Education, Children and Young People Committee

10th Meeting, 2021 (Session 6), Wednesday 24 November

Covid-19 pandemic: Impact on children and young people

Introduction

The Committee is scrutinising the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on children and young people. The Committee will be taking oral evidence at Committee meetings in November and December before undertaking further engagement in early 2022.

The Committee, at this meeting, will take evidence on the impact of the pandemic on children and young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Committee meeting

The Committee will take evidence from—

- John Dickie, Director, Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland;
- Dr Colin Morrison, Co-Director, Children's Parliament;
- Matt Crilly, President, National Union of Students Scotland; and
- Satwat Rehman, CEO, One Parent Families Scotland.

Supporting Information

Written submissions have been provided by the Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland; Children's Parliament; National Union of Students Scotland; and One Parent Families Scotland. These are provided at **Annexe A** to this paper.

A SPICe briefing to support this evidence session is at **Annexe B.**

Gemma Cheek
Assistant Clerk
Education, Children and Young People Committee
19 November 2021

Annexe A

Education, Children and Young People Committee

10th Meeting, 2021 (Session 6), Wednesday 24 November

Impact of Covid 19 on Children and Young People from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds

This paper provides the submissions from some of the witness organisations for the meeting on 24 November 2021.

- Children's Parliament
- Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG)
- National Union of Students (NUS)
- One Parent Families Scotland (OPFS)

Children's Parliament

Children's Parliament contribution regarding the impact of Covid-19 on children

Within the broad scope of the Committee's interests we hope this information is of interest. We look forward to contributing to discussion. We are unable to bring children with us, but we will strive to bring learning from them to the meeting.

Children's lived experience: 2020
The Children's Parliament national survey *How are you doing?* provided children age 8 to 14 with an opportunity to report on learning, life at home, friendships, worries, what makes them feel better and their physical and mental health and wellbeing. Surveys were conducted throughout 2020 in April (4000 responses), May (3698 responses), June (2810 responses) and October (1969 responses). The surveys consisted of a set of statements with an agree/disagree scale. Throughout this period MCPs (Members of Children's Parliament) also reported as journalists on personal experiences via the *Corona Times Journal*. Children and Coronavirus - Children's Parliament (childrensparliament.org.uk)

Here we summarise key learning from the 2020 programme.

As the first period of 'lockdown' came to an end in June the conclusion drawn was that most children did not like the home-learning model and many struggled to engage. Some of this was about not having the tech required in those early months, but many children known to Children's Parliament who had been struggling with school and learning anyway simply got lost in those early months. From our survey we learned that only a minority of children felt that they had a choice in what they were learning, and there were increased levels of boredom and a decline in the numbers of children who reported having fun things to do in their days. Across the initial lockdown period children were less likely to '*try their hardest*' or '*feel pride*' in what they did. Doing school work became something that children worried about increasingly. By summer 2020 Children's Parliament was identifying that whatever model of home or blended learning was to be used in the school year 20/21, the experience of children suggested there was much work to be done to improve the offer and how children were supported.

As we reflect on learning during 2020 we also need to acknowledge the broader context, and through the year we learned much from children about mental health and wellbeing, exploring mood and a sense of self-efficacy in terms of health choices. Throughout those months children reported a decline in mental wellbeing, fewer generally felt cheerful and in a good mood and they had less energy. Children told us they felt increasingly lonely and less sure that 'even if I am having a difficult time, I feel I will be okay'.

Children also became increasingly worried about a number of things. As time passed, they worried more. Most children had someone at home or external to their family to speak to, but a significant minority indicated they do not have anyone. Children also identified a number of things that supported their wellbeing and help them feel good but as time passed children identified fewer things that made them

feel good. A significant number of children reported a sedentary lifestyle during lockdown.

All of these factors may have longer term impacts on physical and mental health and wellbeing and so learning.

Our survey work and Journal pointed to a particularly significant negative affect of lockdown on girls aged 12 to 14 years old. Girls in the early years of secondary school were *most likely* to feel bored, to feel lonely and to say that that there are a lot of things that they worry about in life and to worry about their own health. They were *least likely* to report having fun things to do in their day, or be proud of things they can do. They were *least likely* to feel they have a choice in what they are learning, to feel cheerful or in a good mood or to feel that even if things are difficult, they know they will be okay.

As we published the final data in November 2020, we were more aware than ever that there is no simple path for what might be considered recovery, although we hoped that the return to school and reconnecting with friends and some family members might see some improvements. Reporting late 2020 we found that some aspects of life were improving, but some were not. This left us with a strong sense that rather than identify that some things became problematic *because of lockdown*, perhaps lockdown simply exacerbated or just exposed what was already there, what was already troubling about children's lives. So, by way of some examples and with a focus on school and learning, late in 2020:

- Only 43% of children agreed to some extent with the statement: '*I feel like I have a choice in what I am learning'*. In a system committed to learner empowerment and participation this leaves much to do.
- While 81% of children agreed to some extent with the statement '*When I do something I try my hardest',* 19% did not. This matters, because to be a successful learner requires a level of intrinsic motivation.
- The statement '*I enjoy learning new things'* is an expression of optimism about learning. While 75% of children agreed to some extent the remainder, 25% of children did not.
- The statement '*I know there are things I am good at'* helps us explore learner self-perception and confidence, we are interested in this because when it comes to learning ability alone is not enough, how we think about ourselves matters too. While we can be heartened by the fact that 89% of children agree to some extent, this tells is an important minority do not. As identified earlier this is another area in which girls age 12, 13 and 14 were least likely to agree.
- When asked about what they worry about 40% of children told us they worried about doing school work and 51% worried about exams; considering the age of respondents it is concerning that children so young have worries about exams as part of their educational experience.

Poverty
Poverty is the greatest of rights infringements. It is about low income for a family but it is also about other forms of deprivation and a loss of dignity and respect. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation reminds us that using human rights as a lens through which to view poverty entails a shift from *needs* to *socially and legally guaranteed*

entitlements and from *charity* to *duty*[1]. Our *How are you Doing?* surveys tracked the experience of poverty by asking children aged 8 to 14 whether they agreed/disagreed with the statement *I think my parents/carers worry about having enough money for our family*: 29% of children agreed. We also asked children if they ever worried about a number of things, one of which was *money problems.* During the first months of lockdown 17% of children identified this as a worry. By our October survey this had risen to 23%.

What might any notion of educational recovery look like?
First of all we need to centre our thoughts and actions, our intent, on learners. This needs to focus on **relationships** and **rights**. We are concerned that a narrative framed by the idea of *lost learning* focuses more on the needs of the system to be seen to be meeting arbitrary results in terms of attainment regarding literacy or numeracy or exam results. Recovery will not be evidenced by improved test results in a spreadsheet.

Relationships
At Children's Parliament, when we work with children we talk about rights based relationships. They are based on kindness, empathy, trust and the core idea that runs through all human rights instruments, human dignity. When children and adults learn what human dignity means to them this is transformational. We have a strong sense that teaching and learning through 2020, in the face of all the challenges, became more focused on relationships, on looking out for each other, and maintaining nurturing, loving human relationships. It is as if many educators either remembered or felt empowered to explicitly acknowledge that teaching and learning are relational. When learners feel seen, they connect with the teacher and with learning.

We cannot underestimate the pressures and stress on school staff as they manage the complex mitigations required this past year, whilst also being individuals with their own worries and anxieties about the pandemic. But it is concerning that we are hearing from teaching colleagues and support staff that the space they created in the past 18 months to focus on wellbeing and on the needs of the most vulnerable is being squeezed because of pressures around attainment.

Rights
Being rights focused means building a system that is directed to the purposes described in Article 29 of the UNCRC. With incorporation, the will of the Scottish Parliament, this becomes law. Children's Parliament is working alongside colleagues to focus on building understanding and capacity in schools and early learning establishments to understand what must be done, this is not negotiable, the child's rights are a minimum set of entitlements, sometimes referred to as *the floor not the ceiling.*

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[1] Poverty, inequality and human rights https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/poverty-inequality-and-human-rights

> **Article 29** 1. States Parties agree that the education of the child shall be directed to:
> (a) The development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential;
> (b) The development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and for the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations;
> (c) The development of respect for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or she may originate, and for civilizations different from his or her own;
> (d) The preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin;
> (e) The development of respect for the natural environment.

It is in this Article that we see recovery. All the problematic aspects of what has been reported through 2020 and into 2021 are addressed by an educational experience so defined. When we design, resource and deliver *this* educational experience for every child then we fulfil our responsibilities as duty bearers and children experience their rights as rights holders.

What does education recovery look like from the learner's perspective?
From work in the past year, the following calls to action have been shared by MCPs. They are not the full detail of what children have called for in two major reports[2] but provided as *examples of what children want from the system*; they make a rights based school experience very real. Why wouldn't we commit to these actions and others like them as the essence of educational recovery?

