across the 32 local authorities. There are lots of issues, such as the use of supply teachers, local authorities' policies for pregnant staff and staff seeking to work from home after lockdown, on which we can get agreement in one council area but fail to reach agreement in a neighbouring council area. To be honest with you, that has been—I hope that you can hear this in my voice—a huge frustration over the past year.

There has been a degree of inconsistency that is counterproductive. We would like to see a more consistent approach across local authorities and certainly around those critical areas that make a difference in the classroom. Ultimately, the key factor for students is how we support the teaching and learning in the classroom.

Oliver Mundell: Yes—

The Convener: Sorry, Oliver, but I want to bring in Seamus Searson and then Richard Bell. I will come back to you after that.

Seamus Searson: To follow on from what Larry Flanagan said, inconsistency has caused us problems, and we have to address those problems in every local authority. As I tried to say earlier, we should have clear guidance from above so that there is little leeway. Interpretation causes a problem where guidance says “you can” or “you should” when it should say “you must”. A lot of time is devoted to interpretation, which takes time away from teaching and learning.

There is also the interpretation of what needs to be provided. For example, we are dealing with an authority—I will not name it—that says that, if teachers need equipment to help with remote learning, they should go out and buy it themselves, whereas other local authorities are providing the ICT equipment. That is the kind of disparity that we are facing.

We need to share good practice and resources across the authorities. An unfortunate aspect is that some smaller authorities and even larger authorities do not have the resource that others have. If we can learn anything from this situation, it will be how we can use our resources much more effectively and have a common message so that we all do the same sort of thing. However, I think that we will pick up more problems through the next couple of weeks as well.

Richard Bell: The point about inconsistency is fundamental. It is not just about inconsistencies between authorities, because there can often be inconsistencies within authorities in how guidelines are interpreted at the school level. To be honest, a lot of it is down to variation in the culture of leadership and management at both the local authority level and the school level. Where there is a collegiate approach and culture, we are much more likely to get some kind of workable and sustainable solution in place. However, that is unlikely to happen where there is an autocratic or bureaucratic approach and culture. That is where a lot of the problems kick in. Inconsistency is therefore a big issue, and so is the variability of interpretation.

The Convener: We will go back briefly to Oliver Mundell.

Oliver Mundell: All of that evidence is helpful. The frustration for parents and young people is in seeing the difference in quality of what is being offered elsewhere. That does not chime well with the idea of equity and excellence, which is meant to be at the heart of our system. The members of the witnesses' organisations, who are the teachers on the front line, are taking the brunt of the flak, but the reality is that, in some cases, they have not been given a lot of time away from the classroom, the resource, or clear direction on preparation. Given the time, I will leave that as a comment rather than go round the witnesses again.

The Convener: I am afraid that I will have to draw this panel's evidence to a close. I thank Seamus Searson, Richard Bell and Larry Flanagan for taking part in the meeting. The session has been extremely helpful. If you feel that you did not get to say something because we had to curtail the session, please get back to the committee clerks on that, and it will be shared with the committee.

I suspend the meeting for five minutes to allow the new panel to come on board.

16:05

Meeting suspended.

16:11

On resuming—

The Convener: I am not seeing myself on my screen, but I hope that everything is okay.

I welcome our second panel. Fiona Robertson is the chief executive of the Scottish Qualifications Authority, Jean Blair is the SQA's director of operations, Gayle Gorman is the chief inspector of education and chief executive of Education Scotland, and Alan Armstrong is Education Scotland's strategic director. We will hear opening statements from Ms Gorman and then Ms Robertson.

Gayle Gorman (Education Scotland): The coronavirus pandemic has meant that seismic shifts have had to be made in Scottish education over the past 10 months. We have done that collectively, with professionals working together at all levels to solve problems that were unthinkable a year ago.

I will start by recognising my colleagues in the sector. As we sit here, on the third day of remote learning during the latest lockdown, a huge amount of work is going on in schools, with professionals juggling competing demands and challenges that they are rapidly solving so as to keep children's education moving forward. No one is suggesting that that has been easy or that it is perfect. I am greatly encouraged to see the range and depth of engagement and communication by schools and practitioners, who are actively delivering remote learning as we speak.

That includes clear communications from schools such as Renfrew high school, which said this week that its website

"has video guides and tutorials to help pupils and families with digital technology",

with further support being available through a quick call to the school office. Alloa academy is highlighting "physical resource offers". For example, pupils are told that, if they need new pens or equipment or

"need a new jotter ... after all your hard work",

they can

"pick one up in Alloa Tesco free of charge".

Another example is:

"Access your online learning timetable – January 2021",

as advertised by Dyce academy.

I have been encouraged by the words of Allyson Dobson, the president of School Leaders Scotland, who has spoken about her pupils who were showing signs of loss of learning in August. They learned at a brisk pace during the autumn term when they were back in school, and they

have now shifted on to an online learning approach that her school has been preparing for months. She has been lucky in having had only a limited number of Covid cases at her school. We know that the picture has been highly varied across Scotland.

I make those comments to illustrate how far the sector has moved on over the past 10 months. Some of the individual stories can be read in the publication "What Scotland Learned: 100 stories of lockdown", which we launched recently. It contains 100 stories from the first lockdown. There are details of that on our website and in our submission to the committee.

The support that Education Scotland has provided has been integral to the ability of teachers, school leaders and local authorities to adapt rapidly over the past few terms. There have been opportunities for practitioners to develop their professional skills in using digital platforms and tools for effective online learning. That has helped teachers to deploy learning experiences for their young people who are studying for national qualifications so that they can continue to make progress in new or different ways even where learners may have been required to self-isolate more than once. Feedback from practitioners, from students and learners and from the profession has indicated that the support from ES has been tailored and specific and has addressed the profession's asks.

16:15

Following the suspension of most of our scrutiny programme, our team of inspectors has instead been engaged in reviewing local authority recovery plans, helping the Covid-19 education recovery group workstream delivery and developing the Scotland learns resource—*[Inaudible.]* It has been delivering professional learning through a series of webinars and working directly with heads and schools. Following the Government's announcement today, the team will also be reviewing remote provision and reporting on that regularly.

We have also been working with other education specialists in regional improvement collaboratives and local authorities to provide bespoke support to schools and services at this crucial time. Our existing working relationships with local authorities have been central and, as always, the knowledge that is gained through working with schools and services has helped us to inform and lead the national response.

Once again, we find ourselves in the middle of rapid change, and the experiences of pupils in the senior phase are clearly critical, as are those of pupils in all stages. Our working relationship with

the SQA is strong and constructive, and I am looking forward to exploring with the committee how best we can all work together with our colleagues in the sector as the Covid response continues and evolves.

I will hand over to Fiona Robertson.

Fiona Robertson (Scottish Qualifications Authority): We welcome the opportunity to participate in this panel discussion with our colleagues in Education Scotland this afternoon. Gayle Gorman specifically highlighted support for learning and teaching. As you would expect, my focus is on assessment and qualifications issues following the cancellation of the exams by the Scottish Government and the announcement by the First Minister that we would move to remote learning after the Christmas break.

