



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Education and Skills Committee

Friday 19 June 2020

Session 5



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EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE

15th Meeting 2020, Session 5

CONVENER

*Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)

*Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab)

*Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con)

*Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green)

*Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

*Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)

*Alex Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)

*Gail Ross (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)

*Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Eddie Follan (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities)

Carrie Lindsay (Association of Directors of Education in Scotland)

Councillor Stephen McCabe (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Roz Thomson

LOCATION

Virtual Meeting

Scottish Parliament

Education and Skills Committee

Friday 19 June 2020

[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:00]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Clare Adamson): Good morning, and welcome to the 15th meeting in 2020 of the Education and Skills Committee. Our first item of business is a decision on whether to take in private agenda items 3 and 4, to allow discussion of today's evidence and of the committee's work programme. Does any member object to our taking items 3 and 4 in private?

As no member objects, we agree to take items 3 and 4 in private.

School Education and Early Learning: Covid-19

10:00

The Convener: Agenda item 2 is an evidence session on the impact of the coronavirus outbreak on school education and early learning. We welcome, from the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, Councillor Stephen McCabe, who is its children and young people spokesperson, and Eddie Follan, who is its chief officer for children and young people. We also welcome Carrie Lindsay, who is the president of the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland.

Councillor McCabe will make an opening statement.

Councillor Stephen McCabe (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities): Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the committee.

The past three months have been exceptional for all of us, and we are acutely aware that the impact of the crisis on our society—in particular, on our education system, our children and young people, their families and our staff—has been enormous.

Local authorities responded quickly to the emergency phase of the crisis, including by establishing hub provision for the children of key workers and for vulnerable children. We have, in extremely challenging circumstances, supported about 170,000 young people with free school meals, and we have continued to support children who are in need of care and protection.

As we have moved into the recovery phase, the focus has changed to working with the Scottish Government and other partners to continue to offer support to children and young people in term 4, and to look ahead to returning safely to face-to-face learning in August.

We plan to take a blended approach, with a mix of learning in school and at home. At a local level, councils are in the process of developing their plans. At a national level, strategic discussion continues through the Covid-19 education recovery group, and discussion with the Scottish Government on resources continues through the education recovery resources group.

The committee has asked me to address a number of specific points. First, I point out that COSLA does not monitor members' activity or tell them what to do. It is for councils to decide how national guidance is applied locally, by considering local circumstances and local need.

The Government's strategic framework makes it clear that there cannot be a one-size-fits-all model

for reopening schools. There will be similarities between the blended-learning approaches that will be taken by councils, but it is also to be expected that there will be differences between them. Approaches will be based on resources and on the shape of communities, including such factors as geography, deprivation, school estate and staffing levels. Elected members will be accountable to their local communities for the decisions that their councils make.

COSLA has had a role in negotiating nationally on behalf of councils and in seeking their collective agreement to the strategic framework and to the many bits of guidance that have been produced through the education recovery group process. With our partners in local government and the Scottish Government, we have a role in ensuring that guidance can be applied locally to take account of local needs.

The committee might be aware that Education Scotland now has a role in analysing and reporting on local plans. We will work closely with it to understand the challenges that areas face in delivering those plans.

The committee also asked COSLA to address the issue of parental engagement. There is little doubt that the speed with which councils have had to react to the crisis has had an impact on how they have been able to engage with parents. That was a significant challenge in the emergency phase. It is not surprising that parents might feel anxious and disconnected from schools.

It is our understanding, from Education Scotland's latest monitoring, that almost half of councils have issued surveys to parents or pupils and have active communication strategies. Councils that have not issued surveys have been engaging through parent councils and pupil forums, and we expect that those communication strategies will continue to develop and evolve. COSLA will also continue its positive engagement with national parent bodies.

The committee also asked about the differences between authorities that are taking a school-based approach to their planning and those that are taking an authority-wide approach. As part of the agreement on the strategic framework, we were keen to negotiate local flexibility in planning, and the different approaches reflect that. The plans will be based on the jointly agreed guidance. As part of that, it was agreed by all partners that there is no one-size-fits-all approach and that local circumstances have a significant role to play in how plans are developed.

The number of days in school will depend on capacity, the school estate, school transport and the resources that are available to meet the 2m distancing rule. The size of a local authority, its

approach to critical childcare, the structure of its support, cleansing and facilities management services, and its resources will all inform approaches to local planning.

School staff have worked tirelessly to prepare for the blended learning approach and are demonstrating their commitment to ensuring that all our children and young people get the best possible education in these difficult and challenging times.

Local authorities have also responded to the needs of our vulnerable children with innovative practice in residential care, maintaining contact with families, online children's hearings and virtual assessment and care planning. We can touch on that more in the detailed questioning.

I hope that I have addressed many of the issues that the committee intends to cover. My colleagues and I will answer the committee's questions as best we can.

Gail Ross (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP): Thank you for that comprehensive start. You have probably answered quite a lot of the questions that we want to ask.

From your consultation with the Scottish Government, teachers and parents, what should we expect blended learning to look like?

Councillor McCabe: Blended learning is a mix of face-to-face learning in school and learning at home. The balance will depend on the resources that are available in each council. We are working through the plans and are trying to develop more detail and put in more support for pupils and for parents. I am happy for Carrie Lindsay to give more detail.

Carrie Lindsay (Association of Directors of Education in Scotland): What Councillor McCabe said is right. There will be a range of blended learning; it will be different in different places.

We have done surveys in some local authorities about what parents find useful. They do not always say that it is online learning; a number of parents have said that they like hard copies, too.

The directors of education have looked at the research on blended learning, which is about how home learning is linked to learning in school. Blended learning is different from the home learning that we have at the moment, while young people are not able to access schools. Blended learning will join the two together.

ADES is also working on a national e-learning framework, in which we would use the good work that has come from e-Sgoil and SCHOLAR, which have been used across Scotland for many years, to see how we can support the senior phase with

e-learning. We are working with Education Scotland and the Scottish Government to get that out as quickly as possible.

With the research that we have and with the knowledge of how teachers work and of how they will adapt their processes, we are confident that blended learning will be a better model for parents and that it will meet their needs better than the current model of learning at home.

Gail Ross: Local authority plans are at an advanced stage; I know that a few have been published. I am a parent. When will those plans be made public? The Scottish Government must scrutinise them. When will teachers see them? Will the plans be flexible? Will teachers have autonomy within a local authority's plan, or will that be for headteachers or faculty heads in schools? How will it work?

Councillor McCabe: The plans are being developed in partnership with schools and in consultation with parents and pupils. As a parent, I know the plan for education in my area, but councils are at different stages. They are working hard to put plans in place and to communicate with parents. A number of plans are already in the public domain.

Carrie Lindsay: That is right. Councils have made their plans available and have said that the plans are proposals, because things might change as we must take account of the scientific and public health advice that is available. A lot of local authorities have called it scenario planning, because plans might change as time goes on and advice changes. We have made plans available to parents so that they can help us to ensure that we meet the needs of parents' lives and of local economies.