- Make sure teachers love and care for children and enjoy working with them.
- Help every child feel comfortable and confident to ask for help and support.
- Make sure every school has a safe private space where children can talk to an adult if they are worried, upset or having a difficult time.
- Have specialist art and PE teachers for every school and nursery.
- Make sure teachers do not shout at children. If a child is upset, struggling in class or needs support, make sure teachers take time to understand how they can help them.
- Create, repair and improve play and outdoor spaces and more learning outdoors.
- Make a commitment to involving children in decisions that affect them.
- Create opportunities for adults to learn from children about listening, being kind and respecting children's human rights.

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[2] Children's Parliament Investigates our Health and Wellbeing Curriculum (PSE Review) September 2020 Our_HWB_Curriculum_(2020) (childrensparliament.org.uk)
Ask us how we are: Children's Parliament Investigates Mental Health and Wellbeing for Comhairle nan Eilean Siar July 2021 CP_MHWB_WI2021_Online.pdf (childrensparliament.org.uk)

- Make learning about mental, emotional and physical wellbeing a regular part of timetabled classes. Listen to children's experiences and feelings through regular check-ins, talking about feelings and learning how to manage emotions. It should be like this for all children, not just when a great teacher thinks it is a good approach.
- Praise children, encouraging them to be the best they can be.

As an example of one MCPs reflections on a teacher they love:

"So my teacher knows what children like and doesn't get mad. He's engaged in any learning; he's not like some teachers, who sit down, give you a sheet and that's it. He actually engages and does fun stuff. He's not one of the teachers who doesn't give you help during the class. If you need help or if you ask him about anything, he'll try to respond the best he can and try to help you. He makes children feel good about themselves and everything is happy and good around the teacher." MCP, age 11

<u>To conclude</u>
There is a plethora of work streams and actions coming out of reviews of Curriculum for Excellence, the roles and functions of major institutions in the education system, and of course work around pandemic recovery. Children's Parliament offers the view that unless there is some common thread that connects this work – and that the common thread is *relationships* and the *rights of the child* – we will fail to properly acknowledge the experience of children in the past 18 months, and find ourselves building a recovery that is about the system rather than the learner. In itself it is becoming a bit of a cliché but *building back* must not mean going back to how things were, because for many children that *normal* was not good enough.

Thanks: Our 2020 programme of work on the impact of coronavirus on children was supported by Scottish Government and Public Health Scotland.

Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG)

Education, Children and Young People Committee

The impact of COVID-19 on children and young people resident within deprived communities.

The Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) in Scotland works for the one in four children in Scotland growing up in poverty. We collect evidence from families living in poverty and campaign for solutions to bring about a society where children have a fair chance in life free from hardship. We provide training, advice and information on social security to frontline workers to make sure families get the financial support they need.

1. Child poverty: the context

Even before the COVID 19 crisis around one in four (260,000) children in Scotland were living in poverty.[3] The pandemic has hit low income families with children disproportionately hard, deepening poverty and dragging more families into severe financial insecurity. Although the committee's focus is on children and young people resident within deprived communities it should be noted that there are children living in poverty in every area of Scotland. Research shows that levels of child poverty across Scotland were rising before the pandemic and that child poverty is rising in every local authority area in Scotland. Some areas face particularly high levels of child poverty[4] and areas with already high levels of child poverty have faced some of the biggest increases over the last five years, with, for example, Glasgow experiencing an increase of more than five percentage points. Yet poverty affects children to a greater or lesser extent regardless of their geographical location and the places with the highest risk of poverty do not necessarily account for the greatest numbers of people living in poverty.[5] Action is needed from government to tackle the particular disadvantage young people face in the most deprived areas, at the same time as ensuring support reaches low income families living out with the most deprived areas.

Scottish government has set out a 'national mission' of ending child poverty and has set ambitious targets toward that end. In order to place Scotland on the path to meeting these targets and to protect children living in the most deprived communities from the worst impacts of the pandemic the Scottish child payment must be doubled in the upcoming budget. The introduction of the Scottish child payment in February 2021 has already made a significant difference to the financial situation of many low-income families across Scotland. However, unless the commitment to double the payment is accelerated the evidence[6] is clear that statutory targets to reduce child poverty by 2023/24 will not be met,[7] compounding the impact of the pandemic for children in poverty across Scotland, many of whom are living in deprived communities. Meeting the child poverty target for 2030 will require much broader

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[3] https://www.gov.scot/policies/poverty-and-social-justice/child-poverty/

[4] https://www.lboro.ac.uk/news-events/news/2021/may/dramatic-rise-in-child-poverty/

[5] *Who Lives in Poverty,* McKendrick and Treanor, Poverty in Scotland 2021.

[6] Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2021) https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/turning-tide-child-poverty-scotland

[7] https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2017/6/crossheading/targets-relating-to-child-poverty/enacted

action including on childcare, affordable housing, employment and transport. By doubling the payment now, government will create a firm foundation on which to build broader action contributing to the national mission and ensuring children in low income families have the support they need.

2. The impact of Covid-19

The pandemic has further exposed that low-income families with children are particularly vulnerable to health and economic shocks. Analysis by IPPR Scotland during the pandemic found that just under half (49%) of households with dependent children in Scotland were in the two most serious categories of financial stress, compared to a third of households more generally.[8] It is clear that women have borne the brunt of the pandemic economically and, because they are often primary carers for children, this has impacted on child poverty. Evidence from Close the Gap finds that job disruption will disproportionately impact women because men and women tend to do different types of work, and that those in low-paid jobs will be particularly affected.[9] Women are disproportionately affected by the need for more unpaid care due to ongoing periods of isolation and children being sent home from school, impacting their ability to do paid work, and are less likely to do a job that can be done from home, creating increased risk to their job retention and financial security. This is highlighted by these case studies from our Early Warning System which collects and analyses case evidence about how changes to the benefit system are affecting the wellbeing of children, their families and the communities and services that support them:

A client with two children who had been furloughed, has now been told that she is expected back at work at the beginning of June. When she explained that she doesn't have any childcare, she was told that she will have to take unpaid leave. #751 (07/05/20)

A lone parent key worker has been unable to get childcare for her two children as the local provision is full. She took two weeks sick leave but has been on unpaid leave ever since. She has been advised to claim UC just now and that she may lose her job if she cannot get childcare sorted out. #719 (06/05/20)

Research from Children's Neighbourhoods Scotland demonstrates that although all children in low income families require support, children in neighbourhoods with high levels of pre-existing poverty and social deprivation were more vulnerable to the negative social and economic effects of lockdown and the extended period of recovery including increased income insecurity, greater reliance on the benefit system and barriers to accessing the labour market. This same research has shown the extent to which the pandemic has led to a rapid increase in the number of people across Glasgow accessing universal credit and the long term impact the pandemic will have both on family incomes and health outcomes.[10]

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[8] https://www.ippr.org/blog/covid-19-how-are-families-with-children-faring-so-far
[9] https://www.closethegap.org.uk/content/resources/One-Year-On---How-COVID-19-is-impacting-womens-employment-in-Scotland.pdf
[10] Bynner, C., McBride, M., Weakley, S., Ward, S. McLean, J. (2020) The impact of COVID-19 on families, children and young people in Glasgow. Glasgow: Children's Neighbourhoods Scotland.

Children growing up in deprived areas face additional barriers to accessing support and services which too often results in worse outcomes in terms of education, health and wellbeing. This has been seen both before and over the course of the pandemic. A child growing up in one of Scotland's most deprived communities is 40% less likely than their least deprived peers to leave school with 1 or more awards at SCQF 6 or above.[11] This education gap begins early with children living in more deprived areas less likely than their more advantaged peers to attend an early learning and childcare (ELC) provider with 'very high' or 'excellent' staffing grades.[12] Access to health services in deprived communities is poor, with 8% more patients per GP than the overall average.[13] These inequalities have played out over the course of the pandemic with the death rate from Covid-19 in the most deprived areas of Scotland being more than double that of the rate found in the least deprived communities.[14]

2.0 Impact on Education

CPAG in Scotland's Cost of the School Day project helps schools identify and reduce the financial barriers that prevent children in poverty from fully participating in school life. To understand how the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted children's experience of learning, Cost of the School Day conducted research through surveys and interviews. This research gathered the experiences of 3,600 parents and carers, along with 1,300 children and young people, with an emphasis on the experiences of low-income households, and found that the cost burdens of school closures have fallen most heavily on families already living on a low income.[15]

2.1 Barriers to education during lockdown

Lockdown forced learning from schools into children and young people's homes. Although some families were well-equipped for this transition with separate rooms and desks, adequate resources and parents on hand to help, it is clear from CPAG Cost of the School Day Learning in Lockdown surveys that this was not the case for all families responding to the surveys. Many families on low incomes struggled to meet the additional costs of resources that were suddenly required for learning, most often ICT equipment. Children in receipt of free school meals were more likely to report sharing devices at home and using mobile phones to complete school work. One parent responding to the survey said:

"We use my phone to do everything we do not have a computer/laptop and a lot of things are not compatible. A lot of things we have to write out as we do not have a printer and using a phone isn't ideal."