Everyone who works in education is operating in a challenging environment as they deliver learning and teaching across the curriculum, and I echo Gayle Gorman's appreciation for all the work that is going on to support learners at this time. The SQA is providing support, resources and guidance to teachers and lecturers across 500 schools and colleges and to around 140,000 young people and their parents and carers. That covers 259 courses across all levels of national course provision from national 2 to advanced higher, which represents around half a million qualification entries.

The committee's focus is on the arrangements following the cancellation of exams, but we have needed to consider with stakeholders the full range of SQA qualifications including the wide range of vocational qualifications that are offered across a wide range of subjects in schools and colleges and by employers and training providers in Scotland and beyond. The SQA also accredits a range of qualifications that are provided by other awarding bodies.

The committee can be assured that the SQA is working collaboratively to enable the system to deliver in 2021. Back in August, in order to recognise the potential disruption to learners, free up teaching and learning time and reduce the workload of teachers and lecturers while maintaining the validity, credibility and standard of qualifications, we worked proactively with stakeholders, including practising teachers and lecturers, to propose modifications to course assessment for all subjects. The modifications sought to narrow the focus of each course, minimise the evidence requirements and introduce additional flexibility for the gathering of evidence.

The proposals were made available for national consultation in August 2020, and we received a significant volume of responses—more than 23,000—from learners, parents, carers, teachers, lecturers and stakeholders including the

professional associations. The modifications for each subject were published in early October, accompanied by the equality impact assessment, the child rights and wellbeing impact assessment and a document to demonstrate that we have listened and, where appropriate, adjusted our thinking in response to the consultation.

We have continued to monitor the public health situation for schools and colleges with colleagues in Education Scotland, and we have introduced additional modifications to practical subjects such as music and drama, where appropriate.

The national qualifications 2021 group, which was mentioned in the committee's previous session with the professional associations, has representation from a wide range of education stakeholders including the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland, Colleges Scotland, Education Scotland, EIS, School Leaders Scotland, the Scottish Council of Independent Schools, the Scottish Government, the National Parent Forum of Scotland and the Scottish Youth Parliament. The group has been meeting weekly to consider arrangements for 2021 and it is supported by a working group that includes practitioners. The group has ensured that all parts of the system have co-created the alternative certification model, which the group published in early December 2020. It is continuing to work through and co-create the details of the 2021 alternative certification model, including a system-wide EqIA and appropriate appeals service.

Following the First Minister's announcement last week, we are also working through a range of scenarios and potential flexibilities to the models, should they be needed. The national qualifications 2021 group issued an update on that yesterday, and further discussions will take place at the working group's meeting today, at the Covid-19 education recovery group tomorrow and at the national qualifications 2021 group on Friday.

We are clear, as a group, that the priority for schools and colleges during January should be to maximise learning and teaching time. Learning and teaching must come first. Given the move to remote learning and the challenges that learners face, the assessment of learner evidence cannot be undertaken unless young people have the foundation of learning and teaching of course content. We understand that that will impact on the timing of assessment, which can, of course, take place in the later stages of the 2020-21 session.

In conclusion, I note that 2021 is yet another challenging year. As a system, we have had to adapt quickly to changing circumstances and disruption. We continue to work together to ensure that young people can progress in their learning and achieve qualifications that will allow progression to further learning and work.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the committee this afternoon. I am, of course, happy to answer questions from members.

The Convener: Thank you. I remind members that we are constrained for time. I will try to bring everyone in as best I can. I will bring in Ms Mackay first, to be followed by Mr Greene.

Rona Mackay: My question is for both organisations. During evidence sessions last year, we spoke about the importance of communication with teachers, who, in turn, pass the information on to pupils. There was much criticism about communication. Will the preparation of communications be better this year? Some pupils have told me that they really do not know what to expect this year and that they are not sure what the process will be for appeals and so on. There will be other questions about that, but I want to know about communication from Education Scotland and the SQA filtering down to pupils via the teachers. Will you give me your views on that, please?

The Convener: I assume that Fiona Robertson or Gayle Gorman will respond to questions first. It would be helpful if they could indicate when they want their colleagues to comment or if their colleagues could type R in the chat box should they want to respond.

Fiona Robertson: We are all conscious of that important issue across the system. The Covid-19 education recovery group has a focus on communicating to the system. I think that the Deputy First Minister highlighted today the guidance that was issued last Friday to every teacher, which includes links to SQA resources.

The national qualifications group 2021 has managed a lot of the communications since October and November 2020, following the cancellation of the national 5s and, thereafter, the highers and advanced highers. The communications have been agreed across the group. They have been supplemented by specific messages to parents and carers—they were agreed with the National Parent Forum of Scotland, which also sits on the group—and to learners. Young people were also closely involved in the formation and agreement of the messages.

From an SQA perspective, we continue to do all that we can to communicate as effectively as we can. We are working closely with all the partners in the national qualifications group to ensure that they are using their channels, and Education Scotland is using its channels to push out messages on qualifications for us on behalf of the group. We are working hard to do that, and we are encouraging the wider system to do it, too.

We are doing as much as we can. Of course, there will always be more that we can do, and we

will continue to get feedback on our communications and on whether there are further things that we can do to enhance our approach. A variety of methods are being used to reach the widest audiences that we can reach in order to clarify arrangements as far as that is possible in what is obviously a challenging and fluid situation.

Gayle Gorman: I will build on Fiona Robertson's points. We have a collective communication strategy as part of the 2021 contingency group for qualifications. Our Education Scotland social media channels and broadcast and electronic written communications such as newsletters have all heavily featured communications on SQA announcements, and it came in on the back of that.

In addition to what Fiona outlined about what we do collectively, we have been promoting the message through our blethers, webinars and events for teachers, headteachers and subject specialists. I have made sure that we are answering and addressing questions through our subject networks or webinars and discussions. On Friday, when the Deputy First Minister and I held a series of webinars for headteachers, we collected the questions that came up about the SQA and collated them. I will forward them to our colleagues at the SQA, who will pick them up and communicate back to the system.

The approach is very much a collegiate and collective one. However, as Fiona said, we would like to do more. That will be really important as more detail comes out. In response to Ms Mackay's question, I note that it will be particularly important to work in partnership with Young Scot, the Scottish Youth Parliament and others to make sure that the message is working and getting to young people. The addition of a person from the Scottish Youth Parliament to the contingency group and engagement with them has been really helpful and will support that communication.

Fiona Robertson: Gayle Gorman has made the point that it is critical to have wider engagement as well as more conventional communications, important though they are. I add that a lot of subject-specific engagement is going on through events being held on understanding standards and materials being made available so that the work that we are doing, the modifications that have been made and the assistance to the system are as effective as possible.

We are also working with the professional associations, where we can, to reach practitioners, headteachers and others across the system. There is a big focus on ensuring that we are all working together to get the messages out as effectively as possible.

Rona Mackay: That is fine. From what you say, it sounds as though lessons have been learned from last year. We hope that that is the case, because there was a lot to do on that.

