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Education, Children and Young People Committee

Wednesday 24 November 2021

Session 6

The Scottish Parliament
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EDUCATION, CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE COMMITTEE
10th Meeting 2021, Session 6

CONVENER

*Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
*Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
*James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
*Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
*Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green)
*Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab)
*Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
*Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

John Dickie (Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland)
Dr Colin Morrison (Children's Parliament)
Satwat Rehman (One Parent Families Scotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Stephen Herbert

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Education, Children and Young People Committee

Wednesday 24 November 2021

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:30]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Stephen Kerr): Good morning, and welcome to the 10th meeting of the Education, Children and Young People Committee in 2021. The first item on the agenda is a decision on taking business in private. Are members content to take agenda item 4 in private?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Children and Young People and Deprivation (Impact of Covid-19)

09:31

The Convener: In our main item of business, the committee will take evidence on the impact of Covid-19 on children and young people from socioeconomically deprived backgrounds. We will hear evidence from John Dickie, who is the director of the Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland; Dr Colin Morrison, who is a co-director of the Children's Parliament; and Satwat Rehman, who is the chief executive officer of One Parent Families Scotland. Satwat is joining us virtually, and John and Colin are present in the committee room.

It is nice to see you all. I thank all the witnesses for their time today. We will get the questions under way immediately. We hope to have you for at least an hour and a half, and perhaps a bit longer. We will see how it goes. Stephanie Callaghan will lead the questioning.

Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): Thank you, convener, and good morning to the witnesses. Thank you for coming today. Do you believe that the aim to close the poverty-related attainment gap is an achievable goal, or should we be talking about narrowing the attainment gap? That question is for John Dickie.

John Dickie (Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland): We must make that an achievable goal. Progress toward that goal should be about narrowing the gap, but, if we set targets and say that it is not right that children's attainment and achievement at school is being undermined by their home circumstances and by poverty, we need to put everything in place to achieve that target. I would not want to do anything to undermine that or to suggest that it is not achievable.

It is achievable, but it will take action on two fronts. There must be action to tackle the underlying drivers of poverty and to ensure that all our families have adequate incomes to give their children a decent start in life and to enable them to participate fully at school and in every other aspect of life. That requires the kind of action that is beginning to be taken, such as investment in the Scottish child payment, removing the barriers to work for parents and increasing the level of funded childcare. We know that all those things are needed to tackle the problem and meet the child poverty targets.

At the same time, we need to see action within the education system to remove the barriers that

exist for children who come from lower-income families.

Stephanie Callaghan: Does anyone want to add to that?

The Convener: Michael Marra wants to come in.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): We heard some pretty significant announcements yesterday regarding changes to the Scottish attainment challenge, which is one of the key mechanisms that the Government seeks to use to address the poverty-related attainment gap. You might have followed those announcements.

John Dickie: There is a lot of detail to get over.

Michael Marra: Parliament did not hear as much detail about the direct funding allocations as some of us might have wished for. What is clear is that the money that has been allocated to nine local authorities—the most deprived communities in Scotland—will now be spread more widely across all local authorities.

John Dickie knows the city of Dundee well and has given evidence to the Dundee poverty commission. There will be a significant cut in resourcing. What are your initial thoughts on what impact that might have on our ability to deal with the poverty-related attainment gap?

John Dickie: The first thing to say is that it is right to ensure that funding reaches all parts of Scotland, because we know that children live in poverty in every part of Scotland. Most children who live in poverty do not live in the most deprived areas. It is right to find ways of ensuring that resources meet needs and are allocated to ensure that, wherever a child grows up, if they grow up in a low-income family, their local school and local authority have the resources to ensure that there are no barriers, such as charges, that would stop their full participation at school.

However, we would be concerned if any area was to invest less or to have fewer resources to tackle that gap. I urge local authorities and Government to work together to ensure that that is not the case. We do not want to see any area reducing the amount of resource or focus that goes into tackling the attainment gap.

Michael Marra: More than 100 members of staff in Dundee are tied to Scottish attainment challenge funding, and we believe that that funding might be reduced by up to 80 per cent. Your fears might well be realised.

Would Colin Morrison or Satwat Rehman like to comment?

Dr Colin Morrison (Children's Parliament): I do not know the detail. I am sure that the local authorities are working on their responses.

Satwat Rehman (One Parent Families Scotland): I reinforce what John Dickie said. We want to ensure that funding is available across the country to support those who are impacted by the poverty-related attainment gap. The bigger issue is ensuring that, where funding is required, it is adequate. We need additional funding. We should collaborate to see what resources are available and how we can use them to ensure that those who are at the greatest risk of poorer outcomes due to poverty are enabled to achieve on a par with their peers. I urge joint working and collaboration to see how we can make the most of the resources that are available across all sectors.

That includes the valuable work that is done by the third sector to support families. As John Dickie said, among the underlying causes are structural inequalities that cause low family income. We must look at the additional measures that can be put in place to support young people in schools and in their learning.

Michael Marra: It is right and correct to say that everyone in Scotland who is in poverty should be able to access support. I have no problem with that. We must rise to that imperative.

Can you comment on the particular character of poverty in the most deprived areas? Young people there will not have access to the same opportunities and facilities. Glasgow, for example, has a concentration of the most impoverished young people in Scotland. There are few resources and opportunities for them. What is the character of that poverty that creates particular barriers to learning?

John Dickie: We need to look at places and individuals. It is right to ensure that children and families who are in poverty, wherever they are, are supported and that the systems and funding are in place to do that. There are additional barriers where there is a particular concentration of disadvantage. We have picked up that transport barriers mean children cannot access out-of-school, or even in-school, opportunities. Parents might have less access to childcare, which also might not be of the same quality as it is in better-off areas. There are additional barriers at place level and those must be tackled. That is where we see the importance of linking education policy and funding with wider action to tackle poverty and disadvantage in the different ways that they play out for different groups in Scotland. We need both approaches.

Michael Marra: That is really useful, John.

Colin, do you have any comments on areas of multiple deprivation? Most of them are urban areas.

Dr Morrison: To rewind a wee bit, I would say that it is families that need support and income.

Families need to be able to manage their lives, raise their children and provide the things that children need. That is a priority. The education system itself will not sort some of the fundamental experiences or consequences of poverty. Families need an effective income and support, and communities need decent local resources and provision for families.

The system needs to be a bit smarter about where interventions need to be made. For example, we know that investment in speech and language therapy in the early years reaps great benefits for children who grow up in families in which they are perhaps not immersed in reading, literacy and support for verbal communication.

Conversations on those matters can be so general that we do not consider what has an impact on people's lives. This is about people having dignity and control of their own lives and incomes. It is also about targeting the interventions, particularly in the early years and primary school, that we know have an impact.