Parents reported that a lack of equipment and space to study led to worries about 'keeping up' with learning and the knock-on effect this had on wellbeing. Some pupils

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[11] https://www.gov.scot/publications/closing-poverty-related-attainment-gap-report-progress-2016-2021/pages/8/
[12] https://www.gov.scot/publications/changes-early-learning-childcare-use-outcomes-age-5-comparing-two/pages/8/
[13] Public Health Scotland, https://scotland.shinyapps.io/ScotPHO_profiles_tool/
[14] https://www.opendata.nhs.scot/dataset/covid-19-in-scotland/resource/a965ee86-0974-4c93-bbea-e839e27d7085
[15] The Cost of Learning in Lockdown, June 2020 and March 2021. CPAG in Scotland.

talked about noisy family members, such as siblings and parents working from home, distracting them from their schoolwork, while others described working on bedroom floors or from their laps. Some children told us they felt unable to ask parents for help and parents reported not having the time, confidence or guidance to support children with learning. Among families with lower incomes who said they were missing resources, around one in three said they did not have appropriate IT equipment for home learning, meaning that these pupils were more likely to be missing out on the experiences that peers were finding most enriching. These activities included virtual sports days, making rainbows for windows and sharing messages with classmates. Half of the families struggling with missing resources reported that no one had asked if they had everything they need to learn from home.

However, families who have received support from schools in obtaining devices described how valuable this was. One parent responding to the survey said:

"School has been a great support, phoning asking if there is anything they can do to help you support the kids and speak to the kids. We got offered help with devices. The primary school, I think they applied for extra iPads and the school were able to shortfall anybody that was struggling."

Parents and children reported stress associated with adapting to online learning platforms. Missing resources contributed to stress and worry as children could not complete the work that had been set for them. Pupils often reported feeling overwhelmed by the amount of work which was being set by schools. The need for increased emotional and pastoral support along with regular and consistent communication from teachers were highlighted as ways of helping young people cope while connecting them with their teachers and their learning.

2.2 Barriers to financial support for families

In our research, one in three parents and carers who tried to access support reported that they found identifying and accessing financial support 'difficult' or 'very difficult.' There was a high level of frustration reported from families who did not qualify for help but were really struggling because of considerable changes to their household income. Parents and carers said they would have liked both further financial support and more information and clarity about which benefits, and grants families were entitled to and how they could access them. Families were struggling with additional costs of having children at home including food, electricity, gas and learning resources and did not always feel supported in accessing the support which they needed.

Families highlighted how crucial support was from their schools in signposting and supporting them to apply for entitlements. The impact that this had underlines the value of these supportive and poverty aware approaches in schools. Families also appreciated simple automated processes that meant they received their entitlements without having to negotiate new or complex systems at a difficult time.

2.3 Free school meal replacements

Free school meal replacements were highly valued, especially direct cash payments which allowed flexibility, dignity, safety and convenience. However not all families who would benefit from free school meals currently have access to them. We welcome the commitment to universal free school meals for all primary school pupils by August 2022 and pilots in secondary free school meal provision but during the pandemic and currently, many families sitting just above the eligibility threshold found themselves struggling with additional costs due to the pandemic without the support that free school meals would provide. Families used to receiving universal free school meals but not entitled to alternative provision noted that this caused a significant increase to their costs. Breakfast clubs and after-school activities being cancelled resulted in further additional costs and challenges for some families.

In our update research in March 2021, low income families reported that they were more concerned about money than in spring 2020, with 90% spending more on essential bills while children were at home. The support provided, including free school meal replacements and hardship payments, during the October break and Christmas holidays was hugely valued and the Scottish child payment bridging payments now in place are providing valuable support for eligible families.

3.0 Recommendations

COVID-19 job losses and income drops have hit already struggling families hard. Schools have seen more and more of their children and families facing the stress, anxiety and relentless pressures involved in living on a low income.

The Scottish child payment was introduced in February 2021 and has begun to provide much needed financial support to low income families across Scotland. Providing cash support for hard up families is the single most effective way of ensuring that children and young people living in poverty have the resources they need. Alongside further support for low income families in schools, an immediate doubling of the Scottish child payment is the most effective way of ensuring families have the cash they need to provide stability for their children.

Building on the additional support that the Scottish child payment must provide there are steps that can be taken to ensure children and families living in poverty are supported, including:

- Providing clear and consistent financial information for schools from local authorities.[16]
- Embedding welfare rights in schools to ensure that families have support to maximise their incomes. This can be done through robust referral systems or by embedding or co-locating Financial Inclusion Support Officers as has been trialled in several areas across Scotland including Glasgow.
- Simplifying processes for applying for school age entitlements, with automation being pursued as a priority.

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[16] This is an example from Edinburgh which could be modelled across the country.

- Poverty aware schools actively taking steps[17] to reduce financial pressure on families by reducing costs, maximising incomes and providing non-stigmatising support.
- Continue to encourage and support cash first approaches to, for example, free school meal replacement during school holidays. Families told us that they favour cash over in-kind or voucher support.
- A continued focus on ensuring children from low income households have straightforward access to appropriate devices and connectivity for home learning.

Information on the wider employment, childcare, housing and social security interventions needed to end child poverty can be found in CPAG in Scotland's Programme for Government 2021-26.

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[17] For example, using the Cost of the School Day Toolkit

NUS Scotland

Education and Skills Committee Briefing

Introduction

NUS Scotland welcomes the opportunity to submit a briefing to the Education and Skills committee and recognises the unique challenges facing students and young people as a result of the current global pandemic. NUS Scotland is a federation of over 32 students' associations in Scotland with member associations stretching from the borders to the highlands. We work to promote, defend and extend the rights of students and apprentices in Scotland.

Good progress has been made in widening access to further and higher education to students from the most deprived backgrounds. According to the Fair Access Commissioner's report, "Covid-19: Impact on fair access to higher education interim report", Covid-19 has exposed and exacerbated existing inequalities in access to higher education. We cannot afford for Covid-19 to derail this progress toward widening access or for Scotland to fall behind.

We are calling on the Scottish Government to support students from the most deprived backgrounds to gain a place and stay in further and higher education. This requires holistic support with a student housing strategy, cost of living support and a student mental health action plan.

Student Poverty

For too long students have had to get by on cost-of-living support that doesn't keep up with the cost of learning. In Scotland the reality is that students across Scotland are experiencing homelessness, taking on commercial debt and bank loans and using foodbanks just to make ends meet. We need to see proper financial support for them to meet the cost of learning, and to succeed in their studies.

The Mental Health Foundations 'Thriving Learners' report (November 2021)[18] surveying over 15,000 students found that in the last twelve months **over a fifth (21.5%) of students worried about running out of food**, **nearly a quarter (23.5%) ate less due to a lack of resources or money** and **7.2% were in households that ran out of food**. The number of respondents worried about running out of food is significantly higher than the last reported Scottish national figure (9%) which was collated pre-pandemic. Overall, food poverty among students, particularly older students, is a huge rising concern and is acutely important in light of the widening access agenda.

NUS Scotland's own research from July 2021[19] found that 12 per cent of Scotland's students are using foodbanks, 27 per cent rely on credit cards, and 9 per cent turned to bank loans. Nearly three in four (72 per cent) of students expressed concern

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[18] Thriving Learners- Realising student potential and wellbeing, Mental Health Foundation, 2021: https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/scotland/supporting-students-thrive
[19] Coronavirus Student Survey Scotland Report, NUS Scotland 2021

about their ability to manage financially. By contrast, only a small minority of students surveyed had received support from their institutions through discretionary funds.

In addition, Scottish Government YouGov[20] research from 2017 showed that those in the lowest household income brackets were more likely to supplement the cost of living through taking on additional debt.

Now is the time for a long-term plan to rebuild a fairer and more equal education system that empowers and protects students. We need permanent solutions which will fix a fundamentally broken student support system and ensure students have access to support all year round – not simply more hardship funding. NUS Scotland made this clear in our budget submission that we simply cannot wait any longer for the Scottish Government to put an end to a system that leaves students without support over the summer months and fails to meet the cost of living. There are just 148 days between this year's budget announcement and the day most students will receive their last financial support payment before the summer break. It is within the power of this Scottish Government to end student summer poverty for good by delivering a student summer payment.

Student Housing

Scotland is facing a student housing emergency driven by a shortage of available accommodation and soaring rents. These housing shortages though exacerbated by the pandemic pre-date Covid-19. Recent research conducted by NUS Scotland in July 2021[21] showed that 17% of students have been unable to pay their rent in full over the last four months and 20% have been unable to pay their bills in over four months. We have also seen rising homelessness amongst the student population.

NUS Scotland believes that decision-makers have a duty to consider how housing policy can complement, rather than undermine, further and higher education widening access policy as the current cost of renting student housing is unaffordable to the majority of students.

The Scottish Government has committed to the first steps to improving cost-of-living support available to Scotland's students. However, unless rent is controlled and affordable, any additional income students receive will be transferred directly into the pockets of landlords. Fundamentally, we remain concerned that too many students are being put in a position where they are working more hours than are recommended just so they can afford their rent, undermining their ability to successfully complete their studies. If students are being priced out of the institution of their choice, or education as a whole, because of exorbitant rents, the full potential of widening access will not be realised. It is crucial that widening access policies include supporting students from all backgrounds into affordable accommodation to help them stay in education.