Jamie Greene: I will try to rattle through my questions, in the interests of time. My first question is for the SQA. I presume that you listened to the previous panel of witnesses. The unions were clear on what they felt about the level of communication between them and the SQA not just during the past year, but now, representing—*[Inaudible.]* I invite the SQA to talk directly to those teachers, parents and pupils who are extremely concerned that what happened last year with their grades and awards will be repeated. What measures are you taking to reassure them that that will not be the case?

Fiona Robertson: I have outlined the approach of the national qualifications 2021 group, which includes representation from the professional associations, and its work to develop the alternative certification model collaboratively. I think that I heard Larry Flanagan say that I would use the word "co-creation" in that regard—and I will, because co-creation with partners and practitioners is how the model was developed. That should give learners and the wider system reassurance that, in these exceptional circumstances, and given the further disruption, we are looking at those issues as a systems issue.

On communication, we have worked really hard to get the messages out and to tailor them to parents, carers and young people. We have in place a learner panel, and we are also working with the youth panel that is supporting the Covid-19 education recovery group—CERG—to make sure that the voices of young people are part of the conversation as we consider the issues. I hope that that provides some reassurance.

16:30

I think that the NASUWT and the SSTA highlighted that they are not on the national qualifications group. The professional associations on the group reflect the professional associations that are represented on CERG. We have met the NASUWT and the SSTA regularly—in fact, will have meetings with both professional associations next week. We will ensure that, where possible, we continue to engage closely with all parts of the system.

Jamie Greene: I appreciate that. However, in the previous evidence session, I specifically asked the NASUWT and the SSTA whether they were confident that teachers are confident about this year's plans. The answer was that they are not. Whatever communication is or is not taking place,

the devil is very much in the detail and there are still unanswered questions.

I am glad that you mentioned the SSTA, because it specifically said that it does not consider that the move to remote learning will give teachers the opportunity to predict grades properly on the basis of the guidance that has been given. I want to get into the nitty-gritty and the detail of that issue. How will teachers assess pupils whom they have not seen or cannot see on the basis of coursework that they have not done and prelims that have not taken place? They will come up with predictions of grades somehow. What will happen to those grades? There are many unanswered questions to which parents deserve answers.

Fiona Robertson: I listened to the previous evidence session, and I think that I am right in saying—I wrote this down—that Seamus Searson highlighted concern about the current situation and the developments during the past week. Of course, we all share the concern that there have been changes, and we need to work through the implications of those. However, I think that Larry Flanagan highlighted confidence in the system's ability to respond. I know that Gayle Gorman will talk more about the learning and teaching offer that is available across Scotland and all the work that teachers are doing currently.

The national qualifications 2021 group issued a communication yesterday that was designed to provide a bit of reassurance around the primacy of learning and teaching at this time. As I said in my opening statement, learning and teaching comes first, before assessment. We also provided some reassurance yesterday about the model that we have developed, the supportive role of quality assurance and our work to ensure that standards are understood in order to help teachers make judgments.

As Larry Flanagan said in response to, I think, your question, Mr Greene, it is important that awards are evidence based. At the beginning of the academic year, we were proactive in stripping back the assessment requirements for each course. That was done for national 5 on the basis of Mr Swinney's announcement on 7 October 2020, and it is now being done for highers and advanced highers, following the decision at the beginning of December to cancel those.

All that taken together demonstrates that we have done as much as we can to provide guidance and support for the system in what is obviously a challenging and fluid situation. As a result of the announcement last week, we are progressing that work at pace, so that, if remote learning becomes more protracted, we can provide the guidance and reassurance that the system needs. I guess that I am saying that the national qualifications 2021 group, representing all

partners in the system, is working through those issues as quickly as possible. However, it is also important that we have the time and space to make the right decisions in that regard.

Jamie Greene: You are right—it is a fluid situation. I also understand and appreciate that Government agencies are not always in charge of the decisions that affect the processes that they must develop and redevelop—sometimes those decisions are made by ministers. However, the reality on the ground is that the teachers and pupils that the committee talks to do not have confidence in the system. We must develop that confidence.

I have a specific question for Ms Gorman, which I am sure will open up a can of worms, and others might want to jump in. How confident are you that every pupil and teacher has what they need to participate successfully in remote online learning? We heard from the previous panel that some pupils and households do not have access to the ICT, devices or broadband that they need. There are learning materials, but there are calls to expand those. There are even teachers who do not have access to ICT. It is simply not enough to say that that is a responsibility for local authorities. What is Education Scotland, as a leadership agency, doing to ensure that no one is left behind?

Gayle Gorman: I am extremely concerned about the global inequity in education that is being exposed. A recent United Nations report said that inequity in learning globally had grown by 99 per cent during the Covid pandemic. Education Scotland's equity audit, which came out earlier today, includes clear evidence in that regard. As part of that work, my team looked at 54 schools and the responses from stakeholders, parents, young people and, importantly, those engaged in the learning in order to examine some of the challenges that we face. Those challenges affect countries across the globe, but our issue is in Scotland.

We know that digital connectivity and equipment have caused challenges. The Government has put significant funding into that area, and the Deputy First Minister made further announcements on that this morning. However, the digital divide is not the only issue: the evidence from the equity audit and from many reports shows that there are five other areas.

The pandemic has exacerbated a growing divide. That divide can be digital and about connectivity, particularly in rural areas of Scotland. I live in a village in the north-east, and I am surprised that I am still connected to the meeting—fingers crossed! That is a challenge that local authorities, with support from us, are working hard to address.

Another challenge is that those from lower socioeconomic groups may not have a safe or quiet space in which to learn in their household, which is in addition to the connectivity issues and the digital divide.

Physical resources are also an issue. We do not want children to sit in front of screens all day, taking part in a didactic experience; there should be an integrated and blended approach. Practical, physical resources are important, which is why I highlighted the work at Alloa academy. Many other schools have placed learning tools in supermarkets and local stores for children and young people to collect, as we know that getting those resources is a challenge for some of our learners.

Parental engagement, and having the time for that, is important. We know from global research that pupils who struggle more usually have less parental input and support with remote learning.

Mental health and wellbeing is another significant challenge—we hear that from everyone, and I know that the committee has heard that from your engagements with young people. Education Scotland and the teaching profession are taking the issue seriously. Although I am impressed by the amazing work to support community projects in health and wellbeing and in mental wellbeing that is highlighted in “What Scotland Learned”, we know that there will be a continuing demand for the work that schools are doing in that regard.

I absolutely recognise that there is a challenge. I think that the whole education system in Scotland is coming together to address the challenges. Everyone has roles and responsibilities. As you rightly highlight, Education Scotland has a role in that. We have been promoting an entitlement to learning, and we issued a release on that on behalf of our partners earlier this week. We looked at different types of learning, at how parents can engage and at play-based activities.

We are also working in partnership with the BBC on some broadcast work, as well as on the digital divide that you mentioned, which we are reducing. I know that the Scottish Government is funding that work significantly. However, we must not be complacent. There is a call to all of us in the system to make sure that we do everything that we can, through our materials, delivery and professional learning for teachers.