We need only look at our prison population to understand the impact of not doing anything on emotional wellbeing. What child should leave school functionally illiterate in a modern society? That should not happen, but, if we look at our prison population, we can see the consequences there.

That was perhaps a bit of a scattergun response, but the impact of poverty can be tackled only if we consider lived experiences and target resources at them.

Stephanie Callaghan: I am sorry that I did not make myself clear earlier. I was inviting other panel members to comment.

Witnesses have touched on the broader societal measures on poverty and the early years that have an impact on education. Are there any other local or national policies that would dovetail with those to support closing the attainment gap?

John Dickie: It is fundamentally about tackling poverty. Poverty is about families not having enough money to give their children a decent start in life and the same opportunities as their better-off peers. We need national policies to tackle child poverty at the root cause and to ensure that families have enough money.

There are policies that dovetail with that. I mentioned the new Scottish child payment. Making use of Scotland's social security powers to invest directly in low-income families is a policy that dovetails with closing the attainment gap. However, it needs to be built on. There is no credible route that we or independent analysis can see that would allow us to achieve our child poverty targets and, at the same time, close the attainment gap—which requires us to tackle poverty at source—without at least doubling the Scottish child payment in the coming year. Further action would also be needed around that to ensure that targets are achieved. That is one policy lever. It is probably the most immediate action that the Parliament and the Government can take to make progress on child poverty, which integrates with closing the attainment gap.

However, there are wider actions, including building on the commitments on investing in funded childcare, removing barriers to employment for parents—especially women—and examining the rewards for work in our labour market. We need fundamental changes to ensure that parents—and mums, in particular—have opportunities to progress in the labour market. We need to ensure that childcare is available, to enable them to increase their hours and improve their earnings, and that they have progression opportunities that allow them to do that.

Those are the policies that will help to end child poverty. By ending child poverty, we will go a long way towards plugging the attainment gaps that exist in our education system.

Stephanie Callaghan: Do any of the other panel members want to come in before I put a short question directly to John Dickie?

Satwat Rehman: Can I come in?

The Convener: Yes, of course.

09:45

Satwat Rehman: I will talk about single parents, who are one of the priority groups in the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017. There is a much greater risk of single-parent families being in poverty to begin with, and, during the pandemic, we have seen intensification of the conditions that create poverty for many such families.

John Dickie is right that we need to look at other policies, including childcare. We need to develop something like a family offer from the family bases, which supports the all-important early learning experience for children in high-quality settings, and enables parents to enter training or employment, or to progress in employment. A big issue that we see with single parents is that, although they enter work, they tend to stay in entry-level jobs with part-time hours and have few opportunities to progress.

In terms of the other policy agendas, we need to look at fair work and see what can be done in the short term for single parents. In the longer term, we need to look at how to create high-quality training opportunities, particularly for young people who live in low-income families, and at how we can dovetail more closely with further and higher

education—with further education, in particular—if young people want to take those options.

Something that we have found has had a particular impact on families during the period, over and above increased financial stresses, is the digital divide. Anything that is being done to connect people across Scotland should recognise the need for connectivity, as well as for devices, and for support for families to access things online. We have heard over and over again from families about the stresses of trying to manage with one small device during the pandemic. They were often trying to manage home schooling for more than one child, and for children in different school age groups, and some were also having to work from home. We need to consider measures that will level the playing field and make things more equal for those families, should there be further restrictions. More generally, we should enable them to access the learning opportunities that are available for young people.

We should definitely consider childcare. We need to look at fair work, employability, employment support and the digital divide, as well. Another important area to consider, based on what families have said to us, is how to ensure that there is adequate and targeted mental health and wellbeing support for children and young people, and their parents.

We heard how the generalised anxiety that many of us felt around the pandemic was impacting on families and on their capacity to engage in activities when they became available. We also heard about the particular stresses of being the sole carer at home during lockdown and trying to manage everything—the impact that that had on parents and, consequently, on their children. We definitely need to look at how additional services and supports can be built around what we have in place for children's learning, so that they can make the most of the opportunities.

Stephanie Callaghan: You have touched on a lot of important points, some of which will be picked up later by my colleagues. It is good to hear about the Scottish Government's focus on wellbeing, childcare and so on, and that we are on the right track with that.

I have a direct question for John Dickie. Covid has been a bit of a leveller in some ways. Tragedy has struck some families who would never have expected to be in poverty—the rug has been ripped from under their feet. There is a general feeling that that could happen to any of us at any time.

To go back a bit, I am a councillor in South Lanarkshire Council, and some of our parent councils took part in the Child Poverty Action Group poverty proofing schools project, which seemed to make quite an impact locally. Can you tell us about the outcomes of that project and how effective it was?

John Dickie: CPAG runs that costed school day project. The work started in Glasgow, where we intensively support the local authority and schools to support children, young people, parents and school communities, including teachers, in identifying the cost and resource barriers that prevent children from fully participating at school. We have gone on to develop that work in Dundee, and we are now working in schools in Moray.

Through that work, we develop online resources and toolkits, and we provide support and training to school leaders and trainee teachers to raise awareness of the impact of poverty and to identify the practical things that can be done at a school community level by young people, teachers and parents.

From the direct feedback that we receive, we know that the work has an impact, and from an evaluation that was commissioned by Public Health Scotland we know that, when barriers are removed, schools report and evidence increased levels of participation and engagement at school. Therefore, the work makes a difference.

The pandemic threw into sharp relief many of the issues that we, parents and young people had been identifying as barriers, such as a lack of digital devices or connectivity at home. Pre-pandemic, those issues prevented children from doing homework and fully engaging with their school work. Sometimes, having those resources was seen as a bit of a luxury; it was thought that children and young people did not actually need their own devices. However, it has now become clear that it is critical that they have access to digital connectivity and devices on which to do their work. If there is a silver lining to the pandemic, it is that that need has become absolutely clear. There is greater awareness of the extent to which a lack of resources at home can prevent full participation at school.

Something else that came out of that work that is worth flagging is the importance of communication between schools and parents, carers and pupils. In the two periods of lockdown during the pandemic, we carried out two surveys of children, young people and parents. From those surveys we learned that both parents and young people appreciated it when schools communicated and asked how pupils were getting on and whether they had the resources that they needed. However, the picture was inconsistent—in other areas, parents told us that nobody had ever asked whether they had the devices, technology and support to enable their children to continue to engage at school.

Communication and the manner of communication are important in giving confidence to school communities—including staff, parents and parent councils—to talk about issues of money, cost and resources in a way that is not stigmatising and does not single out individual families. Rather, there should have been a recognition that families were under pressure and did not all have the resources that it was previously assumed they had. Such conversations should become a standard part of the school day. We have produced a toolkit on talking about costs and money at school in order to promote and spread across Scotland the good practice that already exists in many schools and individual classrooms.