As Councillor McCabe outlined, our plans will be shared with Education Scotland. From Wednesday this week, we will work with Education Scotland to consider what we have not looked at in the plans, at local level, and what we could do differently. Now that some resource might be available, we might be able to do things that we were previously not thinking about doing, because we were working within our existing resource. As Councillor McCabe outlined, it will be about how we work with our communities, what resources are available to us and what schools can deliver in their communities.

Gail Ross: You mentioned engagement with parents, which will be critical. Councillor McCabe is probably one of the parents who is engaged all along the way with learning. However, many parents are not engaged and are, even in normal circumstances, hard to reach. How do we reach those parents, who are often from disadvantaged backgrounds, in order to make sure that the plans

fit with their ability to help their children to be home schooled?

Councillor McCabe: I would be careful not to make too many assumptions about individual people, but Carrie Lindsay could comment on that better than I could.

Carrie Lindsay: That is right. We are listening to parents, but some do not talk to us as much as others do, so it is important that we use our eyes and ears to pick up on where in our communities engagement with our young people is not what we would like it to be. Gail Ross is right that some people are not engaging; some young people found it difficult to engage with school before we were in this situation.

Some local authorities have been gathering data on engagement levels, although it is hard to say that the data is robust, because "engagement" means different things to different people and we do not have a single definition of it. Recently, I was made aware that one local authority has gathered information that suggests that 95 per cent of its children have engaged with online or at-home learning. We are trying hard to make sure that it is not just about that 95 per cent because, as Gail Ross suggested, the remaining 5 per cent is the group of young people about whom we are most concerned. This is where children's services come into their own; we are working with our partners across children's services to consider what we can do to support the families that struggle to engage. As time goes on, those families will change.

Local authorities have provided devices and connectivity. However, some young people to whom we might give a device do not have broadband in their home setting, so schools have been creative and innovative about engaging those families, and will continue to do that. However, we need to make sure that we listen to our communities, which will help us to make connections with those families.

10:15

Eddie Follan (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities): I will add to what Carrie Lindsay said. She picked up on the point about ensuring that we make strong links between our children's services and education, which is vital in order for us to work with those families.

Members might be aware that we are working intensively with the Scottish Government on how we can bridge the digital divide and support children and young people who do not have devices. We are aware of the urgency of doing that and of making sure that provision is in place for August.

Gail Ross: This will be my last question. We have been talking about autonomy for local authorities and autonomy for schools, within local authorities. However, we have heard worrying reports about blended learning in which there will be face-to-face learning for only one day a week. That is making parents concerned, because they will have to find a way of home schooling for the other four days of the week. Do you see that as blended learning? In situations like that, should the local authority or the Scottish Government step in?

Councillor McCabe: With regard to the plan, I do not know what the distinction would be between the local authority and the education service. The education service is part of the local authority, so the local authority and the elected members of councils will be consulted on local plans. If they are unhappy with local plans, they will ask for them to be changed.

I do not think that it is the role of the Scottish Government to step in. It is the role of the Scottish Government to work with councils collectively and individually; if it can provide more resources and support, councils can potentially increase the level of face-to-face learning in each local authority area. Within the existing resources and the constraints under which they operate, local authorities are doing all that they can to maximise the amount of face-to-face learning. However, every local authority in Scotland would welcome more support and assistance to do that.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): Good morning, everyone. In recent weeks, councils have been taking a lot of flak for their emerging plans. It is worth putting on the record our thanks to councils, which are working with schools and teachers. They are trying their best in the circumstances, but that does not detract from the fact that parents are anxious about proposals, as Gail Ross said, for just one or two days a week of face-to-face contact and the effect that that will have on their children's education and the parents' ability to go back to work.

Do you have views on the levels of support that you have received to date? Do your members believe that they have enough funding and resource to deliver the Government's current plans? Given the First Minister's comments yesterday that more resource might be available, have you had an indication of how much has been allocated to councils to help them deliver the plans?

Councillor McCabe: We are trying to deliver the plans that we are developing within existing, exceedingly stretched resources. We are under enormous financial pressure not just in education but across all council services. We absolutely welcome the additional resources from Government and the flexibility in how we can use

ring-fenced funds, but there are enormous challenges in trying to maximise the amount of blended learning.

It is not just about finance, as there are also practical issues. For example, school transport is a huge issue for councils. The more resource that is available, the more that we can do to increase the amount of face-to-face learning. In recent days, we have had constructive dialogue with the Government. We have had an indication that there might be financial support, and we are now getting into the detail of that and looking at what individual councils require to increase their amounts of face-to-face learning. Eddie Follan or Carrie Lindsay might want to comment.

Eddie Follan: I do not have a lot to add, but Carrie Lindsay might want to comment. We are having positive discussions with the Scottish Government on that issue.

Carrie Lindsay: Our plans are about a phased approach. The situation is new to all of us—I have never had to try to deliver education in the midst of a pandemic. Our plans will change, but we are doing the best that we can for our children and young people as we want to provide them with a quality education. We will need to test things out and, depending on the public health advice, we might be able to significantly increase what we are able to do. At least 23 of the 32 local authorities are indicating that their primary schools will provide two or more days a week of face-to-face learning, and a significant amount of work is going on to see how and when we will be able to increase that.

With regard to the support that we have been given, we have tried to model that work within existing budgets. Although the Scottish Government gave local authorities flexibility over ring-fenced budgets, that did not release significant amounts of money. From the announcements this week, we believe that further resource might be available, which would allow local authorities to revisit their plans and think about the possibilities.

With regard to Jamie Greene's comment that local authorities have taken a lot of flak, I note that I have also had a lot of positive emails. Parents have said how appreciative they are and that they know that it is a challenging time and we are trying to do our best. However, there are those who say that they are not happy with the model that we have put out there.

Jamie Greene: Thank you for your answers. There are mixed views. Everyone appreciates that it is a difficult time, but our inboxes are full of emails from concerned parents.

I am concerned that so many councils are looking at only two or more days a week. Our

ambition should be to get up to 100 per cent. It is interesting that, this week, the City of Edinburgh Council said publicly that, to deliver the Government's plans and get to 50 per cent contact, it will need at least £30 million and that the alternative is to reduce the social distancing requirement from the current 2m.

You will probably be aware of the plans in Northern Ireland to reduce the distance to 1m. That would increase capacity in classrooms, which might make life easier for some of your members. Do you have views on whether that move is safe? If we replicated that policy decision in Scotland, would it benefit councils?

Councillor McCabe: We are basing our plans on the 2m social distancing rule. Until the Government advice changes, our plans in that regard will not change. If the rule was changed, it would make it easier to increase the amount of face-to-face learning, but the advice has not changed. I do not profess to be an expert on the virus or the implications of the change; we rely on the Government for advice and to take decisions. Until the Government advice changes, we will continue to develop our plans on the basis of 2m social distancing.

Jamie Greene: I appreciate that you are planning around what you have been asked to plan around, but are you doing scenario planning? Do you have an idea of how much additional capacity a shift to 1.5m or 1m would present? The First Minister said that those are active discussions, so I presume that councils are scenario planning and will be able to provide details because, if plans change, they will have to react quickly.