A significant issue that has come out of global research, the report of the international council of education advisers and the Education Endowment Foundation is that teachers’ knowledge and support help to reduce that inequality through the application of a different pedagogical approach. It is a challenge, and we, in the system, are trying collectively to support our front-line practitioners to

reduce the inequity, which is growing during the pandemic.

Jamie Greene: I am acutely aware of the time, convener, so I am happy to let others in.

I do not disagree with anything that has been said on the challenges. I think that we all know what those are—our inboxes are full of examples of them. However, I reflect on the fact that it is the role of Education Scotland and of the chief inspector to ensure that our schools are delivering, which may mean going back to the Government and saying that they do not have enough of what they need. At some point in this session, I am quite keen to elicit from Gayle Gorman what extra resources and support the Government has been asked for in order that schools across Scotland can deliver remote learning of the standard that we all want to see.

The Convener: I know that Ms Gorman wants to come back in on that point. However, before I bring her back in, I highlight that Jamie Greene, Rona Mackay and I met a focus group of young people last night. My experience of the evening was that there was a trust issue, particularly in schools with a large number of pupils who are affected by deprivation as defined by the Scottish index of multiple deprivation. That was due to what happened last year. Teachers’ assessments had become very critical to what happened to a young person. I know that there have been issues about algorithms, but the young people also asked whether they would be judged on their efforts alone or whether ranking would play any part in the assessment process. Will Fiona Robertson shed some light on that?

Fiona Robertson: I think that we are all acutely aware that, naturally, young people will have concerns about further disruption and change in what—as we will all remember—feels like a critical time in our lives as we approach what is, in many cases, the end of our formal schooling. We understand that.

I think that Gayle Gorman’s more general response on the impact of the pandemic is important. It is important that we hear that and that we do what we can to address that as a system. We have been seeking to ensure that we engage and communicate with young people as much as possible in the process. Individual schools and teachers also have a big job to do in providing that reassurance.

On your specific point, we do not expect ranking to be a feature of assessment. Of course, teachers will make relative judgments, as well as absolute judgments, about young people daily. That is a feature of learning and teaching and of how young people are assessed at all stages in their school career and education. However, we will not be

expecting ranking information from schools. We will be looking at awards that are based on nine bands, which is normally how we would expect to report on grades.

The Convener: Thank you. I will bring Gayle Gorman back in.

16:45

Gayle Gorman: I will respond to Mr Greene's question on what we have been feeding back about the asks in the system. At the beginning of the pandemic, in the first lockdown, our senior regional adviser team produced daily updates—they then moved to weekly updates—in which we talked to local authorities, heads and teachers about various themes, including additional support needs, vulnerable children and the learning and curriculum offer, and it gathered the asks from that work. Those asks went up to the Deputy First Minister, often through the CERG, where they were discussed. There have been a range of asks through the work of the senior regional adviser team, working in partnership and gathering information from the system.

We were also clear about the number of requests and the support that was needed for the digital delivery of remote learning, and that advice influenced the additional funding. Mr Greene stated that members get those requests in their inboxes, and we get them, too. We work in partnership with the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland and local authorities to gather that information in a timeous manner and to get it quickly to policy colleagues and ministers in order to shape the decisions and to feed intelligence into the CERG.

There have been a number of asks around professional learning, the support for headteachers and the curriculum offer. Recently, we asked for and were successful in getting additional funding of £1.3 million to scale up and support the work of the e-Sgoil programme and our delivery of live and study support sessions, as well as to enhance the curriculum offer, which Larry Flanagan referenced in the previous evidence session. I hope that that is helpful.

The Convener: Thank you for that. I will take a quick supplementary question from Daniel Johnson and then go to Alex Neil.

Daniel Johnson: I am not sure how quick the question is. My questions are all about the moderation process and assessment and how centre moderation will take place. I do not know whether you want to take me now or after Alex Neil.

The Convener: In that case, I will go to Mr Neil first and then bring in Mr Johnson.

Alex Neil: Thank you, convener. I will follow up on the discussion between Jamie Greene and, in particular, Gayle Gorman. Part of our frustration last year was that, although we absolutely share your analysis of the challenge, there was a distinct absence of data at national level. Therefore, I will ask two specific questions, so that we can get a proper overview of the scale of the challenge that we face in Scotland, because we can do something about our share of the global challenge.

Last week, I read that something like 20,000 of the laptops that had been promised last time have still not been distributed to kids who need them. First, is that true and where are we with that? Secondly, at the moment in Scotland, how many children who are studying remotely in primary and secondary education do not have access to a laptop or broadband?

Gayle Gorman: Some of that information is held by the learning directorate of the Scottish Government but, as you know, after consultation with the Scottish Government around the first lockdown, the analysis from the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities was that 70,000 laptops were needed, and 50,000 of those have been delivered. I believe that the funding and delivery of the remaining 20,000 laptops has begun. I can ask our Scottish Government colleagues to give you an exact figure, because I know that they were in consultation with COSLA about it this week. There is still a discrepancy in relation to getting some of those out but, today, I have seen a huge roll-out of additional laptops to students in Aberdeen. Aberdeen had already had an allocation, and further laptops were going out.

To answer your second question, about the number of children without laptops or connectivity, in the past few weeks, work has been going on with COSLA and our local authority partners, which have asked parents, schools and teachers to come back to them with an updated figure for any further requests for connectivity and laptops.

In particular, what is coming to the fore now, during the second school closure period, is that, as there is a much stronger offer online, there is a greater need for access to remote learning. In addition, parents are using devices, and there may be multiple young people in a household who are trying to get online. COSLA has been recording that additional ask; I am happy to see whether I can get further figures for the committee from our learning directorate colleagues who lead on that.

In our experience, there is still a gap. As I said in response to Mr Greene, if schools are to be closed for a prolonged period, we would want to do everything we can to ensure that that gap is addressed. I welcome the Deputy First Minister's announcement this morning of an additional £45

million, which will go some way towards addressing the gap and picking up the numbers.

Alex Neil: My impression is that the problem is not about a shortage of money but about getting the equipment out there and ensuring that the kids and families who need it are getting the hardware and the software, the broadband connection and so on. Any overview that we can get of the reality on the ground would be extremely helpful.

It might be that somebody, somewhere needs to instil in some local authorities a greater sense of urgency. We heard in the first session today that remote learning is likely to go on beyond January and, in the worst-case scenario, possibly into March. Teachers have been telling me that kids—in particular those in primary schools—have only just caught up since the last lockdown, and that, no matter how well things are done, they expect a big gap to open up again as a result of remote learning starting this week.

The more information we can get on the overall picture, the better. We also need up-to-date information, rather than just a one-off picture. We need to be kept abreast of the situation so that we can monitor it to see that everything possible is being done to ensure that kids, in particular those who are living with poverty and deprivation, are getting access to all the equipment that they need for remote learning. Can you give that commitment?