Stephanie Callaghan: Thank you. It is important that all parents understand the impacts of poverty and take them into account when making decisions.

Dr Morrison: I will quickly add something on that point. I have seen the work with children directly, not just with adults and professionals. When children use the tools and talk about poverty, it de-stigmatises the experience and frames it as a matter of social justice and rights. Therefore, collectively, children understand what it means for everybody. It also means that a child who is having those experiences is not left feeling that it is their responsibility, that their family is failing them or that they should be embarrassed. It is powerful work that creates a space for conversation and moves the idea from being about charity to being about dignity and rights. The work is important and we admire it.

The Convener: I listened to what John Dickie said about the different dimensions of the pandemic. Has the nature of child poverty fundamentally changed because of the pandemic? Are we measuring child poverty in the right ways?

John Dickie: Those levels of poverty existed before the pandemic, but the pandemic has thrown them into sharp relief. The pandemic has exacerbated, and in many cases deepened, the poverty that families face. All families have faced pressures during the pandemic, but those are particularly acute for people who do not have enough money.

The primary way of understanding poverty is as a lack of income. We use a range of methods to measure that in Scotland. We look at income, material deprivation and the persistence of poverty. That is still the right way to measure progress. The fundamental issue is about families not having the money to make choices and the limitations that that creates.

Some positive learning has come out of the pandemic. There is a recognition that the best way to support families on low incomes is to ensure that they have more money. There was a range of responses to the need to replace free school meals during lockdown. There were vouchers and in-kind food parcels as well as cash responses. It was clear from the feedback from our surveys and more generally that cash was what worked. That gave parents the dignity to be able to make choices, including about food, based on what their family needed.

There might have been good intentions behind some of the other approaches, but we need to recognise that one in four children in Scotland lives in poverty and that those families need additional money. Charity handouts can be a backup to that, but the vast majority of low-income families need opportunities to improve their earnings in work and a decent social security safety net that provides support when they have to juggle caring responsibilities and when they face disability, ill health or a crisis such as the pandemic.

The Convener: You are describing the root causes of poverty.

John Dickie: Exactly.

Dr Morrison: The Children's Parliament carried out large-scale surveys last year. One in four children told us that their families were struggling financially. Imagine knowing that when you are eight, 10 or 11 years old. When asked about their worries, one in four children told us that they were worried about their family's income and what they had. That figure increased during the pandemic. We know from good data that one in four children lives in poverty, but we also know from our work that one in four children knows that they live in poverty and worries about that. They take that into their learning and their other social experiences. That is incredibly worrying.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I want to go back to the attainment challenge, which ties in with a wider question about the Government's direction of travel. We all know that poverty impacts education and that the poverty-related attainment gap is quite wide. Who should lead on tackling poverty? The indication yesterday was that the education system would have a bigger role. It already has a role in trying to address the relationship between poverty and education, but the direction of travel was that the education system would have more of a role in that.

I do not have a fixed position on that—I am just interested in the direction of travel with regard to whether the education system, which already has many challenges, should have additional responsibilities on issues of poverty. Should the education system have a greater focus on education instead of a focus on wider issues, or

should it expand its role to cover poverty issues, too?

10:00

Dr Morrison: For me, the question is the problem. If you are suggesting that there is something pure about what education does, that the education system is not impacted by the social circumstances that children live in, that it does not have to consider what children bring into the classroom and that it has a narrow understanding of learning and teaching, that is a problem for me.

At the time, every member voted to incorporate into Scots law the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. That is the responsibility of us all now; we are all duty bearers. As members, you are duty bearers, and the new systems and structures that will be set up as a result of education reform will, as public authorities, be duty bearers.

We have a duty to allow all children and young people to live a life with dignity. Poverty is the greatest infringement of human rights, and we see that reflected in attainment within certain communities and among children from certain backgrounds. We should not consider that we are asking the education system to do something on top of what it is already doing, because we are not adding another layer or initiative. If we start with the idea that the human dignity of the individual is infringed by poverty, that is as much my responsibility as a primary 6 teacher as it is yours as an MSP, so we cannot separate those things.

Willie Rennie: What do you want teachers, schools and the education system to do? What extra thing could be done, or what extra responsibility could be taken on, to assist with the things that you have talked about?

Dr Morrison: I am saying that it is not extra.

Willie Rennie: Okay, it is not extra, but—

Dr Morrison: The starting point for educators is that children enter the education experience with rights-based relationships, so they know that they are loved and cared for and that we have an understanding for them. Educators then need to be able to address the needs of the children as learners. I have already mentioned speech and language therapy. We sometimes forget the first 1,000 days of a child's life, because we think of the education system as covering them from the age of three to 18, as though nothing happens before their third birthday. However, we know that, during pregnancy and in those first hundreds of days, it can feel as though outcomes are already fixed, and that is usually based on poverty. We should start by understanding and addressing the needs of the child and their carers or parents, which can relate to income or support.

We have not even mentioned disability. If we are really going to tackle some of the fundamental core issues, alongside poverty, we need to look at disability, because people who live with disabilities and children with disabilities are disproportionately more likely to live in poverty. It is almost impossible to pull those things apart. When I was an educator, my interest was in the whole child, so I was interested in their family and community, too. I could not pull those things apart, nor would I have wanted to. I might have wanted to improve certain skills—such as literacy, which was my specialism—but that had to be located in a broader understanding of the children's lives. As an educator, my job was to fight poverty. It was that basic for me.

Willie Rennie: You will not get any disagreement from me on that, but the direction of travel that was indicated yesterday was that the education system should have a greater responsibility. I am intrigued about what that responsibility that is not being covered by other parts of the public service should be.

John Dickie: I echo a lot of what Colin Morrison has said. The role of education is to do what needs to be done to ensure that every child has access to all the opportunities that Scotland's education system has to offer. There is a real job to be done in that regard, and it is already happening in lots of schools.

Understanding the school community is integral to the work of schools. That includes understanding the barriers and challenges that young people in the classroom face and identifying cost issues that are preventing them from participating in school trips, dress-down days or other school events that make them feel uncomfortable because money is involved.

Developing that understanding is just good practice. To me, that is the role of education. There are ways in which we can add to that—we have already added to it. School is a key place where families and children engage with public services, so it is where additional support can be provided. There are examples in Edinburgh, Glasgow and elsewhere of financial inclusion being built into schools by providing access to advice and information on the financial supports that are available to families. There is also engagement with parents on wider issues around employment and employability. There are opportunities to build those things in and around schools by working with other public services and the third sector.