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[20] Student Support Review, YouGov Survey, 2017:
https://www.gov.scot/publications/independent-review-student-financial-support-scotland/pages/11/
[21] Coronavirus Student Survey Scotland Report, NUS Scotland 2021

NUS Scotland is calling for the Scottish Government to bring forward a student housing strategy for Scotland as promised, as well as the introduction of rent controls in the private rental sector, including in Purpose Built Student Accommodation (PBSA). We are additionally calling for an enhancement of the rights of tenants living in PBSA.

Mental Health

NUS Scotland's latest COVID-19 student survey (conducted in August 2021) found that 49 per cent of students believed that their mental health was worse than pre-pandemic. This has been confirmed by research of 15,000 students in Scotland conducted by Universities Scotland and the Mental Health Foundation. Their survey found almost three quarters of university students surveyed (74 per cent) had low wellbeing.

In his 2021 Annual Report the Commissioner for Fair Access acknowledged that the pandemic has had the greatest impact on students from deprived backgrounds: *"Financial hardship and declining mental health, although they have affected all students, are likely to have the greatest impact on students from socially deprived backgrounds. They rely more on part-time jobs, the supply of which has been reduced by the pandemic, to pay their way through higher education."[22]*

Indeed, concerned about money are themselves a driver for poorer mental health amongst students. Research conducted by NUS Scotland's student mental health project, Think Positive, a survey of over 3,000 students found that pre-pandemic almost half (48.92%) believed lack of money or financial pressures had a negative impact on their mental health[23].

The Think Positive research also found that students found it difficult to access services and often waited too long to receive them. Of those students surveyed who used a support service, institutional or external (e.g. NHS or third sector), more than half (59.6%) had to wait to access the support they needed. For those students who had to wait just over half (53.8%) waited more than a month.

Since the beginning of the pandemic NUS Scotland have successfully made the case to the Scottish Government for additional funding to support the mental health of students, winning over £5,000,000 for colleges and universities. This is in addition to ongoing funding to increase the number of counsellors in institutions and £750,000 for students' associations.

However, much of this funding was provided as an emergency response to the pandemic with no promises of further funding. Additional funding for counsellors is also due to end next year, creating a financial cliff-edge for these services. While the vast majority of students' associations used the additional funding provided to

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[22] Annual Report, Commissioner for Fair Access, 2021: https://www.gov.scot/publications/re-committing-fair-access-plan-recovery-annual-report-2021/documents/
[23] Improving Mental Health and Wellbeing Support for Scotland's Students, Think Positive, 2020: https://www.thinkpositive.scot/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Improving-mental-health-and-wellbeing-support-for-Scotland.pdf

support health and wellbeing (72.2%), no repeat of this funding has yet been promised either.

NUS Scotland agree with both Colleges Scotland and Universities Scotland that funding to increase counselling provision should be extended beyond next year. We have also called on the Scottish Government to provide further funding to students' associations in the coming year to support student wellbeing.

We also need to Scottish Government to bring forward a Student Mental Health Action Plan, as they have committed to, which addresses waiting times, ensures equity of access to counsellors and embeds mental health and wellbeing into the curriculum.

Digital poverty

The pivot to online learning has been more difficult for many young people from deprived communities as a result of the digital divide that already existed pre-pandemic. As the Commissioner for Fair Access has stated students from socially deprived backgrounds have, *"More limited access to appropriate resources to access online learning – computers, connectivity and safe and dedicated study space at home. Despite the best efforts of institutions and help from the Government, a yawning 'digital divide' remains at both school and higher education level."*

In response to our calls for further funding to address this gap in 2020-21, the Scottish Government provided £5 million for colleges and universities to support students to access online learning. We were also pleased that the Scottish Government made a commitment for annual funding of £5 million for this purpose in this year's Programme for Government. However, while it is now almost three months since many colleges returned, this funding has not been forthcoming.

Meanwhile, 1 in 10 respondents (10.3%) to the Thriving Learners research[24] felt that they did not have adequate internet access where they lived to engage with university and friends online.

With the Scottish Government now asking colleges and universities to continue online learning into the next year, it is vital that further funding to support students to get online is provided as a matter of urgency.

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[24] Thriving Learners- Realising student potential and wellbeing, Mental Health Foundation, 2021: https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/scotland/supporting-students-thrive

One Parent Families Scotland (OPFS)

One Parent Families Scotland[25] is the leading organisation working with single parent families in Scotland. Building on over seventy-five years of advocacy and service delivery expertise, OPFS provides single parent tailored information, advice and support, along with training activities, employability programmes and flexible childcare.

Our vision is of a Scotland in which single parents and their children are valued and treated equally and fairly. Single parents are involved at various levels in OPFS. In this submission we have used the experiences and input of single parents, experts by experience, to inform our evidence.

OPFS delivers 'support for families' services in 5 local authority areas and provides a unique national, specialist information and advice service to single parents and practitioners on key single parent issues. Information, advice, and support can be accessed through a range of multi-channel options. In 2020 /21 OPFS supported over 7,000 parents, children, and young people across Scotland. OPFS campaigns with parents to make their voices heard to change the systems, policies and attitudes that cause child poverty.

We support single parents who face daily struggles, often on their own with no support network in place, adapting to challenges and putting the needs of their children before their own. In this current landscape, with so many evolving issues, our work is for, influenced, and inspired by the strength shown by single parents before and during the coronavirus pandemic.

To ensure we understand the impact of Covid 19 on the families we work with we implemented a 'COVID-19 Single Parent Family Impact Monitoring System' gathering the experiences of single parents through our local and national channels to capture key areas of concern.[26] We track and communicate key service responses and policy relevant issues arising from direct work with single parents. This ongoing feedback provided us with evidence which show the key issues are low income, family need, parent and child mental health and wellbeing and domestic and financial abuse.

Single Parent Families

Poverty and isolation have an impact on parent's and children's wellbeing, causing stress, anxiety, and poor mental health. The challenge of being both sole carer and breadwinner has been magnified by the impact of the present Covid 19 crisis. We know from research by Caledonian University that 84% of single parents reported being lonely before lockdown. Isolation, loneliness, and poverty have a significant impact on mental health - causing anxiety, low mood, and depression.[27]

The Covid-19 pandemic has intensified the deep inequalities already felt by low income single parents and their children, with the impact of job losses on sectors

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[25] https://opfs.org.uk/
[26] One Parent Families Scotland (opfs.org.uk)
[27] https://www.opfs.org.uk/policy-doc/community-connections-briefing-papers/

such as retail, care and cleaning where single parents (predominantly women) are employed, along with a decrease in availability of new roles. The pandemic emphasises the need for investment in single-parent focused support.

Single parent families face the potential for financial problems stretching beyond the immediate pandemic period. The crisis in employment brought about by Covid-19 is experienced differently based on class, gender and ethnicity with these factors contributing to who performs 'key work' and who is able to work from home.[28] Research suggests that the Covid-19 crisis will affect women adversely as they are 47% more likely to have lost their job, many of these women are single parents.[29]

Children in single parent families in Scotland are more likely to live in poverty, and for longer, than couple families. The proportion of children in single parent families living in poverty has been increasing in recent years. Most children in poverty in single parent families live with a parent who is not in work, in a family where there are young children, or where adults are also disadvantaged by health problems, lack of private transport or low qualifications. Where children in poverty in single parent families also live in a household where someone is disabled, or where there are three or more children, they are likely to be even more disadvantaged: this is important as many do so. A recent briefing from Public Health Scotland shows [30]

- Single Parent Families make up 25% of all families, and 92% are headed by women. Around 80% of single parents are aged between 25 and 50 years old and less than 1% are teenagers.[31]
- Most (65%) single parents with dependent children in Scotland are in paid employment
- Four in ten (90,000) children in poverty in Scotland live in a single parent family and
  39% of children in single parent families live in poverty.
- Two thirds of children in poverty in single parent families (66%) live in families where no one was in paid employment. A quarter (23%) live in families where the parent works part-time.
- Families often belong to more than one priority group. For example, among children in poverty: 40% of children in single parent families also have a disabled person at home; over half (54%) of children in a family with a younger mother are also in a single parent household.
- Single parent families are more likely to live in 'deprived areas'. In the 'most deprived' decile, more than five in 10 (53%) of families claiming Child Benefit are single parent families, while in the 'least deprived' decile, this is one in 10.