Gayle Gorman: The DFM's announcement this morning included the work that we are going to do immediately to gather information, just as Mr Neil described, to get a picture of remote learning. We are starting this week by looking at local authority guidance and plans to pick up some of the issues that Mr Neil illuminated, and which were raised by colleagues who gave evidence in the previous session, such as the need for consistency of approach.

Next week, we will begin direct contact with schools in order to learn from them and capture the exact issues that have been raised. We will report on that weekly so that we have the information available in a timely manner to influence the use of further resources and support as required. That is a commitment that we will deliver through Her Majesty's inspectors of education. Our first report on the plans will be published on 18 January; the following week, there will be feedback from the sampling of schools; and the week after, there will be engagement with young people and parents. In fact, as we speak, work is going on with representatives of young people to get that process in place. We are happy to do that.

Alex Neil: That will be very good. If we could get a regular update on that work, it would be extremely helpful.

Gayle Gorman: Yes.

Alex Neil: You mentioned in your introduction two examples of good practice in Renfrew and Alloa. Is there a systematic approach to spreading good practice in remote learning? It is clear that, for most people—not just kids, but teachers—remote learning is still a fairly novel idea, so where we find that good practice exists, it should be spread out as quickly as possible. Is there a system in place for spreading things that are proven to be successful so that we can maximise the chances all over the country of getting the best possible results in a difficult situation?

Gayle Gorman: Yes, Mr Neil. My camera is not on, because of my broadband issues, but I am holding up the "What Scotland Learned" publication, which contains 100 stories from the first lockdown, with an emphasis on what we learned as professionals and on best practice. It also contains additional thought pieces from members of the International Council of Education Advisers, thought leaders and others. The publication is supported by a website, which we have just launched; we are promoting it this week.

As well as that information, on which we already have positive social media feedback from schools that are learning from it, we are running a series of seminars in January that are based on the literature review that went with the project—a review and synopsis about global remote learning that is based on the evidence that we had. The seminars are for professionals to join to take the learning forward and share the best practice.

We have also worked in partnership with ADES to establish their best practice case studies. We created case studies around those schools that have worked effectively and moved to support isolated learners and remote learning, which we then published and used as part of the support discussions in the seminars, workshops and blether sessions that we hold for teachers and school and subject leaders.

We have a systematic approach and plan. That is published regularly and we will add to it from the evidence that we have from the HMIE activity. It is important that people do not invest time in things that we know do not work and, equally, that we set up meetings to lift one another up and share approaches that are effective in moving forward. We are all learning about those approaches as we go, and there is an awful lot of activity around that theme on media platforms.

We also have cohorts and networks of teachers as well as professional learning networks, excellence in headship cohorts and supervision

groups for the subject networks that we run, in which best practice has again been gathered, shared and put back into the system.

It is really important that Education Scotland helps to fill the gap and to share the learning that we, as educators and collaborative practice communities of professionals, know will accelerate our pedagogical approaches during this challenging time, in which teachers, through being at home, are even more isolated from other professionals.

Alex Neil: That sounds impressive indeed.

In monitoring the situation across the country, are you able to identify and, where necessary, intervene quickly with any school or local authority that does not come up to scratch, particularly those that serve a high percentage of deprived students and pupils?

Gayle Gorman: Currently, we have regional teams that are directly linked with every local authority and with the RICs and LA teams. We also have attainment advisers who offer support in the attainment challenge and are linked with those schools that are in the most challenging situations. We have continued to work before and during the pandemic, through closures, reopenings and closures again.

We continue to offer support through challenges to individual schools and local authorities, and to work in partnership with the professionals, because we are all learning—everyone works hard and aspires to do the best for their learners. Sometimes it is about identifying issues and challenges, as we hope to do through discussion with teachers, and using our resource to support that process.

We have worked a lot during lockdown—before and now—with individual schools and practitioners. We have run workshops, we are in individual schools and we coach and mentor headteachers. There is a huge amount of support to help schools to address the challenges that some of them face.

Daniel Johnson: I return to the question that I put to the Deputy First Minister earlier on the methodology that will be employed for the estimation of grades, which will obviously come a lot more into focus now that we are in this period of at-home schooling. The guidelines that were produced before Christmas about how teachers should arrive at estimates were clearly written at a time when in-classroom learning was presumed, and that cannot take place now. There is a lot of concern about how teachers should be doing that, particularly because of at-home learning. Can the SQA clarify when we will have the updated guidance? The Deputy First Minister said that we would have it imminently, and I wondered whether

Fiona Robertson could clarify whether that means in days or weeks or at some point next month.

17:00

Fiona Robertson: I would not say that the guidance that we published before Christmas is no longer relevant; it is, because it provides a structure and focus for certification that is based on modifications to assessment and it provides focused advice on evidence gathering as part of that. The intention was to reduce expectations on evidence gathering for this year; in effect, it was done because there was an anticipation of some disruption. I guess that what you are saying is that, with the move to remote learning, some aspects of evidence gathering and assessment will become more challenging, and I agree with that.

In the message that we issued yesterday, we said that there was a focus on learning and teaching. In his evidence earlier, Larry Flanagan made the point that that is a key message during January and in this early part of remote learning.

We have committed to looking at some aspects of courses again, particularly for the practical subjects in which presence at school is particularly important, such as woodwork, drama and physical education. We will do that at pace. However, we have stripped back the assessment requirements considerably.

We have committed to working through a range of scenarios. That was in our communication yesterday, which came from the national qualifications group collectively, and not simply from the SQA. Those scenarios would include remote learning continuing for some time, with all the issues that would need to be considered therein. Larry Flanagan highlighted issues such as prioritising the senior phase in the return to in-class teaching or return for assessment purposes. All those things are in the mix.

In response to the specific question about timing, that clearly needs to be done as quickly as possible. However, we need to be careful, because circumstances can change. The Government has provided a commitment to consider this fortnightly. We will look at pace, through scenario planning with the national qualifications group, to provide further guidance to the system as required. This is a fluid situation, and we have to be careful about how we do that. I will take guidance from the system on that, and it is important that we do so.

Daniel Johnson: Thank you for that answer. My one comment would be that February and March are the times during the year when that evidence would be assembled and accumulated, so the nearer we get to the end of January, and

the closer we get to that time, the more anxiety there will be.

However, I would like to move on. Having looked at the methodology documents that the SQA has provided, I have a number of observations to make. I note that you said that there would not be ranking but there would be banding. Likewise, I note that, in essence, centres are being asked to look at previous performance, and there are suggestions about the use of things such as pivot tables to consider how grades fall within expected performance. Although there might not be fine-tuned, peer-against-peer ranking, I would suggest that banding still represents quite a degree of precision, especially when we are talking about estimates. What are your thoughts about that and the potential for it to cause issues?

However, more importantly, it is not entirely clear from the documents to what degree things such as the use of the pivot tables and the mapping of grades against previous performance will be tolerated, or what justification would require to be delivered in order to justify grades outside of that.

Finally, how will that be checked—will it be a question of SQA dip sampling? Will every centre have someone from the SQA showing up with their briefcase and asking to be taken through its workings? It was not immediately clear what that kind of quality assessment and assurance would mean for every school in practical terms.