None of that takes away from the fundamental importance of policies to address child poverty and

improve family incomes, such as improving investment in social security, improving the rewards from work in the workplace and removing barriers to work for parents. The two things go side by side. I have not looked at the data, but I have not seen any suggestion that those things are less important or are being offloaded on to the education system. I would be concerned if education in itself was seen as the solution to poverty. In the past, people have held that view as a way of avoiding the reality of what actually drives child poverty, but I do not see such views in Scotland.

There is real consensus in the Scottish Parliament. All the parties supported the terms of the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017, the measures that are in place to tackle child poverty and the requirement on the Government to produce a child poverty delivery plan that focuses on the drivers of child poverty, which are lack of income from work, the level of social security and the high costs that families face. I do not see anything that is diverting away from that, but there is a role for education, too.

Willie Rennie: Before I bring in Satwat Rehman, I want to add another issue. Looking back to the pandemic, we have evidence that includes case studies about families who found it difficult to get childcare when their employers required them to go back to work. Was that the responsibility of the employers—was it bad practice by them—or was it a lack of synchronicity with the easing of the lockdown? The Government was indicating that companies could take their workers back, but childcare was not yet up to full speed. Perhaps Satwat Rehman would answer my first question as well as addressing that one.

Satwat Rehman: I will try to address both, starting with the first and coming on to the one about childcare.

There is a quote in our submission that is critical to the question of whether there should be a single lead or where the responsibility for tackling child poverty should lie. It states:

> "Children just don't walk in, they bring their families & lives with them".

That is critical to addressing child poverty. A child in a school does not just leave everything at the school gate; it is all there.

As both the previous speakers have said, tackling child poverty should be a joint responsibility. That is not to say that there are not actions or areas where certain services could take a lead, but it has to be done in collaboration and partnership with all the services that I spoke about earlier. We need holistic family-based solutions. As Colin Morrison said, it is critical that the voices of children and young people and parents are heard in terms of what they need and what will make a difference to them on the various fronts where poverty manifests in their lives, so that we have something that will work for the family.

Developing the avenues that enable families and children and young people to enter into that support is about thinking about where they will feel comfortable to express what is happening, examining what they need and using that as a starting point. All our statutory and additional services are critical to our ability to end child poverty and the poverty-related attainment gap, so coming together and collaborating will make a difference. As Colin Morrison said, the role of the education service is not just about what happens in the structured lessons; it is the broader stuff that goes on around that. As I said, children bring their lives with them when they come into school.

On the availability of childcare, some employers put unreasonable pressures on parents to go back to the pre-pandemic ways of working. We heard from single parents that we work with that the return to work was happening almost in parallel and at a different pace to the way that services operated. Services were rightly being more cautious about how they opened up and how we could keep everyone safe in schools and nurseries at a time when things were changing quickly. Employers had some responsibility for that.

Should we ever find ourselves in the same position again, there is learning that we can take from the pandemic about how we organise and differentiate the support to recognise the needs of different types of families. In the first hard lockdown, at the start of the pandemic, some single parents who were key workers tried to get access to key worker childcare or to get their children to go to the hubs that were available, but, because we were doing everything so quickly, service providers did not engage in the usual levels of consideration and consultation to ensure that they were being inclusive and getting it right.

One single parent was filling out the form for key workers to request childcare. It asked if you were a key worker and she ticked yes. It then asked if your partner was a key worker. It did not give the option to say that you were a single parent, and the only way that you could move on to submit the form was to tick yes or no. She ticked no, which made her ineligible for the support for her children in the first instance. That was pointed out to the authority, which quickly addressed the issue.

We were all setting up services more quickly and in a way in which we had never worked. It is important for us to take stock, as we are doing here, consider the learning from what has happened and think about what that means for how we develop and build our services anyway and what measures we should have in place

should we find ourselves in the same situation again. That goes back to fair work and more family-friendly and flexible working generally, which can be put into place and used should we find ourselves going into further restrictions.

Willie Rennie: I have a question about the digital divide. In July last year, there were reports that, even though laptops and other digital devices had been purchased, they would not be distributed to the pupils who were in need until August. What was your experience of that? Did the system work quickly enough? Do you have any evidence to add to those reports?

Dr Morrison: We often work with children who do not find school engagement or learning easy in the first place. A number of the children we work with fell off the radar in the first three or four months of the pandemic—they were just gone from the education system. However, many headteachers we know who love and care for their children were literally scrambling about and delivering devices every day. They were knocking on doors and making sure that people had food, never mind digital devices. There was some amazing practice that has really enriched the on-going relationships that schools have with some families who were struggling.

10:15

The first few months were chaotic, and some families still do not have the digital devices that they need. Once that disengagement happened for some children and their families, it was very difficult to re-engage. That will have long-term consequences for some children, in terms of attendance and their ability to work in that blended way, while other children have become much more used to digital engagement with learning and are taking that home and using it to build on.

There is a gap in attainment. There is certainly still a gap in children's use of the digital space to learn. For some children, that has just taken off and they are blossoming with it; for others, there is a legacy of disengagement that will be difficult to address.

John Dickie: I echo that. The feedback from our surveys was that, for children and families who got devices, that transformed things and made a big difference to their ability to engage. However, whether people got devices was inconsistent. Around a third of the young people from low-income families who responded to our surveys said that they still did not have access to a device, so clearly there is still a way to go. That is why the commitment to ensure that every schoolchild has access to a digital device and the connectivity to use it is so important.

We need to get to a stage at which that access does not rely on which organisation someone happens to be engaging with or on a particular headteacher or teacher thinking that a child might need something. It needs to be accepted that, to engage in school in Scotland, children need a device, and we will ensure that every child has one.

The Convener: We have a quick supplementary from Oliver Mundell and then one from Bob Doris. I will then come back to Oliver for a new line of questioning.

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): I want to go back to Willie Rennie's first line of questioning. I listened to Jim Wallace from Aberlour on the radio the other morning. I do not want to misquote him but, in effect, he said that there should be more of a role for the third sector. I am enthusiastic about having more teachers and support staff in schools, but the question is whether money that is designated for tackling poverty should be used just to bring in more teachers. Given the accountability structures, local authorities have quite a big say in how that money is spent and, in some cases, they are directing headteachers. Is that the right approach? Are we accessing the right expertise? Is there really partnership working, or could the money be distributed differently?

Dr Morrison: It is cumbersome and difficult for a national organisation to negotiate with 32 local authorities, and then sometimes to be expected to negotiate with school clusters and sometimes with individual schools, about something that it can provide. Where there are good existing relationships, those things have grown, but it is not easy for many third sector agencies to do that. Often, they do not have the capacity or resource to do the negotiation, tendering and all the rest of it, which is hugely time consuming. That is a broad statement, and it is not true for every organisation, but it is certainly difficult for third sector organisations—even the big ones—to negotiate and access some funding streams.