Councillor McCabe: Limited scenario planning might be going on in councils. Carrie Lindsay can probably comment on that. At this point, the primary focus is to put in place our plans to return to face-to-face learning on 12 August, which is not far away. An enormous amount of work has to be done before then. It is difficult to plan for things that might happen, so we are planning based on what we know, and if the Government's advice changes, we will have to adapt our plans. However, that would make it even more challenging to have plans in place by August.

Carrie Lindsay might want to give some detail on that.

Carrie Lindsay: The first thing is that safety is really important to us. We value our children and young people, and we want to ensure that any environment that we put them in is safe. We also want to provide quality education. We need to weigh those things up in the decisions that we make.

Of course, we are looking at the resources that might be required if the social distancing changes, and we have started scenario planning for that. However, moving from one to the other is quite a big tanker to shift, so it takes a bit of time to put those plans together.

Finance is not the only answer. In my local authority, there are examples where we have transport difficulties. We have 424 buses in place, but even if the social distancing requirement of 2m is changed to 1m—and it applies to transport as well—that will still not allow us to get 100 per cent of our children into our school buildings. We need to look at the practicalities in a number of areas to ensure that what we do is safe and that we are following advice.

In answer to the question on whether we agree that we should change the advice, I agree with Councillor McCabe: I am an educationist and it is not for me to give that advice. We should listen to the World Health Organization and scientific and public health advice. We will follow that to ensure that our children and young people are safe in our schools.

Jamie Greene: Thank you—that is very helpful.

My final question on the subject of going back to school is on blended learning. Do you know whether a national online platform is being considered to deliver home schooling or whether the 32 local authorities will have separate learning platforms? A number of parents have had very little or no engagement with virtual or online schooling in the past few months and there is concern that, if councils are left to deliver it without a centralised approach, there will be disparate results in the prospects of long-term blended learning. I am keen to get your views on how we are going to support parents, who will ultimately be part-time teachers.

Eddie Follan: Parents cannot be full-time teachers in the home, so we have all been keen to support them as much as we possibly can. That is why I talked about the digital offering. We need to ensure that it is comprehensive and that all children can benefit from it. Carrie Lindsay might want to talk about e-Sgoil and the work that ADES is doing with Education Scotland, because that is important, as is the work that Western Isles Council has developed.

Carrie Lindsay: I mentioned e-Sgoil, which is the platform that is used in the north of Scotland. There is evidence that it has been used for some courses in all 32 local authorities during the past few months. We are building on that, and ADES is using it as an e-learning platform that we will offer to all local authorities. We have been in discussion with directors of education across Scotland to see whether there is willingness and a desire to have

e-Sgoil as a national platform, and we are now progressing with it and working with Education Scotland.

The e-Sgoil and SCHOLAR offerings have been mostly for senior phase subjects, but we are looking to see what we can deliver for the broad general education and what that might look like. Education Scotland is also working on some resources for home learning and we imagine that they will connect with the e-learning, e-Sgoil offer.

As I mentioned, some parents say that they prefer non-online learning and like to have hard copies of resources, so there needs to be a balance in what we expect to be online. Some families have reported to me that they have four or five children at home as well as parents working from home, and they do not have six devices that people can use.

Teachers are really good at finding ways that will work for the children in their classes. They know their class at a local level, and that is how it will work best.

10:30

Eddie Follan: I am not sure whether I mentioned this before, but part of the work that we are doing around the digital offering is on connectivity, which will be a big part of making sure that every council has an offer. It is about not only devices, but connectivity and access to the internet, and that work is on-going.

The Convener: I have a supplementary question on the e-Sgoil offering. We know that timetabling is one of the biggest headaches that most schools have, and you have had to re-timetable based on much-reduced attendance at school. We also know that the SQA advice is for 160 hours of teaching for a certificate qualification in the final phases. Does e-Sgoil allow schools to share a teacher, if you like, across different schools in order to deliver the curriculum? Can a teacher be shared across a local authority? What is the advantage of e-Sgoil in replacing face-to-face teaching? I think that those questions will be for Carrie Lindsay, initially.

Carrie Lindsay: Currently, e-Sgoil works through live teaching, but it can also be recorded, which means that lessons do not need to be used at the time.

You mentioned timetabling, which is one of the restrictions in secondary schools. We are thinking about big blocks of time in some of our secondary schools because we do not want children to be moving around quite as much. It is about how we could use live teaching and the recording of lessons to allow children to have a full experience of the course that they have elected to study.

You are absolutely right: we would share across local authorities. At the moment, the ask is for some staff in each local authority to contribute to the work of e-Sgoil so that those in the Western Isles, who started it, are not teaching every child across Scotland. We are happy for them to do some of that, but it is about how we all buy into the work so that we can deliver lessons and develop courses for children online.

Alex Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I will begin by asking Stephen McCabe about the five principles that are outlined in the joint education recovery report with the Scottish Government. Is the main principle not the missing principle and the most important principle, which is that every child—[*Inaudible.*]

The Convener: I am very sorry, but we have lost the connection to Mr Neil. We will try to get him back as quickly as possible. We will move on to questions from Mr Halcro Johnston.

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I always seem to be drafted in when there is a connection problem. However, I suppose the problem highlights some of the issues that children, parents and teachers are facing across the country.

We have talked about the scientific advice, but I will quickly highlight some of it. The World Health Organization guidance is for 1m social distancing, and I was interested to hear Professor Leitch talking this morning about the Northern Ireland example. The scientific information that people are receiving there is the same information to which the Scottish Government has access. It is obviously simply about the interpretation of that advice, which is the Scottish Government's right to determine.

As MSPs, we have constantly been contacted by different organisations that have highlighted the issues that they are facing because of Covid. That has included hospitality and events organisations, hotels, coach operators and so on, a huge number of which have large capacity at the moment. There was mention of the fact that it is about resource as well as simply being about funding, although one is associated with the other.

Even if we stay with 2m in our guidance, is the possibility of achieving 100 per cent classroom time—or as near as possible to that—and as normal an education as possible a safety issue or a resource issue? Can resources be put in place to achieve that?

Councillor McCabe: If we maintain 2m social distancing, it is simply not realistic to get anywhere near 100 per cent. It is not simply about money. It would take an awful lot of money, but it would also take incredible resources, which are simply not available. Some people think that they are

available and that we should be able to commandeer public buildings throughout our areas and have as much money as is needed to throw at it, but I simply do not believe that that is realistic.

At this point, within the constraints of 2m social distancing, we are engaging in trying to see whether we can increase at the margins the amount of face-to-face learning. I think that getting to 100 per cent based on 2m social distancing is impossible. However, Carrie Lindsay, as a director of education, is better qualified than I am to comment on that.

Carrie Lindsay: I agree that safety is the important issue for us. We are taking the advice that we are provided with by the scientists and the World Health Organization. At the moment, the advice that is coming through the Government, which has access to more of that advice than we do as directors of education, is that the 2m guidance is still about safety. I do not believe that it would be possible to get to 100 per cent with the 2m rule.

When I consider the buildings that I have in my local authority, I think of the experience that I had with a fire in one of our large secondary schools at the beginning of the current session. We had to find places for 1,600 children, and it took a mammoth effort for all parts of the council to come together to be able to place those children.