I realise that there is quite a lot in there, but I am trying to understand how the model will work.

Fiona Robertson: I will work through your questions in the best way that I can.

The first point was about banding and estimates. Schools provide banding estimates every year; the nine bands that apply for national qualifications are an expected feature of what schools provide to us every year. Estimates are therefore a feature of the system. Although I accept that they obviously have a greater prominence and importance with the cancellation of exams, the nine-band scale is very familiar to teachers.

In addition to that, some universities require banding information for the purposes of entry to university. There is therefore also a broader reason there. We always provide results to schools on a nine-band basis, although certification is based on a graded basis. I am happy to provide further information to the committee around that if that would be helpful.

In relation to how the model will work, we have sought to outline a supportive process of quality assurance and an understanding standards

approach. We have set out a significant programme of understanding standards across most subject areas, which will be further expanded to provide support.

As we highlighted in our correspondence from the national qualifications group around the importance of quality assurance, we are looking to ensure trust and consistency across the country, so that a national 5 or higher that is awarded in the north of Scotland is of the same standard as one that is awarded in the south of Scotland. That is at the heart of what we are trying to do.

Daniel Johnson highlighted some guidance on how the model will work, and we provide guidance on estimation every year. We provided some guidance on gathering evidence for estimation at the start of October. We are suggesting that schools look at a variety of information to inform their approach as well as at where a greater focus in a particular subject area or a particular department might be helpful and at where peer support might be appropriate.

Although I do not think that the SQA will be pitching up with briefcases, the serious point there is around how we develop a sampling strategy approach to this work. That is being developed at present and we will discuss it with the national qualifications group.

I acknowledge the communication that we put out on 8 December that highlighted that reviewing evidence would start at the end of January. I think that, as a matter of priority, we will need to look at some of those timelines and perhaps push some of them back. As I outlined in my opening statement, learning and teaching come first and need to be the priority at this time. We will therefore look at that.

We have said that we anticipate that every school will be sampled. We are happy to provide further information on that in due course, but that will be discussed with partners.

Daniel Johnson: I thank you for that answer. This is my last question. There will be a sensitivity around the role of past performance as a benchmark in the estimating process. I recognise that that is part of a basket of measures and assessments, but there will be a high degree of assessment and it is not clear to me how strong an influence that feature will have.

Following on from what the convener said, what this will mean, particularly if there is a prolonged period of at-home learning, which will inevitably require a much higher degree of assessment of individual candidates by teachers, is that there will be a dependence on the relationship that the learner has with their teacher. There will naturally be concerns in some situations about whether that will have an undue bearing on the grades that are

arrived at. There are lots of mechanisms that could be arrived at to try to counteract that, but I think that that will be a residual concern for some people.

I noted in my most recent look at the documentation, which was before Christmas, that there were still references to centre-based appeals. However, I could not see that when I looked at the SQA website earlier today. I am keen to understand, though, how the appeals process will work and whether the candidate, rather than the centre, will have the final say on whether an appeal will go in. If we have an assessment method that is much more influenced by teacher judgment, it is important that the candidate has the final say. What is the SQA's view on appeals?

Fiona Robertson: There was quite a lot in there, including a question on appeals. However, on your broader comments, I am happy to follow up those matters with you because I think that some of your questions might relate to the original guidance, which we provide annually on estimation as part of the exam system. I am happy to follow that up with you separately, if that would be helpful, just for the avoidance of doubt. However, we did provide material back in October around gathering evidence for the purpose of estimation, which is key.

Every year, assessment is individualised—it is by definition individualised—and we seek to ensure that young people can consolidate learning as far as possible before any assessment takes place. That is particularly important for some subjects, so there are differences of approach across different subjects for good reason. Again, I am happy to elaborate on that.

On your question about appeals, we have made a commitment to review the appeals process in 2021, and that work is on-going. We have started to have conversations with the working group and the national qualifications group about that. Indeed, we have had conversations with the Equality and Human Rights Commission and will be having a meeting with the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland next week. Quite a lot of groundwork is therefore being done, which will also include, towards the end of January, a discussion with a learner panel, because the views of young people are important. We have had some conversations with young people already.

Given some of the issues in relation to appeals, not least that this is a systems issue as much as an SQA issue, I anticipate that we will go to consultation on a set of proposals in relation to appeals. I hope that that will be possible during February. I hope that Mr Johnson appreciates that we have been seeking to ensure that we have the building blocks of the alternative certification

model in place as quickly as possible; and the work on appeals has followed that. However, I have noted the committee's views, the correspondence that ministers and committee members have received and, of course, the observations in Mark Priestley's review. We are aware of all that and are looking at how we might take things forward.

The key issue is the incorporation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child into Scots law and ensuring that all public bodies are fully compliant with that legislation, which is what we will seek to do. That is why the conversation next week with the Children and Young People's Commissioner's office is important.

The Convener: Just before we move on, I have a question in the context of the UNCRC. You may have seen the letter from the children's commissioner to the committee.

Fiona Robertson: Yes, I have.

The Convener: What happens when a young person has been severely affected by the crisis for the past two years and is finding it difficult to show proof of their work? I am thinking, in particular, of the example of a young carer, who may not have been able to attend school and may have had longer periods of unsupported home learning, which had not been the norm previously. Will that young person's circumstances be taken into consideration as they would if someone were to fall ill on the day of the exam or was unable to sit the exam?

17:15

Fiona Robertson: That raises important issues. Many awarding bodies are looking at the issue of differential loss of learning for various reasons. The issue is important, but it is also very tricky. Conventionally, as one would expect, certification is done on the basis of evidence. Larry Flanagan highlighted the point that evidence is needed in order to certificate, whether that evidence is a judgment made by a teacher or a judgment made by the SQA. Our exceptional circumstances service, which operates during exam time, is also evidence based. It looks not at the wider circumstances of the young person but at the evidence in front of the subject specialist.

There are some quite difficult issues in there. We are focusing on stripping the assessment requirements right back in anticipation that many young people will have faced disruption and challenges.

More generally, in relation to young people with additional support needs or issues in relation to additional support for learning, we provide guidance around assessment arrangements that

would apply in an exam year. Those arrangements effectively apply to schools and colleges for the purposes of internal assessment. It is very important that those adjustments are in place. Some of the circumstances that you alluded to can be dealt with through adjustments to learning, teaching and assessment in the normal way.

It is an important set of issues, which we are considering with our partners.

Beatrice Wishart: My first question is for the SQA. It has been reported that cancelling the 2020 diet of exams saved the SQA £19.5 million. Are there similar projections for cost savings this year, and will the funds be repurposed to deal with the impact of the pandemic on learners?

Fiona Robertson: You are right. The cancellation of exams has resulted in a cost saving. We have returned some of our grant funding to the Scottish Government. We continue to discuss arrangements around our grant in aid for the latter part of 2020-21 and into 2021-22. In the absence of exams, I would anticipate further cost savings. However, we are still costing the quality assurance work and any further appointee costs, which contribute quite significantly to the overall cost of qualifications. We also have some fixed costs, as any organisation would. We continue to have discussions with the Government around all of those.