Oliver Mundell: My question is really whether we are getting the priority right. It is about whether a lot of the money that is going to schools for equity is ending up being used to plug staffing shortages or for other things that are very education focused. I recognise that there is a gap there, but I wonder whether involving the third sector and others who have better expertise in addressing poverty would give us the full chance to use the money as best we can.

The Convener: There is some kerfuffle at this end of the table because we have lost access to our colleagues who are here virtually. Therefore, once this question is finished, I am afraid that I will

have to suspend the meeting until we can recover the technology. I am sorry for the distraction.

John Dickie: Shall I come back in, convener?

The Convener: Yes. We can finish this exchange, and then we will suspend.

John Dickie: There is a role for third sector organisations in finding ways to work with families where the children have not been engaged at school, find school particularly difficult or have not been at school. Expertise to support those families and children lies in the third sector. As Jim Wallace said on the radio the other morning, some of those families and children and young people found that the pressures of not going to school helped, because they were not previously able to engage or get the most out of school.

I suppose that that is about local government, the third sector and schools working together to identify what additional support they need to provide. That comes back to the point about ensuring that the resources are there so that, wherever someone goes to school in Scotland and whatever their home background, they can access the same kinds of opportunities that can be accessed by children in better-off areas or in families on higher incomes in their area. That is about ensuring that the resources are adequate to deliver a genuinely free education system that is genuinely open and able to engage with and support children from all backgrounds. There are examples in which third sector organisations are already involved in providing that kind of support, and we need to learn from those.

The Convener: I suspend our proceedings until we have a solution to the technological issues. I apologise.

10:21

Meeting suspended.

10:50

On resuming—

The Convener: Welcome back. I apologise to everyone for the hiatus in our meeting. We return to our line of questioning.

Oliver Mundell: I want to ask about rurality and poverty. Have those who are living and learning in rural communities been well served during the pandemic? There have been lots of cases of people struggling to access digital learning. In the relatively urban areas of my constituency, people worked together and there was lots of community support. However, lots of people living in very remote communities struggled to access such support. Is that something that you have picked up on?

John Dickie: I am trying to think back to the work that we did with, and the response that we got from, children and young people and families in rural communities. There were existing barriers that were exacerbated or reinforced by the pandemic. There were particular barriers in relation to transport and the ability to access opportunities in and out of school. Children who grow up in low-income families in rural areas might not be part of a community. There is more to do to ensure that they are not stigmatised and that the school handles that in a way that mitigates any risk of stigma.

I am racking my brains. We have done a bit of work. I could share more about the specific cost barriers that young people have experienced in rural areas, but I would have to get back to you after the meeting.

Oliver Mundell: That would be helpful.

Dr Morrison: I would like to get to the aligned area of mental health and wellbeing. Earlier this year, we published an investigation into mental health and wellbeing that was carried out by children in the Western Isles. Clearly, they spoke from the perspective of island communities. That has been presented to the local authority and the national health service in the Western Isles. The report is on our website and there are links to it in our submission. The children gave a clear insight into their experiences in the past 12 to 18 months and into what they would like from the education system and other providers in their communities.

Oliver Mundell: I asked that question because, yesterday, we saw a shift in focus away from using the Scottish index of multiple deprivation and towards looking at low-income families. I have been lobbying the Government on the issue for a long time and asking what is being done about hidden rural poverty. However, at no point did I think that that support would come at the expense of our most deprived communities.

A concentration of poverty presents certain challenges, and, as you have identified, people in rural poverty face social isolation and very different challenges. Both challenges must be met. Do you think that looking at low-income families is the right measure for determining how funding is allocated, or do you think that we still need the Scottish index of multiple deprivation? I have always thought that a hybrid system would meet both challenges.

John Dickie: I think that we need to look at both. In terms of overall funding, and ensuring that we are providing support and making resources available to tackle poverty wherever it is in Scotland, using data on low-income families as a way of doing that makes sense.

As we discussed earlier, there are other place-based barriers that need to be addressed as part of wider policies to tackle poverty and disadvantage. Families in rural areas face particular issues—in many cases, they face higher energy and transport costs, for example. They might also have issues in accessing opportunities in the local community, although in a different way to those in some of the most disadvantaged areas. However, in rural areas, there can still be barriers that do not exist elsewhere to accessing out-of-school learning opportunities.

It should not be a case of either/or. We need to ensure that overall funding settlements are adequate so that, wherever a child goes to school, whether it is in area of multiple deprivation or in a rural area—

Oliver Mundell: I will push you a little bit on that. Do you think that it is wrong to move away from the Scottish index of multiple deprivation when it comes to allocating the attainment funding? Is that a mistake?

John Dickie: No, I think that, overall, using data on low income—

Oliver Mundell: Is the better model.

John Dickie: —-is the better model, but we need to ensure that we are adequately funding schools everywhere to respond to the needs in their areas. That is part of a wider funding settlement with regard to how we fund our schools and education system.

Satwat Rehman: I will quickly come back on Oliver Mundell's previous point and reinforce what John Dickie has said about the need to take a place and people approach. By looking at those on low incomes across Scotland, we might be able to take more of an intersectional approach that recognises that inequalities can impact on families and their experience of poverty in different ways, and we might look at how we respond accordingly to support single parents, people from black and minority ethnic communities and those with a disability in the family, or a combination thereof.

On the rurality question, we have seen some of the issues that John Dickie has spoken about, such as transport costs, the availability of support and the logistics of getting support. One issue that we have heard across the board from single parents, which in some ways was more intensified for those in more rural areas, was the feeling of increased isolation. Some were not living physically close enough to other people to be able to see anyone else, which intensified the experience. We need to look at that issue when considering how we respond to the multilayered nature of poverty and inequality that children and young people in low-income families are experiencing.

Oliver Mundell: Thank you. That is helpful.

Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): Thank you for emphasising the need to take a holistic approach in tackling poverty. As a teacher for more than 30 years, I taught many demographics in many areas of multiple deprivation, and a lot of what you are saying about seeing the child and the whole family has resonated with me.

Over the years, including recently during Covid, has there been a change in culture in education and a greater awareness of the impacts of deprivation? As we recover, how can we ensure that learners and families are at the heart of that recovery and that the focus is on them rather than on systems and the mechanistic side of things?

11:00

Dr Morrison: This might seem a bit strange, given the committee's focus, but I think that the focus on attainment is the wrong focus. The focus needs to be on how the pandemic has been experienced by families with the least resources and the least access to all the support that might have been available, and on the families who were cut off from services that they relied on until those services found different, more creative ways of working.