In Fife, I have 53,000 children. In trying to find alternative buildings, we have to think about how we would get the meals in there, how we would get the cleaning to take place, how we would make sure that there is playground space for the children and how we would make sure that there are enough toilets and hand washing facilities. It is not as simple as just finding a hall or a space; it is about making sure that we can deliver quality education for children and young people, for whom this is the only chance they get at education. We want to make sure that we get it right and that we use facilities in the best possible way in order to do that.

We will take advice on distancing and we will respond whenever it changes in order to make sure that we get as many children and young people back into school as quickly and for as long as possible.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: That is extremely helpful. I absolutely appreciate the challenges that the pandemic is causing for everybody.

Carrie Lindsay mentioned the WHO advice, which is for 1m social distancing. Is there specific guidance on education that requires 2m or is the 1m advice for education as well? If you are following the World Health Organization's advice, it would suggest that 1m might be an option.

Councillor McCabe: We are following the advice of the Scottish Government, which is following the advice of its scientific advisers.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: Okay; thank you for that.

You may or may not have seen on social media today that there has been a letter to the education secretary from newly qualified teachers. Can you give a bit of advice on where COSLA and the individual councils are in relation to newly qualified teachers and whether they, as a resource, are being fully utilised in delivering education in the blended model?

Councillor McCabe: I will bring Eddie in on the national policy level and then Carrie can come in on the detail.

Eddie Follan: I have not seen the letter on social media, so I cannot comment on that.

We work through COSLA with others to make sure that we are maximising our workforce, which we need to do in this situation. Carrie is probably better qualified than I am to talk about the newly qualified teachers issue; however, from a COSLA perspective, we are looking to maximise the workforce as much we can.

As part of that, one of the big challenges of the pandemic in relation to delivering a blended learning approach is that we started from a point at which we had a shortage of teachers. We now need to do everything that we can to get to a point at which we can adapt to the new model. Carrie can perhaps give a bit more detail on that.

Carrie Lindsay: Thank you for that. It is an interesting question about why so many NQTs have not been placed in permanent posts. At this point, there is a difference from what we would usually take as permanent posts and supply, because, if we have children in smaller groupings, we might need people now who we will not need in the future. Therefore, a lot of local authorities are looking at offering temporary positions to NQTs.

I will go back to an earlier response about the finance. When we were putting together the plans, extra finance was not available; we did it within the local authority budget, with the flexibility over ring-fenced funding that the Government had offered. As much as we can, we have been working within the existing council funds, so that we do not put our councils into a deficit position. There is now an opportunity to revisit that, and, as I said, many councils have already done that. We will start to look at what the case would be if we had more finance to take on the NQTs. In my authority, we took on about half of the large numbers of NQTs that wanted to work with us; we did not have the funding or space for more of them to join our

workforce. Now that resource is available, we will look at that again.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: Thank you. That is super.

Councils have flexibility in how they deliver, and you have talked about the importance for some families of non-online learning, but will blended learning be largely reliant on online learning? Can it be delivered across the country or council areas without young people having access to computers or the required technology or connectivity?

Councillor McCabe: Individual councils are making a massive effort to upgrade their digital infrastructure and offer equipment, such as laptops, to young people. The other day, my council approved an allocation of £500,000 to improve our digital platform. We are also in discussion with the Government about the £30 million that it has set aside. It has bought 25,000 Chromebooks, leaving £21 million. We are in discussion about how best to allocate that resource in order to increase the infrastructure and the availability of laptops to young people. Carrie Lindsay might want to come in on some of the detail.

Carrie Lindsay: The research on blended learning is interesting. It shows how important it is for the learning in school to be connected in some way to the learning at home. However, that does not have to be online.

At the moment, there is a big focus on online learning. That is right, because we need to get it right for the young people who are using it. However, if we consider the cycle of teaching, learning and assessment, there will be lots of situations in which we have teaching and learning in a school setting, work going on at home and the work coming back to be assessed by the teacher before the next piece of learning is planned. All that teaching, learning and assessment can take account of things that are not online.

As I said in a previous answer, the survey that was carried out by one of our local authorities shows that a lot of the parents prefer some of the non-online learning. We are talking about the quality of education and provision for our children and young people. We do not want them to sit in front of a screen the whole time, so we want schools to consider different ways of learning. Online learning is one part of that, but it is not everything. We need to take account of all that holistically when considering the teaching and learning of our children.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: You mentioned that one of the councils has carried out a survey. However, there is no national definition of engagement. I have been trying to find out from the Scottish Government the number of young

people who are not able to access online learning because they do not have either the laptop or the connectivity to do so. We have not been able to get that information during the past two months. You are basing your plan for blended learning on guidance and funding streams from the Scottish Government, but is it an issue that the Scottish Government, if it cannot provide that information, is providing guidance without full knowledge of the picture on the ground?

10:45

Councillor McCabe: There might not be a national picture at this time, but councils are working hard to identify the pupils who require that support and are looking to provide the support, either from within their own resources or from the additional resource, when it is allocated.

Again, I am sure that Carrie Lindsay can come in on the detail.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: Surely there should be a national picture. If the Scottish Government is determining the guidance that you are required to follow to deliver blended learning, should it not have an idea of the picture on the ground? At this point—nearly three months into the pandemic—should the Scottish Government not have a figure based on information that has been provided by you of what online learning can be delivered?

Councillor McCabe: We are working on producing that figure. Eddie Follan or Carrie Lindsay might be able to come in with some detail on how we are working to produce a figure, in discussion with the Government, that would inform how best to allocate the resource.

Eddie Follan: As part of the process that we are going through, we are working with councils to understand their individual needs. We will continue to undertake that work as a matter of urgency. We are aiming to pull together information from councils so that we can get a national picture in order to identify need.

Carrie Lindsay: The delivery of education is a local authority responsibility, which means that local authorities will be aware of the pupils they need to support. The empowered headteachers and class teachers in our empowered system will absolutely be aware of the families who need that extra support.

In order to gather the figure nationally, we need to think about what we need the information for. We are looking at the information at a local level to ensure that we are using any resource that is available nationally. However, I do not think that we would necessarily be looking for support at a national level to enable us to do that, because that is what local authorities do anyway—

Jamie Halcro Johnston: But you are getting that support, because you are accessing a £30 million fund that the Scottish Government is making available. Surely, that support is being provided on the basis of information about need that has been provided by councils.

Carrie Lindsay: Yes. We work together on making sure that we have the resource and on where it goes. We have been doing work through COSLA to ensure that that resource is made available for the online aspect of what is being done. However, with regard to the non-online aspect, local authorities know their schools best and headteachers know what they need to do for the families in their local areas in order to deliver the support that needs to be delivered.

The Convener: I will bring in Mr Neil, who has joined us again.

Alex Neil: Thank you, convener. I do not know what went wrong there.

I have a question for Stephen McCabe. Five principles were identified in the education recovery group report. However, it strikes me that the main principle is missing, which is that every child in Scotland is entitled to full-time, high-quality education. I am a grandfather, and my grandchildren have just been told that, from 11 August, they will get one and a half days a week at school for the indefinite future. Their parents and I regard that as absolutely unacceptable. That is not good-quality education. It is not blending education, it is bleeding education. Surely, we can do far better than that for our children.