We are working through that, not least because the Scottish Government's announcement on the cancellation of highers and advanced highers was made only a few weeks ago. I am happy to come back to the committee with further information on that when the numbers are settled and the work is done.

Beatrice Wishart: If you could do that, it would be helpful. Thank you.

The focus at the moment is on the national emergency that we are in just now. What can be learned from the experience of 2020 and 2021 about the future certification of learners at the end of secondary education?

Fiona Robertson: When I was before the committee in August, I said that all public bodies and agencies will learn from this period, and the SQA is no different. It has obviously been a very challenging period for everyone who is working in education. Gayle Gorman has alluded to that, as have I. We have had 132 years of certainty about exams happening in spring, but circumstances have taken that certainty away and we have been required to put in place quite different arrangements in short order.

Of course, there has been learning, but, in looking forward, we are making sure that we work with the system to deliver and that our decisions

are explained and communicated as effectively as possible. That is a system-wide issue.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development is doing some work on the future of qualifications and assessment in its review. We are a full partner and are playing a full part in those discussions. I welcome discussion and debate on the issues; it is important that Scotland has this debate. We have an obligation to young people in Scotland to have the debate collectively and perhaps to settle some of the issues as we go forward. Some of what we have heard today highlights the challenges of a different approach and some of what we have discussed in the past at committee has highlighted the challenges of the examination system. With change comes challenge but, as I say, I welcome the debate on the work of the OECD, and we will contribute to that debate.

Beatrice Wishart: Does Ms Gorman have any comments on that?

Gayle Gorman: I echo what Fiona Robertson said latterly. We have seen and are very aware of the report from the international council of education advisers, which clearly lays out that Scotland needs to reflect on how our assessment fits with the curriculum for excellence principles and approaches. Fiona also referred to the upcoming OECD review looking at curriculum for excellence with a particular focus on the senior phase and picking up assessment. Of course, there is also the Priestley review, which says that Scotland is well-placed to have this debate.

We are quite well-placed in Scotland in that we have mixed provision and assessment. There has, of course, been an emphasis for some students on final exams, but we must not forget that other students have been through much more practical and continuous assessment approaches, particularly learners in the college sector, which takes a mixed approach.

I welcome the debate; it is timely. If we want to reflect the world of work that our young people are going into, we should look at the research done by the World Bank and the OECD around core skills for young people in the workforce of the future up to 2040. We need to think about the self-evaluation skills that we equip young people with, in reflecting on their learning—as well as reflecting collectively as a system. We look forward to having that discussion.

The Convener: I am very conscious of time, but Iain Gray, Ross Greer and Oliver Mundell have questions. I am sorry to ask again, but please make questions and answers succinct. We will go to Iain Gray first.

Iain Gray: I want to go back to the idea of co-creation. Have I got that right? It is quite intriguing.

It is the complete opposite of the way in which last year's alternative to exams was developed. When you gave evidence last year, Ms Robertson, you made it clear that the Deputy First Minister had described to you what he wanted and that the SQA had designed that. In fairness, I note that, when it went wrong, he agreed that what had been designed was what he had asked for and that, therefore, the degree to which it did not turn out well was his fault.

This year, the certification model is being designed by a national qualifications group with lots of members including the Scottish Government. Last year, Mr Swinney said that it would have been inappropriate for him to take part in the design, but this time his officials are part of the group. Is one of the things that you learned from last year that you should have listened more—or, more cynically, is it an attempt to ensure that, if something goes wrong, the blame will be spread around a lot of different people?

Fiona Robertson: I have highlighted the approach that we are taking this year. It is an approach that, frankly, would not have been possible last year, given the time constraints that we faced in trying to develop and deliver it in less than 100 working days. It would be unfair to suggest that we had no discussion with the system last year. We were faced with taking forward an approach that needed to be undertaken in very short order.

I welcome this year's approach and the contribution of the sector. That is being taken forward in good faith. It is important to highlight that in response to your question. Across the group, there has been a lot of pride in the joint work that has been done. That process of co-creation has been a system-wide effort to address a system-wide challenge. That is what we have been seeking to do, as well as making clear the roles and responsibilities of everyone in the system, including the SQA.

Given all that I have said, I accept that the qualifications remain SQA qualifications and that they are our responsibility at the point of certification. I also accept the SQA's statutory responsibility as an organisation. In the challenges of last year and moving into 2021, it has been really important to look forward and to take the work forward as productively and constructively as possible with this system. That is what we have sought to do.

Iain Gray: The committee probably welcomes a more open approach. Last year, it was quite critical of the more closed nature of the approach. I am not sure that you have more time to develop it this year, given how fast moving the situation has been. *[Interruption.]* Let me finish my point, and then, by all means, come back on that. It is

entirely fair to say that the situation is changing rapidly.

In relation to the national qualifications group, on a number of occasions you have referred to Larry Flanagan saying that it is important that evidence is provided through teacher assessments. That is fair—he did say that—but he also said that the approach that is being taken has led to fears among teachers of an increased workload, that the process is very bureaucratic and that the fundamental problem is that many other members of the national qualifications group do not trust teacher judgment. How do you feel about that side of the comments that he made earlier?

Fiona Robertson: The point about evidence is not just Larry's view, important though that is; it is also the view of the national qualifications group and of partners across the system, and it was included in communications from the group yesterday around the primacy of learning and teaching. The assessment of learner evidence cannot be undertaken unless young people have a foundation of teaching and learning of course content. That is not just an SQA position but an agreed position across the system.

17:30

On trust, the national qualifications group and the working group that supports it were supportive of the SQA's responsibility to ensure—going back to my earlier comment—that awards across the country are broadly consistent and fairly established. Fairness and consistency are key factors. Judgments must also be made within a framework of assessment, which goes back to the point about evidence. Teachers' professional judgment is at the heart of that approach, so trust in teachers' judgment is at the heart of the approach. However, what we have heard consistently from partners across the system—including from practitioners—is that they welcome the support and guidance that is provided by the SQA on understanding standards and quality assurance.

With the greatest respect, we have had more time to put in place a lot of the foundations of that work, which has led us to provide bespoke guidance on evidence gathering and assessment materials across the 55 national 5 subjects. During January and into early February, we will provide guidance on 52 higher subjects and 41 advanced higher subjects. We have also been developing anticipatory materials on understanding standards, all of which has been done in good time to help teachers. I appreciate the challenge, which was highlighted by the witnesses on the previous panel, that everyone wants all the materials yesterday or as soon as possible. I understand

that. However, we must also acknowledge that this is a changing and fluid situation and that we need to respond in the best way possible. Perhaps the worst thing that we could do is chop and change. We need to take care that, as far as possible, our guidance is clear and consistent. Therefore, there are judgments to be made. However, we are working with the national qualifications group to inform our approach, and that is the right thing to do.

The Convener: I am very conscious of the time, but I will bring in Mr Greer and Mr Mundell.