A recent survey of 1083 single parents across the UK found that 80% of single parents experienced discrimination and 96% wanted single parents added as a protected characteristic in the Equality Act [32]

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[28] Covid-19-and-inequalities-IFS.pdf
[29] Coronavirus Crossroads: Equal Pay Day 2020 report | The Fawcett Society
[30] Child Poverty in Scotland: priority groups - lone-parent families (publichealthscotland.scot)
[31] https://www.gingerbread.org.uk/what-we-do/media-centre/single-parents-facts-figures/
[32] Single Parent Discrimination Research & Lobbying — Single Parent Rights

The impact of Covid-19 on children and young people in Single Parent Families

This written response is based on the everyday experiences of single parents and their children living in the communities where OPFS has local services- Glasgow, North & South Lanarkshire, Falkirk, Dundee and Edinburgh. It also includes feedback from our national advice and information service which provides support and a listening ear to single parents across Scotland.

We would like to thank the committee for the opportunity to share the experience of single parent families of the impact of the pandemic. This submission will draw explicitly on the feedback from single parents themselves, their experiences during the crisis. Across our services we have heard how Covid has exacerbated stress and mental health issues for parents and their children who were already experiencing stress and pressures of living on a low income. Some families we work with do not have resources to meet their most basic needs. They tell us they feel exhausted by the stress of living on a low income intensified by the impact of the pandemic**.**

Often parents find themselves cutting back on the quality or quantity of food for themselves to ensure their children eat well. Having a safe place to sleep is one of the most basic of human needs, yet families affected by the benefit cap are struggling to secure their family home. Many of the parents engaging with OPFS have been affected by domestic abuse still ongoing or in the past. This results in the (mainly) single mothers affected having extremely low self-esteem and confidence.

Living on a low-income increase's parents' stress levels, increases social isolation and loneliness which in turn affecting relationships and child and family wellbeing. In the longer term, poverty affects parents and children's' health and wellbeing, limits their ability to live full and fulfilling lives and can affect their life chances. The diagram below has parent & child wellbeing at the heart and shows the interconnected issues which impact on this, with Covid- 19 intensifying existing disadvantages.
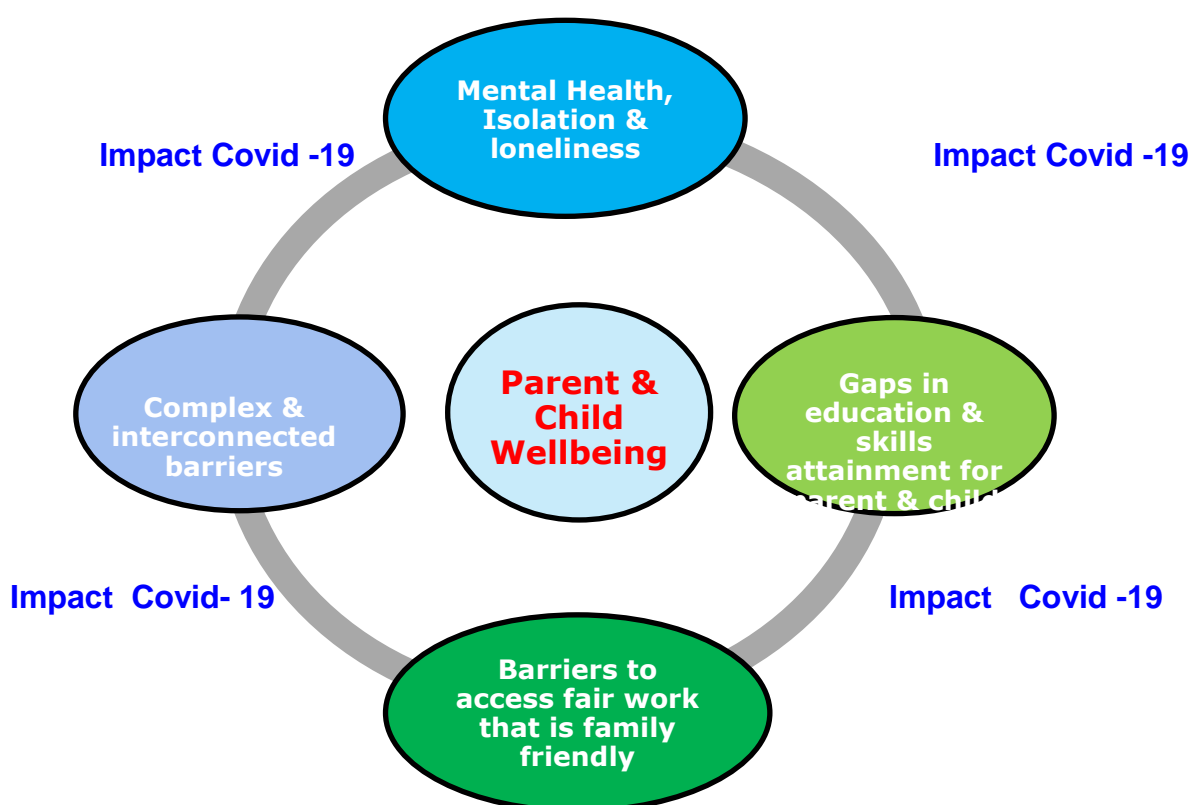
The normal coping strategies used by families on a low income have been badly disrupted by Covid-19. Parents and carers draw on and contribute to informal mechanisms of family and community support (for example visiting friends for a meal when money is short), and can turn to emergency support from local services (this now goes far beyond food banks, for example our local services often provide help with clothes, school uniforms, baby equipment etc. Many parents felt the increase pressure of extra cost with less income.

Research tell us that when the UK went into hard lockdown in March 2020, these mechanisms for navigating life on a low income suddenly became very difficult, if not impossible, to sustain.[33] For example, the restrictions on household mixing and non-essential trips removed the opportunities for direct family and community support, while much local authority provision was disrupted. Parents and carers on a low-income highlighted factor that impacted on family wellbeing since the pandemic began.

- Having children at home meant higher spending on food, energy and on ways to entertain or distract children when so many outdoor leisure activities were no longer an option.
- Remote schooling in particular has been very expensive for families that have had to buy a laptop, for example, or arrange for broadband access. Others just couldn't afford it so some children suffered the impact on their education as a result.
- The cost of certain items (most obviously food) has risen for many: promotions have been reduced and cheaper items are harder to obtain. Many families were forced to use more local but expensive stores to avoid public transport or to get groceries delivered, while charity shops have been harder to access.
- Restrictions on household mixing and non-essential trips constrained family and community support, while vital free services such as libraries were often closed over the period of lockdown and while restrictions were in place.
- Single parents unique situation was often not recognised for example we heard from parents who were turned away from supermarkets because they were accompanied by their children.
- Single parent families were often not included in the groups which were identified as being at risk by local authorities during lockdown, even though they were uniquely affected by being trapped at home with their children.

The experience of families with whom OPFS works with shines an unforgiving light on the absence of targeted, adequate support for families on a low income, who today face the ongoing impact of the insecurity of Covid-19 and increased financial pressure. It underlines how important it is to understand properly differential experiences across different groups in society

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[33] M Power, R Patrick, K Garthwaite & G Page, COVID realities - everyday life for families on a low income during the pandemic, July 2020

For example across all our services some of the families we work with have children who have been in care or on the edges of care and where the parent themselves is care experienced.(13% of parents using the Falkirk service are care experienced and 30% of the families have had some of their children removed, some are under Supervision Orders and some are under a Section 25 order.) The impact of Covid and the ongoing pressures has been particularly difficult for families in these situations.

The mental health impact of Covid on children has featured heavily in feedback across all of our services. For example, some parents told us the daily statistics of deaths and cases had "*caused turmoil for children's emotions*" with some reporting they were *"afraid and scared".*

In our Covid Impact Reports parents told us their children had feelings of anxiety about every aspect of their lives. They picked up on what their parents were going through and what was reflected in the news and on social media. Tensions caused by poverty, isolation and loneliness which had been bubbling under the surface in homes became intensified. In some cases, children experienced adverse childhood experiences for the first time.

Parents reported that their children have become more withdrawn that they were out of the way of socialising. With some children feeling they couldn't leave their bedroom, or their house and parents struggled to get children to go back to school. Some quotes describe these experiences:

One parent said about her son "the light went out in his eyes"

"The first two weeks of home-schooling were an absolute nightmare"

"I am worried about the future with my children."

"I am feeling lonely and anxious with everything that is going on just now"

"Lockdown has raised several issues in our family and both my daughter and my self's mental health has deteriorated. Managing this is a worry"

"My teenage son and I nearly came to blows because of the pressure of living with very little money and home-schooling during lockdown. I have no other family support. Where can I get support?"

"I have a child off school self-isolating. I have had a benefit check and I am getting what I am entitled to, but I do not have enough money to live on".

"I am having to stay off work because my child has to self-isolate due to someone at school. I cannot work from home. What are my employment rights, and can I get financial help while I am at home for 14 days?"

During lockdown and the ongoing impact of Covid-19 children had to stop doing all the vital things that are part of their everyday life, which are crucial to their wellbeing. Many were living with domestic violence, parental addiction, poor parental mental

health as well as acrimonious separations and poverty. During the darker periods of lockdown, the negative effect on isolated parents experiencing a lack of peer and family support was traumatic. Some families had been pushed into extreme poverty experiencing stigma, shame, and loss of self-esteem.