Councillor McCabe: At the end of the day, the reality is that what is on offer is second best. The reality is that the best thing for our children would be to return them to full-time education and school without any requirements for social distancing—that is, to return them to normality. However, the reality is that we have been advised by the Government and its scientists that children can return to school in August only on the basis of there being 2m social distancing, and it is impossible for us to provide full-time education under that constraint.

I am not quite a grandfather yet, but I am a parent of four children. Only one is still at school: a 15-year-old boy who is in secondary school and needs significant additional support in school. He is facing the prospect of attending school for two and half days a week across a fortnight. I would hope that we could offer more than that to the more vulnerable of our children.

Nobody accepts that the situation is satisfactory, but I think that we, in the education system in Scotland, are doing the very best that we can to deliver the best education service in the most

extraordinarily challenging times that any of us has faced in our lifetime.

Alex Neil: Are we not coming at this from the wrong end? I listened carefully to your introductory remarks. Basically, you seem to have said, “This is the school’s capacity and we need to maintain, for the time being at least, the 2m distance. Assuming that we stick with that, we are constrained by the capacity in terms of both buildings and staff.” Can you not take a leaf out of the national health service’s book? It had major constraints on buildings and staff, so it requisitioned buildings and recruited the additional staff that it needed.

I agree that that would have to be paid for by the Scottish Government, but, as the paediatricians are saying, there are costs to not getting our children back to school five days a week in terms of their mental and physical health, their education, our future economic prospects and our security as grandparents and parents—all those things are dependent on that happening.

Do you not think that the attitude should be that we will not accept capacity as a constraint but will, instead, address the capacity issues to ensure that we give our children full-time education? We are looking at the possibility of Scotland being the only one of the four nations of the United Kingdom not planning—or at least trying to have—a full-time return to school in August. That is not good enough.

Councillor McCabe: I respect your passion for young people and their futures. I share that passion—I want all our young people to flourish. However, there is no point in me telling you or anybody else that what you have described is possible with 2m social distancing.

I have heard from other people, including some in my political party, that we should make a superhuman effort to double the school estate to provide full-time education with 2m social distancing. With all due respect to the NHS, it set up one temporary hospital, at a cost of £43 million, and it has never been used. As I understand it, there are around 2,500 schools in Scotland. To imagine that we could replicate 2,500 schools is, to be perfectly honest, just fantasy.

In my village, we could accommodate half of the school roll in the community centre, which used to be the primary school. However, five minutes down the road to Port Glasgow, there is a campus of two secondary schools and a special needs school, with a school roll of about 1,200 pupils. The primary schools in Port Glasgow have a combined roll of about 1,000, and there are not the buildings to accommodate half of that roll. I am sorry, but that idea is simply a fantasy.

Money is not the only issue. If the Scottish Government offered councils a blank cheque and

said, “It doesn’t matter what it costs—go out there and double the school estate. Get every single child back to school full time with face-to-face learning in August, based on 2m social distancing,” we could not do it. Carrie Lindsay gave practical examples of that when she talked about the issues of accommodating the school roll when a school in Fife burned down. Your proposal is absolutely impossible.

Alex Neil: There are many areas where it could be done, although maybe not necessarily in cases such as the one that you mentioned in Inverclyde. In your village, where the old school is still available, surely you should use that if it can take half the pupils and additional teachers can be found. I agree that you would have to get funding from the Scottish Government to do that.

In areas such as the one you described in Greenock, can we apply a bit of imagination? Supervised homework hubs could be created, for example, with the information technology to make sure that every child has access to what they need to do. One and half days a week of face-to-face learning is just not acceptable. Many years ago, we all signed up to getting it right for every child—GIRFEC—but the current approach is not getting it right for most children.

We need a bit of imagination and to apply the ideas on—[*Inaudible.*]—accommodation and the homework hubs that have been tried elsewhere. We need to reassure teachers and other staff about security, with weekly testing for Covid in every school until we get back to as normal as is possible. I think that you have taken the capacity constraints and decided to work to them without trying to overcome them.

Councillor McCabe: I do not accept that. Councils are trying enormously hard to find ways to maximise the amount of face-to-face learning. Given that we have now had the offer of potential funding from the Government and that councils will now engage with Education Scotland, we can consider how to maximise face-to-face learning and provide support to young people and families. You challenged me on the question of whether we can get schools back to 100 per cent face-to-face learning by August, and we cannot do that with 2m social distancing.

Alex Neil: Well, you have to look at the other side of things. I accept there are some areas where there are physical challenges, but if you created supervised homework hubs for example, that would be far better. We know from the past three months that home schooling has been particularly detrimental for poorer kids, kids who are vulnerable and so on. It has even been difficult for a lot of middle-class kids, and, as parents go back to work, it will be even more difficult.

We talk about scientific advice, but nobody seems to be listening to the scientific advice from 1,500 paediatricians that was published on 17 June. In their letter, they said that the risk of

“scarring the life chances of a generation of young people”

by not going back to something close to full-time education is a lot higher for young people in our country than the current arrangements for schooling that were put in place because of the virus.

I agree with Stephen McCabe that we have to plan for the worst case. We might be down to 1m social distancing in August and there might be a second wave of the virus in January, so we would be back to where we started. We would need much more capacity in the system, and I accept that there would be challenges in particular areas.

I go back to the example of my grandchildren. Surely, a day and a half is not acceptable for them. Round the corner from the school, a village hall sits empty, doing nothing. Why is that not being used? Why are we not raising our ambitions? If every other nation in the UK can do that, why cannot Scotland?

Councillor McCabe: I am not going to tell you that that is acceptable, but I am not going to tell you that it is unacceptable either. I will not comment on individual cases, but the reality is that councils have faced and continue to face enormous constraints. If there is the opportunity of additional funding, those are the types of initiative that we could consider.

In relation to the science and 2m social distancing, the reality is that we are reliant on the Government’s advice. We will take the Government’s advice, and, if that advice changes, our plans will change.

I am passionate about getting young people back to school as quickly as we can. I know a young person who has been off school for three months and who has done absolutely no online learning in that time. I managed to get him into a childcare hub one day a week, and he is now attending school—the hub is in a school—two days a week, which is good because he needs face-to-face support. I understand your frustrations, but we must work within the constraints.

I spent last Friday night watching two hours of the committee’s evidence session earlier that day, when you were interviewing the Deputy First Minister. I am afraid that you should be putting to Government some of the questions and the challenges that you are putting to us.

11:00

Alex Neil: I agree. Just to go back to the scientific advice—

The Convener: Alex—

Alex Neil: This is my final question. If we are all following the signs—

The Convener: Ms Lindsay wants to respond to the previous question, if that is okay. I will come back to you.

Alex Neil: Sorry.

The Convener: No problem.

Carrie Lindsay: I want to clarify two issues. First, I see staff in schools, headteachers and local authorities being hugely imaginative and creative in trying to keep our children learning. They have perhaps not managed that with 100 per cent of pupils, but if we were not being creative or imaginative, it would not be happening with even 50 per cent of pupils. People are trying their absolute best in circumstances that none of us has ever been in before. We are doing something that is completely new to us.

Secondly, our plans to get schools up and running are our initial plans. In my local authority, we have been talking about staged or phased plans. We are thinking about getting people back in as the first phase.