Schools have told us that, during the pandemic, their main focus has been on wellbeing and mental health. Every good teacher—if I can call them that—whom we knew and whom we engaged with professionally was focused on very basic things, such as maintaining the connection with their pupils, checking in with them and asking them how they were; providing them with some fun or structure to the day, however limited; making sure that whoever they lived with, whether that be their mum, their dad or their gran, had the basics that they needed; and checking that there was food in the house. Those are the kind of things that many teachers did. They invested all that time in those relationships and children's wellbeing, but—I am sorry if I am going a bit off script in answering the question—they now find themselves back in school, where there is intense pressure on what we call attainment.

Just recently, we had a very visceral reaction to something in a school that we are working in. I will not name the school, because that would not be fair. In working with children and staff in the school and asking children about their views on their current educational experiences, one message that came back very clearly from children was, "Teachers aren't very interested in my life outwith school." When we reported that back, there were tears among some teachers; they were very moved and quite hurt by that. They said, "We've

spent 18 months being clear about how we love these children and doing all these things. Now that we're back in school, the children feel that we care less."

Teachers at the school have turned the situation around amazingly quickly. Every child is now on a soft start—the whole school is on a soft start. Many more emotional wellbeing check-ins are being carried out. They realise that the pressure that they felt, whether it was internal or came from somewhere else—who knows where?—that the focus had to be on literacy and numeracy because there had been "lost learning" needs to be parked, otherwise all the ground that was gained in maintaining relationships, especially with the most vulnerable children, will be lost.

We certainly want our children to do well in literacy and numeracy. The school in question is a primary school. However, unless we maintain those relationships and continue to look after the children, we will just be chasing our tails; we will not make up the lost ground.

Last year, in our surveys for children up to the age of 14, more than 50 per cent of respondents said that they were anxious about exams. That figure grew during the pandemic. We have a system that is perceived to be about attainment and exams, when, in fact, its focus, if we are to have any sense of recovery, needs to be on mental health and wellbeing. It feels as though we are losing ground and layering more pressure on teachers and learning support assistants. There is a feeling that we are losing what we might have gained as regards relationships. In our submission, we said:

"Recovery will not be evidenced by improved test results in a spreadsheet."

We feel strongly that there has been such a loss of purpose, and a misdirection. We are seeing that in schools when we are there day to day.

Kaukab Stewart: Where do you think that that pressure—the focus on attainment that you talked about—is coming from?

Dr Morrison: At one end of the system, it is coming because it has been announced that we will have an exam diet this year. In secondary schools, the feeling is, "My goodness! We're going to have a full set of exams, as we did before the pandemic." Schools are now working towards that, knowing that a number of children disengaged or found it difficult to learn during the pandemic.

At a primary school level, we have testing, and we talk about children doing well and making up for what has been lost—such language is the norm. In my view, education leaders and the committee should be leading a discussion about a cultural shift that says, "We are most interested in the wellbeing of our children." For the next few years, that will be our priority, because we have a great deal of evidence that says that that wellbeing has been undermined.

I do not know about you, but I see the impact of that in my broader family life and in my workplace. We see the impact all the time in our professional lives. You must see the impact of mental health issues, anxiety and depression in this building. Those things are very real, and they are real in our children.

We can chase the thing called attainment and think that we can get children back to whatever normal was, but doing that is a lost opportunity and a mistake.

I am sorry. I think that I have gone way off your question.

Kaukab Stewart: That is all right. It was interesting to hear what you had to say about that.

I turn to Satwat Rehman. My original question was about a cultural change in education, greater awareness of the impacts of deprivation and putting families and children rather than systems at the heart of the recovery.

Satwat Rehman: I will go back to what you mentioned just before you asked your question, about a holistic approach and greater awareness of needing to work with the whole person and not a particular aspect of the person. During the lockdowns, we certainly saw that some schools, headteachers and staff groups absolutely got that. We administered grants for energy costs for single parent families, for example. In one particular school, the head spent the whole day doing applications to ensure that families got the money that they needed. They knew that the priority for the families was supporting their wellbeing and supporting them on the additional material costs that they found themselves experiencing.

I echo what Colin Morrison said. We need to focus on creating the conditions for children and young people to thrive. We know that children learn best when they are secure and stable. They learn best when they are not anxious about anything or worrying about whether there will be enough food in the house for them or what their mum or dad is coping with. We saw that children had anxieties about their parents and about how their parents were coping during the pandemic and what that meant for them.

Some families still have to live under tighter restrictions because of health conditions, for example. We have not all gone back to the way that things were, and it is right that we take some time to think about whether we need to go back to the way that things were. Some families have reported that not having constant battles about

getting ready, getting to school and doing homework and having more of a flow and rhythm to the day that suited where their children and young people were at really took the tension out of some of their relationships.

There is an opportunity to pause and listen to what children, young people and families are saying is important to them and to use that as the starting point for beginning to focus on recovery post-pandemic.

There is a lot of anxiety about educational qualifications and exams, for example. Families have told us not to expect them to be able to start off from where they left off pre-pandemic. The impact that the pandemic has had on mental health and wellbeing means that they need to start way back and get themselves back to where they were pre-pandemic. It is crucial that we consider how we can support families through schools and what the nature of that support needs to be in a broader sense, as opposed to just thinking that they seem to be lagging behind on X, Y and Z and about how teaching and learning can be intensified to get them to that point. That will not work unless they are ready to learn and thrive.

Kaukab Stewart: I remember talking about the phrase "readiness to learn" quite a lot in the profession.

I want to move the discussion on a little. I do not want to take away John Dickie's opportunity to speak, but I am conscious of the time. I am thinking about interventions that can help the situation. We always need to measure things somehow—we need to have proof of outcomes. I am thinking about clothing grants and free school meals, for example, but also about universal credit cuts and benefit caps, which have been mentioned in written submissions. Can you give me some examples of interventions that have had either a positive impact or a negative impact on children and families?

John Dickie: Yes. Some interventions that have been made over the past couple of years have had positive impacts. There was the replacement of free school meals, particularly when it was a cash replacement. Children and parents reported back to us what a difference that additional resource had made to them. There was the introduction of hardship grants, and there are now bridging payments to bridge the gap to the full roll-out of the Scottish child payment. There was also the introduction of the Scottish child payment itself. All of that additional cash support to families makes a difference—it is really important—and they report that back to us.

As I mentioned earlier, the evaluation of the cost of the school day programme suggests that there has certainly been a difference in outcome when it comes to participation and engagement at school, although I do not think that we can yet say that those interventions have had a direct impact on the attainment gap. However, whether they are school-based interventions or wider interventions to improve family incomes and to boost the incomes of families on the lowest incomes, they are clearly part of a process that will improve family resources and reduce the costs that children face at school.