Consequently, the fallout from the current Covid-19 pandemic crisis has been significant. It has led to a range of interconnected problems such as, social, educational, health, financial and emotional. For many, the pandemic has reinforced pre-existing inequalities. It has been especially arduous for young people and children living in some of the poorest communities in our society.

We are concerned that the impact of this will result in a "tsunami" of mental health problems among children as a result of Covid 19.

Recommendations

Family Poverty
1. The Government should immediately re introduce the £20 a week uplift to Universal Credit (UC) it introduced in April 2020 with the increase being extended to those on legacy benefits and passed on in full to those subject to the benefit cap.
2. End the benefit cap and 2 child policies which increase child poverty in single parent families
3. The UK Government should provide greater support for families with children, whether delivered through Child Benefit or Universal Credit, to provide a decent level of support to families on a low income, and to prevent rising levels of hardship.
4. The Scottish Government should implement the increase in the Scottish Child Payment in 2022.
5. Missed schooling needs to be mitigated by higher funding for extra tuition for low income families as well as ensuring they have the tech and connectivity to learn at home.

Family Support
1. It's vital when thinking about children's mental health we consider it in the context of their wider circumstances. In particular their families circumstances as well as their relationships, with their parents, siblings and peers etc.
2. Empowering parents to support their children within the family is one of the most effective ways of enabling young people to overcome poor mental health.
3. Due to additional vulnerabilities some parents need support themselves to successfully support their children and their mental health. Support parents to be better positioned to be frontline support for their children
4. A degree of anxiety is normal, children and adults are anxious at times and most children and adults have the skills and abilities to be able to overcome these but when they impact our everyday lives we need to be able to support children and their parents.
5. it's vital to help children to build resilience and cope with stress and anxiety building their self-confidence and helpful social networks.

6. More investment is needed in mental health support for both parents and children.

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

The harmful effects of this pandemic will not be distributed equally. They will be most damaging for children in the poorest communities, and for those in already disadvantaged or vulnerable situations. The majority of single parents mainly women, are combining working with caring for their children – often with reduced or no support. Throughout the first lockdown, this was commonly experienced as an 'impossible balancing act', with single parents making constant trade-offs between their work and caring responsibilities. As restrictions ease single parents perceive an uncertain future, the key emerging issues for single parents and children include poverty and low income; digital exclusion; early years and school age education and childcare; stress, isolation and the impact on family wellbeing including mental health.

Every child should be able to have a home-cooked meal, a warm bed, clean clothing, and the chance to learn and play in their own home. But too many of our poorest children miss out on these essentials. It is widely felt by single parents that the unique challenges facing them and their children have not been sufficiently accounted for in policy and guidelines developed in response to the crisis. At OPFS we will continue to amplify the voices of families through their stories and participation.

One Parent Families Scotland

Education, Children and Young People Committee

24 November 2021

Covid 19: Deprivation

Introduction

This is the second meeting where the Committee will be considering the impact of, and response to, the pandemic. Last week, the Committee took evidence from panels on the topic of Additional Support for Learning. On 1 December the Committee will hear from representatives of local government.

One of the papers prepared for the 17 November meeting highlighted a number of publications that would be relevant for each of the three sessions on the impact of the pandemic.

This paper will briefly set out the broader policy framework on closing the attainment gap in Scotland; explore the particular impact of the pandemic on those from more deprived communities and households and look at the policy response to the pandemic and recovery.

Closing the attainment gap

The 2016-17 Programme for Government set out the Government's ambitions last session to close the poverty-related attainment gap. It said—

> "It is the defining mission of this Government to close the poverty-related attainment gap. We intend to make significant progress within the lifetime of this Parliament and substantially eliminate the gap over the course of the next decade. That is a yardstick by which the people of Scotland can measure our success." (p5)

To this end, the Scottish Government established a number of policies. Under the banner of the Attainment Scotland Fund were:

- From 2015-16 Challenge Authorities and Challenge Schools – selected on the basis of the proportion of children living in SIMD20 areas (the fifth most deprived areas based on SIMD methodology);

- From 2017 -18, Pupil Equity Funding, based on the proportion of children eligible for free school meals;

- From 2018-19 the Care Experienced Children and Young People Fund, aimed at improving outcomes for care experienced young people up to the age of 26.

- A range of national programmes which include support for staffing supply and capacity, professional learning and school leadership, Regional Improvement Collaboratives, and some third sector organisations.

As well as the targeted programmes or funding streams, closing the attainment gap is an overall aim of the education system. As such, the universal school education offer is intended to support the goal. In addition, one of the aims of the expansion of funded ELC to 1,140 hours is to improve children's outcomes and help close the poverty-related attainment gap.

The National Improvement Framework and Improvement Plan (NIF) sets out the vision for Scottish Education—

> "Our vision for education in Scotland Excellence through raising attainment: ensuring that every child achieves the highest standards in literacy and numeracy, as well as the knowledge and skills necessary to shape their future as successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens, and effective contributors; achieving equity: ensuring every child has the same opportunity to succeed, with a particular focus on closing the poverty related attainment gap."

The NIF sets out 11 measures to measure the attainment gap. These are:

- 27-30 month review (children showing no concerns across all domains)

- Two Health and Wellbeing measures: Children total difficulties score at ages 4-12 and at ages 13 & 15

- Four measures of literacy and numeracy in primary and secondary schools

- Three school-leaver measures, having at least one qualification at SCQF Levels 4, 5 and 6 on leaving school

- 16-19-year olds participating in education, training or employment.

A number of data collections have been interrupted by the pandemic. Changes to SQA qualifications also makes national level comparisons over time difficult. The Scottish Government's Implementation Framework for taking forward recommendations in the OECD report includes a commitment to consult "on changes to the NIF measures [which] will begin in January 2022 and conclude in September 2022."

Members may wish to explore with the panels—

1. **Whether the aim to close the poverty-related attainment gap by 2026 is an achievable goal?**

2. **To what extent is the attainment gap a reflection of broader society which requires to be addressed by measures other than education?**

3. **Does the panel have examples of local or national policies, beyond education, that are dovetailing to support the closing of the attainment gap?**

4. **Is there a tension between the goals of improving education for everyone and closing the attainment gap? Should one be prioritised?**

Attainment Scotland Fund

As noted above, the ASF includes a number of strands. How those strands are targeted also differs, with the Challenge Authorities and Schools Programme being targeted on the basis of community-level measures of deprivation and the larger PEF based on eligibility for FSM.

The allocations for the current year of the ASF are:

Scottish Attainment Challenge 2021 to 2022	Allocations for 21/22
Challenge Authorities	£43m
Schools Programme	£7m
PEF	£147m
Care Experienced Children and Young People Fund	£11.6m
National programmes	£6.6m
Total	**£215.2m**

The interventions are intended to make progress particularly in the areas of literacy, numeracy and wellbeing.

There is a difference in how the challenge authority and schools' programmes, and PEF are allocated. The challenge authority and schools programme are grants made by the Scottish Government for specific projects in response to proposals. PEF, on the other hand, is allocated to schools and it is for the schools to determine how the additional monies should be spent, albeit with certain conditions attached (e.g. must be aimed at closing the attainment gap).

Head teachers may wish to work together with their peers and the school community to determine how to spend PEF monies. The PEF operating guidance lists a number of resources that head teachers may wish to use to determine what interventions may reduce the attainment gap in their schools. These include the Scottish Attainment Challenge - Self-evaluation resource, An Intervention for Equity framework, and the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) Toolkit. The third sector can often deliver these interventions.

The Scottish Government has commissioned evaluations of the ASF. The fourth was published in March this year. The recent evaluation set out the long-term outcomes it measured progress against. These were looking at both professional practice and the outcomes of teaching and learning—

- Embedded and sustained practices related to addressing the impact of the poverty-related attainment gap.

- All children and young people are achieving the expected or excellent educational outcomes, regardless of their background.

- An education system which is aspirational, inclusive in practice and approaches for all including teachers, parents and carers, children and young people.

- Closing the attainment gap between the most and least disadvantaged children and young people.

The evaluation highlighted a mixed picture in terms of the quantitative data. It says—

"For the majority of measures, attainment of those from the most deprived areas has increased, although in some cases not at the same rate as those in least deprived areas."

The evaluation also reported that the majority of headteachers observed an improvement in closing the attainment gap. It found evidence of continuing culture change in terms of greater collaboration, understanding the barriers faced by pupils and families affected by poverty, and embedding approaches to equity in practice.

The evaluation also noted the complexity of this area and that "it remains difficult to assess the reasons behind any observed improvement in attainment or closing the poverty-related attainment gap, and whether these changes have occurred as a direct result of the fund."

Audit Scotland published its report Improving outcomes for young people through school education the same week as the Scottish Government's evaluation of the ASF. The Audit Scotland report stated—

"The poverty-related attainment gap remains wide and inequalities have been exacerbated by Covid-19. Progress on closing the gap has been limited and falls short of the Scottish Government's aims. Improvement needs to happen more quickly and there needs to be greater consistency across the country. The government and councils recognise that addressing inequalities must be

at the heart of the response to Covid-19, longer-term recovery and improving education."