The safety and wellbeing of our children and young people is hugely important to us. We know that it will be tricky for parents and grandparents, as you mentioned, and it will be difficult for our children and young people to come back into and be part of the school community again. The blended learning approach allows us to take a phased approach. If we get more resource, we might be able to do that more quickly, but we need to have the support of local communities and to use everyone's expertise and support to allow our children and young people to return to school.

I will finish on the idea of using other facilities. Some facilities will be suitable, but I cannot stress enough how challenging it was for me to get children from one school into different buildings. I had to look at toilet and hand-washing facilities, at playgrounds and at how to get all the staff there, including the cleaning and catering staff. It is not simple, particularly when you multiply that for a number of different establishments.

We are being innovative and creative, and we will work with local communities to help us as much possible.

Alex Neil: I will make two points in response. First, I make it clear that I am not in any way disparaging the excellent efforts of educationists at every level, who are doing what they can to see us

through the crisis. There is no question of my being anything other than admiring of educationists' work.

On the political point—and politics is about the allocation of resources—we must lift some of the shackles that are on you guys and find alternative capacity, staffing and buildings, as well as finding the money. The scientific and medical advice from the paediatricians and others is that, if we do not get children back in full-time education, or as near as damn it in full-time education, the damage that we will do to the kids will be far greater than the potential risk of coronavirus. We have to listen to that medical evidence.

We have seven weeks to plan. Even if it will not all happen in seven weeks' time, let us at least plan to get our kids back safely in full-time education, working on the assumption that 2m distancing will stay but understanding that that may change between now and the beginning or end of August.

The risk to our children now of what we are planning to do, which is a day and half a week in school, is educationally not acceptable. There are mental and physical health risks, and paediatricians are telling us about the risk to their life chances. There is also the risk to our economy in the medium term if our kids never get back the education that they are losing out on. We cannot afford to do anything other than at least strive to get the kids back full time in August. Does Stephen McCabe not agree?

Councillor McCabe: We are striving to maximise the amount of time that young people can spend in school and be supported face to face with the resources that are currently available to us. If additional resources are made available, we can potentially increase that amount of contact. Nonetheless, if we are to retain social distancing of 2m, it is simply not practical to get 100 per cent of children back in school in August. Whether or not you or I want that to happen, I simply do not accept that it is possible.

Alex Neil: But we can do much better than giving children 30 per cent of their time at school. From the experience of the past three months, we know that, although policy has been well intentioned, home education is not working, particularly for poor kids, but even for middle-class kids. Many of them do not have information technology support from the council, so when their IT system breaks down, the whole thing breaks down. We need a much more ambitious programme than the one that we currently have. The current approach is not up to scratch, and it is nowhere near what our children need.

The Convener: I am very conscious of the time. Are you finished, Alex?

Alex Neil: I am finished.

The Convener: Good points have been made on both sides. We move to questions from Daniel Johnson.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): Perhaps I can lead on from where Alex Neil has taken us. I will put it the other way round. Hundreds of parents have written to me to say that they are very upset and angry because the one day a week of schooling that many of them have been promised by our local council falls well short of the 50 per cent mark that they were expecting.

John Swinney previously told the committee that he

“would like to see the level of schooling being as close to 50 per cent as”

possible. He admitted that that might

“not be possible”

but went on to say that

“it might be possible to exceed”—[*Official Report, Education and Skills Committee*, 12 June 2020; c 10-11.]

that amount in some settings.

Councillor McCabe, should John Swinney have been surprised that 50 per cent has been such a challenging target for so many local authorities and schools to achieve?

Councillor McCabe: I do not think that John Swinney should have been surprised by that. We had discussions through the education recovery group on that very issue with regard to what was achievable. The view was that, in some cases—as we see in some of the local authority plans—100 per cent is achievable. In a rural school with a small roll, and with plenty of accommodation and sufficient teachers, it is possible to get 100 per cent of the children back in school. However, the school estate is so varied across Scotland that individual councils face very different challenges.

Much of the issue potentially comes down to where councils are with their school estate. In Inverclyde, our school estate has been completely renewed, and we have a mix of new-build schools and schools that have been completely remodelled and refurbished to a very high standard to provide space and capacity. That allows us potentially to achieve a higher level of face-to-face learning. On average, our current offer is two and a half days per week in secondaries and two days in primaries. We could potentially increase the offer in primaries with some additional resources. However, different councils are in different places, and I will not criticise any individual council.

With regard to my council, I have had no emails whatsoever from parents about the matter, and I

am the council leader. If the parents in my area were up in arms, I would expect my inbox to be flooded with emails. Throughout the pandemic, I have had no emails at all about education matters—absolutely none. Perhaps parents are bypassing local government and going straight to Parliament because they think that all the decisions are taken there. I can understand the reaction in certain council areas, but I will not criticise any of the councils—they are all working incredibly hard to support young people and maximise learning.

If the Government and Parliament can provide additional resources, I am confident that—certainly in some instances—we could increase the amount of face-to-face learning. My challenge to you as parliamentarians, and to the Government, is to provide us with additional resources; we might then be able to deliver provision that is closer to the 50 per cent mark.

Daniel Johnson: I think that your point about resources is a good one to make—you are correct to challenge the Government on that—but I assure you that my email count on the issue is in the hundreds.

You have said that, if we are to get to the 50 per cent figure, that will be a function of social distancing, the number of teachers and other staff that we have in schools, the space that is available in schools, the amount of money that is provided and the transport that is available. Looking at each of those variables, what will it take to get to 50 per cent? Has COSLA done work on that? What is needed in each of those categories to get to 50 per cent across the country?

Councillor McCabe: The dialogue does not involve looking at those categories; it involves looking at the plans of individual councils and councils being supported by COSLA and our directors of education to engage with Education Scotland and the Government to see what can be done in each council area to increase the amount of face-to-face learning. That will vary from council area to council area.

The figure of 50 per cent was not written into the strategic framework. That was deliberate, because some people were of the view that we could not achieve a figure of 50 per cent of learning in school with 2m social distancing. The Government has set that ambition. As councils, our ambition is to maximise the amount of face-to-face learning that is provided within the constraints that we will have to operate within. I am sure that if we could secure some additional resources, that would help.

However, as Carrie Lindsay has pointed out, the issue is not just one of money; there are practicalities that need to be considered. In the

past few days, I have had a discussion with a bus operator, and I know that there are huge challenges for bus operators in staying in business throughout the pandemic, because their markets have collapsed. We have tried to support bus operators by continuing to make payments for school transport even when services have not been provided. We are now looking to operators to substantially increase the service that they can provide, and there are simply not enough buses. Double runs will have to be undertaken to get children to school, which will involve opening schools earlier and closing them later. There are huge practical issues that must be considered. More money would be welcome and would assist, but there are enormous practical challenges that mean that, in some cases, it might not be possible to get to 50 per cent.

Daniel Johnson: I understand—

The Convener: Ms Lindsay wants to come in on that point.

Carrie Lindsay: I would like to reinforce one of the points that Councillor McCabe made. The 50 per cent figure was not in the strategic framework, which was about maximising the use of space. The 50 per cent figure seems to have been picked up in the past few days.