The theory of change behind that is widely understood: those interventions will impact on participation and engagement at school and on young people enjoying the school environment, all of which is critical to improving children's overall experience of school, their attainment, their achievements and their sense of what they are getting out of being at school.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): This has been a really interesting line of questioning. I wish to focus on the potential role of pupil equity funding. I will not discuss the level of funds, which might come up during the budget process anyway, but I would like to consider how the funds could be spent. We have heard evidence this morning that schools pretty much know their children and families better than they have ever known them. That was an unavoidable truth as they sought to help them during lockdown.

I would like to know about the future opportunities for how schools could use funds over a four-year period. In theory, they can now plan strategically over a four-year period—but not in a silo or in isolation. Are there opportunities to use pupil equity funding within the wider community to support the learning needs of children and the wider needs of families more generally, to make the children ready to learn when they get to school? Do you have any thoughts about how you have seen equity funding used well in the past, perhaps during Covid, to help young people and their families? What opportunities might there be? It would be helpful to get that on the record.

Dr Morrison: I understand that there is good evidence, published by Education Scotland on the national improvement hub, although it might not be easy to find. There was a lot of evidence pre-pandemic about how PEF money was being used and about effective interventions for attainment. That evidence is there.

What I do not know, however, is how that evidence has been used, read and understood by regional improvement collaboratives, by school clusters or by schools. I suspect that many teachers do not have a lot of time to find and read evidence, but there is evidence pre-pandemic of what an effective intervention is.

11:15

Some great stuff is certainly available. I remember reading some evidence from educational psychologists on effective individual learning initiatives that they knew of, and there is also the work that has come out of the improvement methodology, with small-scale projects that have then been scaled up. There is lots of evidence, but, as I have said, it is pre-pandemic.

Although we need to look at that, we also need to rethink what we are using our PEF money for, because, for me, the priorities have changed. The priority should not be some purist view of attainment and the attainment gap; instead, health and wellbeing should be our absolute priority for children if we are to get to the place where we can address their learning. Some schools have been great at using PEF money to work on family learning and parental engagement. I guess that they would say that that is probably one of the hardest things for them to do, but it is probably even more important that such an approach be taken now.

John Dickie: I echo those comments. There are examples of PEF money being used very directly to reduce the costs of participation in, say, school trips and activities or out-of-school clubs and to ensure that there is no cost or financial barrier to participating in school life. It is important to children's health and wellbeing that they feel comfortable during the school day and that they can fully participate in learning. As Colin Morrison has highlighted, there are also examples of the money being used to fund home schooling engagement and support, which is all about involving and understanding families and identifying their wider needs to ensure that, again, those barriers to engaging at school are removed.

Satwat Rehman: I echo what Colin Morrison and John Dickie have said. Going back to the main issues that I highlighted earlier for the families we directly support, I think that anything that addresses general family health and wellbeing in collaboration with others in the community, that finds opportunities to support families to re-engage locally and see what they can participate in and how they can do so and that supports broader learning outcomes would be a very valuable use of some of the pupil equity funding. In some of those areas where we have used the funding for services, we have found it important to have a consistent relationship in place. Having someone who is there for the child or young person and their family and who can connect with the school and other services has been critical during this period, because they have remained in touch with everyone.

We need broader, non-siloed thinking with regard to local community-based solutions that involve schools and PEF and align them with other available support. As that approach will look slightly different in each area, proactive engagement with the families will be critical. I would welcome it if a more meaningful approach to supporting and engaging families were seen as a core and critical use of PEF.

Bob Doris: Satwat Rehman just got to the nub of my question without my having to lead the witnesses down that particular road. Schools do not exist in a silo; they are anchors in the community and are already working with lots of third sector organisations. There are also parent councils, pupil groups and, indeed, a whole plethora of organisations around a school, and, now that PEF money has been guaranteed for four years, we have a real opportunity to carry out some key planning work and consultation with the local community to find out how best to tackle poverty and enhance attainment.

I think that that was what Satwat Rehman was saying. Do the other witnesses feel that that is how PEF should be used in the years to come?

Dr Morrison: Theoretically, yes, but it is more patchwork than pattern—that is the expression I would use. It is not the same everywhere. School clusters next door to each other can take very different approaches and have different levels of community engagement, parental involvement and commitment to learner voice and participation. Those things are way too dependent on the leadership or culture within a school. They are not embedded everywhere. That is one of the things that we will need to smooth out with UNCRC incorporation. It is unacceptable that a child or family can have one experience with an early learning centre and a different experience if they go to one five miles down the road.

We need to address such issues systemically. It is not okay—it is a bit of a lottery at the moment. There is no guarantee that a school that receives PEF money uses it in the way that you are describing. We need to think about that.

Bob Doris: That is helpful. There is obviously a contradiction between local independence and flexibility and consistency across local authorities and across Scotland.

Mr Dickie, do you have any comments? Convener, I will not come back in after that. This is my final question.

Dr Morrison: Inconsistency is not okay under UNCRC incorporation. The child's rights are the same whether they live in Dunbar, North Berwick, Glasgow or the Western Isles. We cannot be doing with inconsistency any more. It is not acceptable. The rights of the child mean that all

these things have to be consistent across the country, and there are means of redress when they are not. It is fine to have something that we want to call local accountability or power within a local system, but, overarching that, the Government is responsible for delivering equity of experience.

The Convener: Thank you Colin and Bob. We now go to Ross Greer.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): Convener, I think that John Dickie is looking to come in with a word on Bob Doris's final question.

The Convener: I am sorry, John.

John Dickie: I just want to add two points to what has already been said about PEF money. The first is about the importance of talking to children, young people and parents as part of the process of identifying the barriers that prevent them from being able to engage at school or in learning more broadly, using what they say as a starting point.

Secondly, PEF is one source of funding but it needs to work with the other sources of funding that support families in the community and the third sector more generally, as well as with the general funding settlement for schools. All that money needs to work together to ensure that we are providing a holistic package of support to families.

The Convener: Thank you for that. I apologise for cutting you off earlier. I now turn to Ross Greer.

Ross Greer: Before I go on to my main line of questioning, I will pick up on Colin Morrison's point about the UNCRC. During the bill process and since the bill was passed, everyone in the public sector and politics that I have encountered has broadly been speaking the same language about the UNCRC, but I am concerned that there is inconsistency in understanding how it will change the practice of service providers and so on. Colin Morrison made a valid point about the difference between local flexibility and inconsistency in compliance with rights. Do you think that there is a broad and consistent understanding across Scotland about what the UNCRC will actually mean for service providers and their practice?

Dr Morrison: No, there is very poor understanding of that at the minute. It is the responsibility of the people who have worked hard for it for all these years to make sure that people get support for that, whether it be professional knowledge or capacity building in a broader sense.