It also stated—

"Given the level of resource that has been targeted through the ASF and the slow rate of improvement in attainment, if the ASF continues in some form beyond the current funding period the Scottish Government needs to be clearer about the anticipated pace of change, identify and measure against appropriate milestones, and consider the lessons about what works in determining how funding is directed."

The Auditor General for Scotland gave evidence to the Committee on 3 November 2021. He said that the use of community-level SIMD data could be too blunt a tool to identify deprived individuals.

CPAG Scotland's submission also noted that "poverty affects children to a greater or lesser extent regardless of their geographical location and the places with the highest risk of poverty do not necessarily account for the greatest numbers of people living in poverty". However, it also highlighted that living in communities with higher rates of deprivation had additional impact; it said—

"Research from Children's Neighbourhoods Scotland demonstrates that although all children in low income families require support, children in neighbourhoods with high levels of pre-existing poverty and social deprivation were more vulnerable to the negative social and economic effects of lockdown and the extended period of recovery including increased income insecurity, greater reliance on the benefit system and barriers to accessing the labour market."

The Scottish Government is expected to announce a refreshed approach to the Scottish Attainment Challenge shortly. The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills told the Committee on 6 October—

"Although we continue to make good progress on that long-term ambition, I recognise that there is more to do and that the needs of individual learners should be central to our reforms. That is why we will provide £1 billion over this session of Parliament to close the poverty-related attainment gap and support education recovery, including a refresh of the Scottish attainment challenge programme from 2022-23. That will empower schools, support education recovery plans, and help to improve outcomes for children and young people. This autumn, I will set out to Parliament how we will refresh the attainment challenge and how that will support faster and more consistent progress for learners across the country."

This announcement is planned for Tuesday 23 November.

Members may wish to explore with the panels—

5. **Whether there has been a change in culture in education and greater awareness of the impacts of deprivation? How has this improved outcomes for young people?**

6. **Whether the panel can point to interventions that have made measurable difference to outcomes for young people?**

7. **What are the strengths and weaknesses of interventions being at a school rather than a local authority level?**

8. **How well do the interventions reflect the desired outcomes of children and young people and their parents?**

9. **To what degree should targeted resources be allocated on the basis of community-level or individual level measures of deprivation?**

Impact of the pandemic

As the SPICe papers for the Committee's meeting last week noted that there is evidence of the pandemic exacerbating existing inequalities.

The Scottish Government published an Equity Audit in January 2021 looking at evidence of the impact on children and young people who experience deprivation. The equity audit looked at the impact of the first lockdown in from March 2020. This is important, as there is evidence that the quality of the distance learning offer in the second lockdown in early 2021 was higher than in 2020.

The Equity Audit looked at the literature available at the time as well as fieldwork undertaken by Education Scotland. This work identified five themes—

- Health and wellbeing.
  "The mental and physical health and wellbeing of children and young people may have been negatively impacted during school building closures."

- Digital infrastructure and connectivity:
  "Where there were gaps in such access – with socioeconomically disadvantaged children and young people potentially being most negatively affected – this had a direct impact on the remote learning experience and the engagement of children and young people."

- Support to parents/carers and families:
  "Effective communication was key to the ongoing support."

- Teaching provision and the quality of learning:
  "The evidence highlights emerging differences in terms of the teaching provision experienced by children and young people from higher and lower income backgrounds."

- Support for teachers and the wider workforce:
  "Additional training for staff, parents and pupils increased user confidence and knowledge and this remains an important ongoing focus [particularly in relation to digital skills]."

The Equity Audit discussed evidence on the differing educational experiences and outcomes of children and young people from more deprived backgrounds. This included: the amount of time spent on remote learning; the type of teaching provision; access to resources in the home (e.g. digital devices, space, parental support); concerns on the impact on mental health; the intersection between deprivation and other forms of disadvantage.

More recent advice from Education Scotland set out how children from more deprived background's health and wellbeing and learning at home could been disadvantaged compared to their more affluent peers. Health and wellbeing factors listed included greater financial and therefore emotion strain in the household, difficulty accessing services, and families at greater risk to the virus. Factors limiting learning at home included, lack of quiet spaces to undertake work, less access to books, less time undertaking school work at home.

In addition to these possible harms, a review of evidence by the UCL Social Research Institute on Mitigating impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on primary and lower secondary children during school closures identified a potentially "increased exposure to risk especially for those children living in potentially dangerous domestic settings".

CPAG Scotland's submission pointed to evidence that women had "borne the brunt of the pandemic economically and, because they are often primary carers for children, this has impacted on child poverty". It also said that the barriers to learning that some families experienced led to them reporting additional stress and worry.

The Children's Parliament undertook waves of surveys of young people throughout 2020. It found that after the return to schooling in summer/autumn 2020, some aspects of life improved for children, but others not. The Children's Parliament considered whether the issues of mental wellbeing and sense of autonomy were amplified, but not caused, by the pandemic. It also found that the impact of the pandemic particularly affected girls in early secondary school.

Members may wish to explore with the panels—

10. **To what degree the pandemic has created a novel problem or whether it has amplified existing inequalities.**

Responses

As noted in papers last week, the Scottish Government's role has been broadly threefold. To make policy decisions, often backed up in law through the Education Continuity Directions. To support the collaborative approach to those decisions, the production of guidance and the delivery on the ground. Lastly the Scottish Government provided additional resources.

The Scottish Government has made available significant additional resource to local authorities to support the school system in the past two years. The Coronavirus (COVID-19) education recovery: key actions and next steps document published in October 2021 stated—

> "Work to support children and young people has been a top priority since the very start of the pandemic, and over £450m of additional funding has already been committed during 2020/21 and 2021/22 as part of education recovery. £240m of that total has already been provided for the recruitment of extra staff to ensure resilience and to provide additional support for learning and teaching. In addition, a further £145.5m is being added permanently to the local government settlement from April 2022. This will allow local authorities to offer sustained employment of additional teachers and support staff.

> "Further significant funding is being made available for a range of initiatives that are important to education recovery, including the provision of free school breakfasts and lunches all year round for all children in P1-7, digital devices for every child, abolition of fees for instrumental music tuition, removal of core curriculum charges, and the full rollout of 1,140 hours of high-quality Early Learning and Childcare (ELC)."

To support schools and teachers with remote learning, Education Scotland along with partners developed a "National elearning Offer" which included eSgoil as well as other resources and professional development. This remains available this year and includes—

- Live, interactive lessons through e-Sgoil;

- Expansion of the online and remote learning options available to schools in both the Broad General Education and Senior Phase;

- Study support webinars and resources; and

- Recorded content for learners to use as directed by their teacher.

Members may wish to explore with the panels—

11. **How central were the needs of learners and families impacted by deprivation in the Scottish Government and local authorities' responses to the pandemic?**

12. **How were the voices of learners and families impacted by deprivation heard in decision making about school closures and other restrictions?**

13. **Learning during the second lockdown is often reported as being an improvement on the first. Does the panel have any reflections on whether this is the case and whether the experience for children from more deprived households was improved?**

Recovery

The [Scottish Government's Coronavirus (COVID-19) education recovery: key actions and next steps](#) document notes the significant likely impacts on children and young people. It frames some of the responses to pandemic as a renewed focus on existing priorities. It said—

> "While the global pandemic has forced us to reflect upon learning in new and unexpected ways, our fundamental ambition around [the vision and priorities set out in the National Improvement Framework] remains undiluted. As well as the moral imperative to support our current generation of children and young people, this is also an essential investment in the future of our society. We must all invest time, hope and attention in their social development and educational achievements, and we must ensure our work is underpinned by a rights-based approach, shaped by what children, young people and their families and carers tell us."

The Scottish Government is responsible for the overall education system and the strategic approach. Local authorities and schools are key to the delivery of school education and the specifics of the actions to support education recovery will be left to local decision-makers.

There is perhaps a tension between the idea of redoubling pre-existing efforts to close the attainment gap and making significant and fundamental changes to school education. [The International Council of Education Advisers' second report was published in December 2020](#); it said—

> "This is not a time for getting back to normal. It is not even time to develop a modified new normal. It is time to look to the future to redesign Scottish education as a universally designed system for all contingencies and disruptions. This system can and should develop self-directed learners; provide access to digitally-based learning as a human right; transform assessment to be continuous, inclusive and responsive; and ensure that all students and teachers are equipped with online and outdoor capabilities that will be pandemic-proof in the future and significantly better in the present. All of this can and should occur within a universally designed system that becomes increasingly inclusive, responsive, agile and collaborative, with changes in government resource allocations that reflect this shift."

To support localised action, Education Scotland has produced guidance. [Recalibrating Equity and Social Justice in Scottish Education: Bouncing forward after COVID-19 lockdowns](#) identified "six broad principles which can be used to help schools and local authorities consider their use of Scottish Attainment Challenge funding and supports to recalibrate equity and help learners to bounce forward after COVID-19 lockdowns and school closures." These principles included prioritising re-engagement with learning, identifying learners most impacted by poverty & COVID-19 (including learners with ASN), and providing high quality universal and targeted support.