I am not aware of evidence on blended learning that tells us that 50 per cent is the optimum level of face-to-face learning, although new evidence is becoming available all the time, and if evidence emerges that tells us that 50 per cent is the optimum level of face-to-face learning, we should focus on that.

As directors of education, I and my colleagues are trying to deliver quality and to maximise face-to-face contact, but not to focus only on quantity. That is where the current debate about 50 per cent is not helpful. We should not think only about quantity without having evidence to say that 50 per cent face-to-face learning would be best for children's learning. If such evidence became available, we would look at that.

Differences in provision—whenever we have them—always create disappointment. People notice that one local authority is doing one thing, while another is doing another. We must look at what the parameters are and why councils are making those decisions. Directors of education are trying to be clear about why decisions are being made. If that is not coming across well enough, we need to make sure that we get better at that.

We can think about these plans as induction plans—they are the plans to start the process of thinking about how we can get our schools back to normal, or back to some level of normality, bearing in mind the need to look after our children's wellbeing and safety. Those plans will not

necessarily run for a long time, particularly now that we know that new resource will be provided to support any changes to them.

Daniel Johnson: It is not just in the past few days that the figure of 50 per cent has been cited—I quoted the Deputy First Minister citing the 50 per cent figure, so it is not an unreasonable expectation of parents.

I say to Councillor McCabe that, if he wants us to make the case to Government, we need to understand what the gap is for all those resource areas. However, I will move on to my next question.

11:15

Some of the language on blended learning is perhaps unhelpful. I think that people have got it in their heads that we are going to have whizzy, technology-based solutions but, actually, a lot of it will look very traditional. My experience has certainly been that what we are delivering at home is worksheets. Many parents in my constituency have noted that all the materials have been generated by schools themselves, and there has been huge replication of effort. Teachers have been making an extraordinary effort in developing the content but, in essence, we have seen the reinvention of the wheel school by school.

Surely, there is a need to develop some economies of scale here. When materials are developed to be deployed, there should be some consistency. That is not necessarily the way that we would normally approach things, but in the current circumstances, given the pressures, there should surely be centralised resources to be called upon. They should certainly not be made mandatory, but they should be available to be used so that we do not have this extraordinary duplication of effort.

Does the panel agree that we need that national approach to the development of at-home materials?

Councillor McCabe: I agree that schools have been making an enormous effort to meet young people's needs, and that will continue to be the case. Education Scotland is absolutely playing a role as well. Carrie Lindsay might want to comment on the role that it is playing and what we are trying to do collectively as a system.

Carrie Lindsay: I mentioned earlier the e-Sgoil resources from SCHOLAR that are available online, but you are right. Education Scotland is developing materials that will be available nationally to support home learning. Teachers are creative and innovative individuals and they also—probably—like a bit of control. Sometimes we find that, even if something is provided nationally,

teachers want to shape it to make it work for them in their particular circumstances. There is nothing wrong with that, but we want to make sure that we reduce the workload for all our staff in our schools and that they can access materials that will help them to deliver the blended model.

We also have the regional improvement collaboratives. In our collaborative, we have been working on support and advice on blended learning and looking at things that we can do and how we can support digitally some of the work in our region. We are working in a number of ways to ensure that we do not reinvent the wheel, but provide the best possible materials for home learning or blended learning.

Daniel Johnson: In recent days, we have heard the plans described as a contingency. Will you explain what you understand that to mean? Is this plan A? Is there a plan B?

Councillor McCabe: This is the plan that we are working on at this point in order to try to return our young people to school, face to face, in August as much as we can, but if circumstances change, we will need to change the plans. We are not in control of that. Decisions that affect the plans will be made by the Government, and if it changes the rules—for example, on the 2m social distancing—we will need to adapt our plans accordingly. As I said, a lot of work is going in to implement the current plans, and work will continue over the summer, even when staff are on holiday. However, if there are significant changes, that will obviously add to the challenges for local authorities.

As Carrie Lindsay said, this is not the end point. This is the starting point for getting our young people back to school after most of them have not been in school for months. It is about starting to get them back, albeit on a phased basis. Ultimately, we aspire to return all our young people to school full time at the earliest opportunity.

Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): I am interested to hear from everyone about variety. I accept and understand the reasons why there is variety in what can be provided from school to school. However, I am keen to know what is being done around the country to engage with parents on that. In particular, could panel members touch on what some of the constraints are and explain why some schools are physically capable of providing more than others?

Eddie Follan: It comes back to the fact that we have local plans. People will come up with what they need to do as part of those plans. We know that those plans have moved at pace, and that it has affected the way in which we can engage with

parents. However, we also know that most authorities are doing so. That will develop as we go on.

I will ask Carrie Lindsay to answer, because I think that she is closer to the issue of plans.

Carrie Lindsay: I would like to touch on the last question, which was about contingency plans. I think that we are calling the plans different things. You might hear about “induction”, “contingency”, “stage” or “phase” plans; those all mean the same thing, which is that we know that this is not set in stone and that we will have to change the model, because advice will change. That is the message that we are giving. However, it takes quite a long time to develop such plans. In my case, the plan is for 53,000 children across 153 schools. Therefore, it cannot be changed quickly. There needs to be space for us to make changes as we progress.

We all want children to go back to school as normal—everybody would want that—but we are in the middle of a pandemic so we are having to look at the practical barriers that are stopping us from having 100 per cent of pupils in our schools. Transport is an issue. If we can only get 15 children on a double-decker bus, and the buses cannot do more than one run because they go on to do other things after their school runs, that is a practical problem that we cannot solve easily. In some of our island communities, buses are used for cruise liners and various other things, and some companies have gone out of business.

Available space is the other key issue. If we do not have enough available space that is appropriate to use for good-quality learning and teaching, that becomes a barrier. Availability of staff is also an issue. There might be staff available in some local authorities but not in others, so that is also a barrier. I do not want to get too practical. However, toileting and hand washing are other key issues that we need to look at to understand how we can keep our children safe.

Some of those things can become barriers to the safety and wellbeing of our children and young people. We are working hard on that at local authority level with our education services and headteachers to ensure that we are getting the maximum capacity in our schools so that we get children and young people back as much as we can.

Dr Allan: You have neatly anticipated my question, which was about capacity on transport and buses. You also, rightly, mentioned that that is a particular issue for island constituencies like my own, although I have to say that there are sadly no cruise liners at the moment—I hope that that will change at some point. You have indicated what some of the challenges are, and you mentioned

island and rural areas. Many of the young people at secondary school in my constituency travel more than 20 miles each way per day to get to school. Do we have a picture of the variety in the transport problems that are faced across the country? Are there any parts of the country or types of school that will face real logistical problems with school transport?

Councillor McCabe: That issue has been raised at COSLA leaders meetings on a number of occasions by island council leaders. Obviously, poor connectivity in the islands is also linked to that. Transport and connectivity are both major issues for island communities.