As an example, the Children's Parliament has two pieces of work on-going at the moment. One is called "How professionals make rights real". We are working with children and local professionals in Clackmannanshire and East Lothian to develop an approach and resource so that front-facing professionals understand what the convention means. Children and professionals are working together on that. Secondly, we are doing another piece of work in Aberdeen and Edinburgh that is called "Dignity in school". We are working with primary schools so that they can become hubs for human rights practice, and a resource will come out of that that people can use to support the journey, if I can use that word.

We are trying to help front-facing professionals understand how incorporation impacts on their day-to-day work. We try to do that in a way that includes them, because it can be a wee bit scary for people if they think that it is yet another initiative or it is going to bring radical changes. We need to help people to weave the principles through the rights-based things that they already intuitively do, so that they can begin to name those things as such. We also want to give them some support. We are talking about progressive realisation—there is no cliff edge. It will take a number of years to get incorporation right, so we want to get alongside people to do that.

Front-facing professionals either do not really understand what it means or have not, as yet, been given the support that they need to understand it. It is not about simply giving people training on, and an introduction to, the UNCRC—it is much more about how they do their job and what being a duty bearer means to them. We have a lot of work to do.

Ross Greer: We will probably want to return to that issue.

I go back to the deputy convener's line of questioning on the positive interventions that have been made over the past 18 months. Last week, the committee heard evidence from the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland. He made the point that the pandemic—perversely, given its overwhelmingly negative consequences—did allow for some breakthroughs and positive developments. For example, in some cases, remote learning gave schools an opportunity to connect with young people who were already disengaged from school, and with their families, in a way that they had not been able to do successfully before.

I am interested in hearing your thoughts on whether there have been any positive interventions or developments caused by the pandemic that we are now in danger of losing as we return to normal, whatever that means. Are there any particular changes in practice that, although they were caused by a change of circumstances that was overwhelmingly outwith our control, we should look to preserve because of the benefits that they brought about? I am thinking about developments beyond the stuff that John

Dickie mentioned, such as additional funding and free school meals. I am interested in changes in practice, in particular. Perhaps John can start on that.

John Dickie: I would hope that some of the things that we have learned from the pandemic are now being built in. For example, there is a recognition that children need devices and connectivity and support to ensure that they are able to engage in remote learning. It is not just about remote learning—part of the general package of learning is done at home, using devices, even when we are not in lockdown situations. There is a commitment to ensuring that every child has a device and connectivity, and it is now critical that the Government is held to account on that front and that it actually happens.

Another piece of learning from the pandemic, which I mentioned earlier, concerns the importance of cash-based responses and the recognition of the need for cash first. The most effective way of ensuring that families have resources is, in general, to ensure that they have more money so that they are able to make choices about whether that is spent on paying energy bills or on food, school clothing or what have you. There are some positive things to learn. We now need to ensure that we do not lose sight of the commitments that have been made over the past two years and that they are bedded into the system as mainstream approaches.

Satwat Rehman: I go back to the fact that, through necessity, we had to try different ways of connecting with, reaching and engaging people. As Ross Greer said, in some cases, that worked really well—for example, for those who might have been disengaged or who, for a number of reasons, found it more difficult to make their way physically to school. For others, however, it presented particular challenges.

I can give some anecdotal evidence. I know that the committee received evidence from Sally Cavers last week, in which she said that some of the children and young people who needed additional support for learning found it very difficult to engage with, and to absorb what was happening through, online learning, especially given the intensity of such sessions. One of the positives from the pandemic involves looking at how we use hybrid methods of learning. Many institutions now also have a greater understanding of home and family as a result of being in people's homes digitally and seeing what the conditions are like. We need to recognise how critical and core digital access is as we go forward.

11:30

We all experienced the pandemic differently. There were lots of anxieties for many of us, but they were intensified for the families that had real financial concerns and greater financial barriers as a result of the pandemic. A critical point for broader learning is that we consider how to ensure regular and predictable income for families.

John Dickie mentioned the Scottish child payment. That is one key mechanism that we need to look at when we consider how to support families on low incomes. We argue that, the quicker that can be doubled, the better it will be for families, because it will mean that they will have less stress and, therefore, that parents will be able to focus on other things. Recognising that as the bedrock for adequate, predictable and regular income will be critical to how we support children and young people to achieve the best outcomes that they can achieve, which is what we are all about.

However, there is learning about what has worked well for some and not so well for others. Families will tell us about that. Schools will also be able to tell us about some of it, as will the work that Colin Morrison spoke about.

We must consider how we integrate hybrid ways of working and supporting young people. If a pupil finds walking into school really anxiety inducing, how can we get them into the classroom virtually? We have shown that it is possible; we now need to ensure that we have the tools, connectivity and, most important in some ways, support for the families. We had technical hitches in this meeting and there was a team working to get us through them. If a technical hitch happens at home, families need to be able to access someone for support. We need to equalise access in those ways. There is an opportunity to see how we can do that.

Dr Morrison: A point of learning for us has been that parents and carers have begun to value themselves a bit more as educators, which they are—they are the primary educators. During lockdown, although I am sure that not every day was good, they began to realise that play, baking and getting out on bikes, for example, are fundamental to a child's development. The problem is that many of those things also come with costs, which can be difficult for a family that is struggling financially. We saw other third sector organisations working hard to ensure that kids could get a bike or had ingredients for baking.

For families who had the means, those moments were important. We should continue to verbalise our acknowledgement of parents and carers as educators, but we also need to be involved with families so that we understand when

they do not have those extra things. It is not only about, for example, a child having to take ingredients to school if they are doing home economics, which would be an issue relating to the cost of the school day, but about whether it is possible for them to do such things at home as part of their learning.

We have had an insight into family life as educators that we need to remember and not lose sight of.

Satwat Rehman: It is also important to understand the other priorities for, and pressures on, families and parents. Although someone might have been furloughed or working from home, that might no longer be the case. We need to be able to work with whatever the family situation is. One size does not fit all, so, when we consider hybrid models, we need to recognise the other responsibilities and requirements that parents have—particularly single parents who do not have anyone to share any of those requirements and responsibilities with—and not add layers of pressure on families.

The Convener: That brings us to the end of our evidence-taking session. I thank John Dickie, Dr Colin Morrison and Satwat Rehman for their evidence, which has been very useful and insightful.

We were to have been joined by Matt Crilly, who is the president of the National Union of Students Scotland, but, for reasons that are completely beyond his control, he was not able to join us for the meeting. We have met him before and we look forward to meeting him again. It is appropriate that I congratulate him specially, because he graduated from the University of Strathclyde earlier this week. I say well done to him. He is now in the *Official Report* with our congratulations.

The public part of the meeting is now at an end. I ask members to reconvene on Microsoft Teams to allow us to consider our final agenda items in private.

11:35

Meeting continued in private until 12:23.

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