The rapid review of evidence by the UCL Social Research Institute on Mitigating impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on primary and lower secondary children during school closures argued that school level action "requires schools to have access to contextually relevant diagnostic tools they can use to assess the range of harms in need of redress in their local context." It also cautioned that targeted interventions supporting learning in normal circumstances may not necessarily apply; it said—

> "[We concluded] that there was less strong evidence for mitigations that might successfully address the harms [of the pandemic], either individually, or in recognition of their potential to interact. This is because many of those interventions suggested are based on addressing individual needs that present under normal conditions. In fact, mitigation strategies targeting small numbers of children in need of additional support under normal conditions might not automatically confer benefits to larger number of pupils, nor be manageable at scale. Given the unusual circumstances in which children were absent from school, harms may also not present so discretely, or be amenable to being solved one by one."

Audit Scotland's Improving outcomes for young people through school education report stated—

> "It is now more important than ever that schools, councils and the Scottish Government are clear about:
>
> > • the priorities for education recovery from the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and how to improve outcomes beyond what was being achieved before
> >
> > • what that means in terms of the anticipated outcomes for children and young people
> >
> > • how these outcomes will be measured, reported and acted on."

The Committee heard last week of the importance of taking into account Children's and Young People's voices in plans for recovery. The Scottish Government's recovery plan highlights the new Children and Young People's Education Council which is intended to provide comment on national policy. The recovery plan also stated—

> "It is important, however, that we integrate this approach beyond the main strategic policy groups. We want to make it the norm for children and young people to be involved in decision-making across Scotland, so that they are at the heart of decisions that affect them at local and national levels … As we implement this approach, we need to improve the skills and awareness of policy makers and decision-makers. We will therefore seek and take account of expert advice and guidance of children's rights organisations, children and young people organisations and children and young people themselves, monitoring how we are doing, and adjusting and improving our approach."

A SPICe paper provided last week highlighted a number of papers from Scottish, UK and international organisations. Several were concerned with how the response to the pandemic should be approached. Some themes from those papers are:

- Support social and emotional needs of learners;

- Support teachers and staff's wellbeing and capacity;

- Include parents/carers;

- Encourage innovation and build on innovative practices necessitated by the pandemic;

- The primacy of in-person teaching and learning;

- Measuring and understanding the scale and type of learning loss and health and wellbeing issues and supporting schools to do this.

The Children's Parliament's submission argued for a rights-based approach. It said—

> "We need to centre our thoughts and actions, our intent, on learners. This needs to focus on **relationships** and **rights**. We are concerned that a narrative framed by the idea of *lost learning* focuses more on the needs of the system to be seen to be meeting arbitrary results in terms of attainment regarding literacy or numeracy or exam results. Recovery will not be evidenced by improved test results in a spreadsheet." (emphasis in the original)

Members may wish to explore with the panels—

14. **Since schools returned in Spring, has the panel seen positive changes as children and young people reconnected with schooling and other services?**

15. **Whether the panel consider the response to the pandemic requires greater commitment to existing priorities and processes or if a qualitative change addressing the attainment gap is required?**

16. **How much of the responsibility for recovery from the pandemic in schools should be devolved to school and local authority levels? How should schools and local authorities be held accountable for progress?**

17. **Whether there have been barriers to engage or re-engage parents and carers in their children's learning?**

Further and Higher Education

The Committee will also take evidence from the National Union of Students. The NUS represent students attending Universities and Colleges.

Widening Access

Since 2016, universities and colleges have been working towards the mutual aim of widening access to university for students from the most deprived backgrounds. This work is guided by Scottish Government targets put in place following the recommendations of the Commission on Widening Access (COWA).

The overarching target is that by 2030, students from the 20% most deprived backgrounds should represent 20% of entrants to Higher Education. The interim COWA target of at least 16% of first year, first degree entrants to university being from the 20% most deprived areas by 2021 appears to have been met by the sector ahead of time.

The latest statistics, published by HESA, show 16% of first year, first degree entrants were from the 20% most deprived backgrounds in 2018-19 and 2019-20 . The next key target is for students from SIMD20 backgrounds to make up 18% of full-time, first degree entrants by 2026.

In 2019-20 25% of full-time entrants to colleges' Higher Education courses were from SIMD20 areas.

NUS Scotland's submission stated—

> "We are calling on the Scottish Government to support students from the most deprived backgrounds to gain a place and stay in further and higher education. This requires holistic support with a student housing strategy, cost of living support and a student mental health action plan."

Progression from school to FE/HE

When considering the impact the pandemic on learning and any remediation, it is important to consider timescales. For many, education does not stop at the end of school. Larry Flanagan from the EIS told the predecessor committee in January this year—

> "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."

This year saw increased numbers of Scottish students accessing university places. The SFC reported in August—

> "Overall, 31,660 Scottish students (up 12 per cent compared with this time last year) have been accepted on a degree course for the new academic year. In anticipation of increased demand - and as part of its response to the special circumstances created by the pandemic - SFC's annual allocation of university funding for 2021-22 included around £14 million of Scottish Government money for additional funded places."

Impacts of the pandemic on students from more deprived backgrounds

The Scottish Government set up the [COVID-19 Learner Journey Ministerial Task Force](#) in January 2021 to look at concerns around student attainment and progression during the pandemic. The task force, which has now concluded, brought together representatives from the college and university sector, qualifications agencies, government and government agencies and unions. It considered the immediate challenges for institutions and students and informed the government's response to these.

Some students who were unable to complete course work, placements or practical work due to the pandemic may choose or be required to repeat a year of learning. Higher education students can do this using their additional year of funding - known as a +1 year. Students who have used their +1 year of funding are advised to apply to the Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS) to have their request considered on compassionate grounds[34].

NUS Scotland [raised concerns in a submission to the predecessor](#) Committee in January of this year:

> "While the pandemic has affected all students, the impacts have hit disadvantaged students hardest; those already experiencing financial hardship, those without the safety net of family support, those from a widening access background, and those who are the first in their family to access further or higher education."

The [Coronavirus (COVID-19): Advisory Sub-Group on Universities and Colleges](#) provided an advice note to the sectors in June 2021. This highlighted a number of protective and mitigation measures against the spread of the virus. It also noted that institutions will also wish to consider mitigations of the wider harms of the pandemic. The group highlighted—

- bereavement support

- mental health and counselling services

- learning and assessment support in light of the educational disruption experienced over the past year, and

- additional financial support for students whose circumstances or family circumstances have been affected as a result of the pandemic.

[A report published be the Mental Health Foundation on 17 November 2021](#) found that "nearly three quarters of university students surveyed in Scotland have low wellbeing". The mental Health Foundation also questioned the extent to which some of the findings reflect the pandemic or existing issues. It said—

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[34] https://www.parliament.scot/chamber-and-committees/debates-and-questions/questions/2021/01/21/s5w34725

> "While the study was undertaken during the pandemic which undoubtedly added additional pressures to students, Mental Health Foundation urges caution in attributing too much reasoning for the study results to the impact of COVID19, lockdowns and restrictions. It is clear that existing inequalities have been exacerbated by the pandemic so the 22 per cent of students who were worried about running out of food and the 24 per cent who ate less due to lack of money, were likely to have already been struggling financially."

A longstanding issue for the NUS has been the cost of student housing. Its submission stated—

> "Scotland is facing a student housing emergency driven by a shortage of available accommodation and soaring rents. These housing shortages though exacerbated by the pandemic pre-date Covid-19. Recent research conducted by NUS Scotland in July 2021 showed that 17% of students have been unable to pay their rent in full over the last four months and 20% have been unable to pay their bills in over four months. We have also seen rising homelessness amongst the student population."

Digital learning

Similar to schools, the lockdowns led to learning being moved online in colleges and universities. Students required access to laptops and broadband in order to complete college and university coursework. In 2020, the Scottish Government made available £5m to support access to digital equipment and tackle digital poverty. The Scottish Government NUS Scotland January submission stated:

> "[NUS Scotland remains] concerned that the digital poverty gap is widening existing inequalities. The demand for digital support exceeds what colleges and universities can offer. As students, we believe that current funding will not cover the forthcoming need of students in the year ahead and so we are calling on the Scottish Government to invest an additional £5 million into digital inclusion for students in 2021/22."

A move to digital is likely to have particularly impacted learning on practical courses.

Members may wish to explore with the NUS—

18. **How successfully have institutions adapted their responses to student needs since March 2020?**

19. **How well have students been supported in transitions between schools, colleges and universities to cater for gaps in learning or wellbeing issues caused by the pandemic?**

20. **How are mental wellbeing issues being addressed by universities and colleges?**

21. **How well do institutions understand the financial circumstances of their students and how these can impact on learning?**

22. What feedback has the NUS received on how effective institutions have been at making students aware of additional support available during the pandemic such as increased discretionary funding?

**Ned Sharratt, Senior Researcher (Education, Culture), SPICe Research
18 November 2021**

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