Ross Greer: Thank you, convener. I will stick with that line of questioning to Fiona Robertson and the SQA.

You talk about the guidance being produced in good time, but it is not—as the fact that it is still not available suggests. Earlier, you mentioned the on-going scenario planning and the scenario planning that happened previously. Potential prolonged school closures and a move to remote learning should have been at the top of the SQA's risk register for this school year. Why was that scenario planning not done over the summer and from August into October, so that all those decisions could, in essence, already have been made? In that way, you would have known what would happen if schools had to be closed for a month. For example, why was there no scenario planning for the impact of a month-long school closure on the deadlines for submission, to allow you to make a relatively quick decision at the time? That seems to be a failure of scenario planning, and I cannot understand why it had not already been done.

Fiona Robertson: We have done a lot of work to build the foundations of the approach for this year, to endure through a number of scenarios. Of course, scenario planning is part of what we do, and it includes discussions with partners through the Covid-19 education recovery group and the qualifications contingency group, which is convened by the Scottish Government. It would be unfair to say that we have not done any scenario planning, but we have also been very focused on creating the building blocks for an alternative certification model. In the same way as the system has had to move quickly into a period of remote learning that it might not have fully anticipated—and has done so very well—we are moving to ensuring that we have those arrangements in place and that they work.

The timing of all of this is critical. The point at which decisions are made about school opening or closure is critical, and we must be agile in our scenario planning. An off-the-shelf approach would not work, so we must continue to be fleet of foot about the scenarios that might play out, depending on public health advice. It has been

difficult to anticipate the impact that the new strain of the virus has had on learning and teaching.

Ross Greer: You are not being fleet of foot. The subject-specific guidance for national 5s demonstrated that. A period of prolonged school closure was one of the most predictable outcomes for this academic year. There has been a failure in scenario planning.

The SSTA raised an issue that was covered in *The Herald* newspaper. One school suggested that teachers would have to remotely invigilate pupils' completion of coursework that is to be used as evidence of their grades, and the SQA guidance that I could find did not rule remote invigilation either in or out. I assume that decisions about that will be based on subjects and qualification levels. Can you clarify that the SQA is not recommending remote invigilation as a default for senior phase pupils?

Fiona Robertson: There is no suggestion that we are insisting on remote invigilation as a default. The guidance that was produced before Christmas related to qualifications across the system. Remote invigilation may be appropriate for some of the assessments that are undertaken by some of our training providers, and there might be circumstances in which schools or colleges might wish to consider those approaches. However, remote invigilation has not been a feature of Scottish education, and the system is realistic about the opportunity—or lack of it—for that.

Following the cancellation before Christmas of the higher and advanced higher exams, we are looking at what further advice might be genuinely helpful. We have moved to remote learning and teaching, so it is important that we consider what the extent of effective remote assessment might be. A lot of formative assessment can be done remotely and straightforwardly, but, as I said, that is more challenging for some subjects and for some assessment approaches. We must keep discussing what is possible and what might be more challenging.

Ross Greer: I have a supplementary question to Beatrice Wishart's question about budgets. I understand that just under £20 million was saved due to the cancellation of exams and that around £13 million will be returned to the Government. Local authorities provide a substantial sum of around £25 million. Will there be any refund of the contribution that they make?

Fiona Robertson: Your figures are correct. We get around £30 million from the centres, which includes a levy from local government that has been in place since 2012-13. That has been a fixed sum each year, irrespective of the number of qualifications that are provided. On top of that £30 million, the Scottish Government provides around

£50 million to the SQA to provide qualifications in Scotland. The money that we get from local government does not cover the cost of qualifications. On the basis of your arithmetic, Mr Greer, the scale of the saving does not reach the level of the local government fees, or the school or college fees, that come to us.

Mr Swinney has set out today further support for the education system, and any returns of moneys to the Scottish Government—including support for the education system—will be distributed appropriately by the Scottish ministers.

The short answer is that, as things stand, the arithmetic unfortunately does not support providing a refund to local government.

Ross Greer: Thank you, Ms Robertson. That is all from me, convener. I am conscious of the time.

The Convener: Mr Mundell will ask the final question.

Oliver Mundell: I seek a cast-iron guarantee and some reassurance that young people who do not have access to the internet and who are therefore extremely limited in their ability to access much of the remote learning that is on offer will not be penalised further down the road, when it comes to assessment, and that whatever appeals or other system comes to fruition will allow such factors to be taken into account.

The Convener: We will go to Ms Robertson first. Ms Gorman may wish to answer that question, too.

Fiona Robertson: That is probably a question for Ms Gorman, in fact. I do not have anything to add on internet access.

Oliver Mundell: If I may, convener, I will come back on this point briefly. Going back to a point that Daniel Johnson made, I feel that there is a role for the SQA in how appeals would operate. If parents and young people felt that they had not had the support that they needed to prepare for assessment because of factors that were outwith their control, it would be good if they were able to put those concerns to the SQA.

The Convener: Do you wish to comment on that particular aspect, Ms Robertson?

Fiona Robertson: I have highlighted our approach and the work that we are doing around appeals, as well as the primacy of learning and teaching and the evidence that can be generated. Please be assured that I am not suggesting that the issue is unimportant. In the context of our involvement in the Covid-19 education recovery group and the on-going discussions with Education Scotland on these matters, I accept that it is very important.

In providing assurance to you, Mr Mundell, on the measures that are being taken by the Scottish Government and Education Scotland, I suggest that you defer to Gayle Gorman for an answer. However, appeals have to be based on evidence—you are right—and we have been closely involved in the discussions on remote learning and the guidance on entitlements, which are key.

Gayle Gorman will want to say more on that.

Gayle Gorman: I will be brief, as I am conscious of the time. I reiterate the welcome for the additional funding for families for laptops and other equipment—*[Inaudible.]*—activity today. Local authorities will decide where the funding is needed and how it is to be directed, given their knowledge of the families, children and young people.

I agree completely that appeals must be based on evidence and that learning disruption should, absolutely, be recognised as part of the evidence for the SQA. The guidance that the group produces will take that into account. We already know—as, I am sure, you do—that there are certain areas of the country where young people have had to self-isolate several times already before the move to remote learning. That is a key factor, and the the work that is being done in partnership with the Scottish Government on its delivery of funding—which is delivered through local authorities, given schools' knowledge of their learners—supports that. Given the circumstances this year, that is a high priority.

I am sure that, in the further phases of the work that HMIE will do in looking at the system and asking about what is happening, that will feature highly in our discussions with young people and we will be able to report on that.

Oliver Mundell: Even if you give some young people in my constituency a laptop and vouchers for connectivity, there is nothing for them to connect to. I want to make you aware that there is a small group of individuals who cannot access remote learning online in a meaningful way. Schools are working hard to make other provision, but those individuals will clearly be at a significant disadvantage, no matter what efforts schools make.

The Convener: Thank you, Mr Mundell. That point is well made on behalf of your constituents.

I thank Ms Robertson, Ms Gorman and their officials for their attendance this afternoon.

17:45

Meeting continued in private until 18:15.

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