Carrie Lindsay: We have been having weekly mini directors forums, as we call them. I have had conversations with people from Orkney, Shetland and the Western Isles about some of their transport problems. Interestingly, they are the same transport problems that I have in Fife. We are a mini Scotland in some ways, and we have fairly rural communities where children travel almost 20 miles to get to school. We have the same difficulty in trying to access more buses. If we can only get 15 children on a bus, we need to consider whether more buses are available. We have been talking about and working through those difficulties. We try to support one another to think about solutions. We have not come up with a suggestion on where we can buy new buses, but that is the kind of thing that we are thinking about. We are helping one another and thinking outside the box about what might be possible.

You are absolutely right that transport is an issue in some local authorities. In others, it will not be a problem at all. There are differences in how we need to respond to the barriers in order to maximise what we do for our children and young people.

Dr Allan: It is fair to say that you have all expressed some scepticism about the idea of using temporary or additional buildings. I can understand why it is not possible to find 2,500 additional buildings, but are local authorities working with one another to identify which individual schools have that option? As others have said, there are logistical challenges and we will never come close to what is needed, but there are churches and village halls around the country that might be usable. What co-ordination is there to identify whether any of them are usable?

Carrie Lindsay: That is another conversation that directors have been having. Quite a number of people have contacted me to ask about what we did after the fire at Woodmill high school, what the barriers are to doing that again and what resource is required. We are supporting one another and thinking about creative ways to use buildings. We probably need to think about how to

maximise the use of assets in each individual local community. It would be more challenging to bus children across boundaries between local authorities. To go back to the example of the fire, we considered whether it would work to bus children to another local authority area, but the distances made that very difficult, including for staff. We need to consider what facilities are available at local level and what it is appropriate to use to deliver quality learning and teaching.

Councillor McCabe: We need to understand that, over the past decade or so, councils have been rationalising their school estates—they have been closing schools and in some cases refurbishing and building new ones. In my council, most schools are probably at more than 80 per cent of capacity. On top of that, we no longer have the number of public buildings that people think that we have in our communities, because a lot of them have been closed. For example, community centres have been closed due to austerity and churches have closed. People might perceive that there are a lot of public buildings that could be used. However, even if practically we could use them, many are not available. There is not the amount of extra accommodation that people think there is.

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): I am sorry, but I want to return to the contingency plan. Carrie Lindsay said that language is important, and it absolutely is. All this week in Parliament, we have been told that blended learning is a contingency plan for going back in August. That implies that there is another plan for going back in August. Stephen McCabe, you are the co-chair of the education recovery group, along with the Deputy First Minister. Blended learning is not a contingency plan for August, is it? It is the plan.

11:30

Councillor McCabe: As far as I am concerned, at this point in time, it is the plan. The Government advice is for 2m social distancing, so we cannot accommodate 100 per cent of our pupils in school. We will therefore have to have a blend of face-to-face learning and home learning. That is the plan at this point in time but, if things change, plans will need to change.

However, as Carrie Lindsay has highlighted, it is not easy to change plans quickly. We will be sending term-time school staff away on holiday—I do not think that many of them will be going too far—within the next week. Basically, they are going away with the understanding that the plans that are being developed and which they have seen are the plans that they will be implementing come August. If things are going to change, they need to change quickly. Realistically, I think that blended learning will be the plan that is in place in

August. The issue then becomes how, over time, things evolve and change and over what timescale they change.

Iain Gray: You made a compelling case for the efforts that are going into delivering the blended learning plans from teachers, local authorities and so on. Do you think that those involved in trying to put those plans in place would have been a bit taken aback to be told this week that it was just a contingency plan that they were working on?

Councillor McCabe: Yes, I think so, from the reaction that I have had across the system, to be perfectly honest. Given the amount of effort that people are putting into this, the danger is that there will be a bit of demotivation on the back of that news.

Iain Gray: That is helpful. Another thing that we have been told in Parliament is that local authorities should be using imagination, innovation and every possible resource to try to maximise face-to-face school time. One aspect of that is using other premises, and we have explored that quite a lot. The other aspect is taking on additional teaching staff by bringing back retired teachers or taking on new teachers. We touched on that briefly around the issue of newly qualified teachers. We are being told by NQTs that they are not able to get employment. I think that Carrie Lindsay said that Fife was able to take on only half the NQTs who were looking to work there. In reality, is anybody anywhere bringing back retired teachers, employing new teachers, and taking on more probationers than they would have? Is that happening anywhere?

Carrie Lindsay: Earlier, I was referring to the fact that we were trying to develop our models within our existing budgets. At that point, we were thinking that we might take on some more staff but not in large numbers. Now that there may be some more resource available—although we are not sure what that looks like yet—that is certainly something that we would be considering.

We would not be taking on those staff on a permanent basis, because we will not need them permanently. We would take them on as supply staff or temporary staff. If these are contingency plans—if the advice changes—we will need to look at our plans differently. That is the big question for us. I cannot tell you whether people are starting to use retired staff, because that is something that the General Teaching Council for Scotland has done quite recently. I do not know whether that idea has been taken up by some local authorities. Currently, my local authority has not taken it up. That is not to say that it would not do so if it needed to.

Iain Gray: The trouble with that is that, in their letter, the newly qualified teachers say that to be

taken on as supply staff is equivalent to being offered a zero-hours contract and, for many of them, what that means is that they will have to find alternative employment in other professions. At the same time that we are trying to bring our pupils back for maybe only 50 per cent of the time, we are turning away newly qualified, enthusiastic and motivated teachers. Is that not the case?

Carrie Lindsay: I do not think we are turning them away. We are—

Iain Gray: They are saying that they are going to go and do something else.

Carrie Lindsay: We have certainly been using some of our people in our hub areas. In the last wee while, they have been volunteering to do some of that work.

If we have the resource and the requirement to take teachers on, that is absolutely what we will do. Obviously, if the plans change in any way and we have further resource, we will look to employ more teachers. On whether that would be supply teachers or permanent teachers, you will understand that, if we took on large numbers of permanent staff and later we no longer required them, we would be in a difficult situation, because they would not have posts. It is quite a complex situation. We need to look at that and to decide what we need to deliver the blended model that we have planned for, while also looking for future models and working with our NQTs to make sure that we are giving them the support that they need and the advice that they need about their futures.

Iain Gray: The trouble is that, complex though it may be, it looks very simple from the outside. Here we have newly trained, qualified teachers, who are keen and eager to be teaching, and we cannot give them a job.

I will ask a final question about resources. We are told that, in order to cope with the emergency, local authorities have been given flexibility to use the funding that has been provided to deliver the 1,140 hours childcare expansion. I have to be honest and say that I do not understand that, because the requirement for 1,140 hours of early years provision has only been delayed, as I understand it, so councils are still going to be required to deliver it and those resources are still going to be needed. Can anyone on the panel explain to me how that resource is available, for example, to employ those newly qualified teachers?

Councillor McCabe: I saw the letter from newly qualified teachers circulating on social media last night. Staffing will be a key issue in the discussion that we are having at a national level. We will certainly look at the NQT issue; it has been raised by the teaching trade unions as well.

Carrie Lindsay: On early learning and childcare, I am going to use the word “complex” again—I do not mean that to be patronising in any way. The statutory requirement for an early learning and childcare offer of 1,140 hours has been taken away for now, but Iain Gray is right that we must still plan to deliver 1,140 hours as the year goes on.

Nursery and childcare settings employ people throughout the year, because they take in children as they go through the year. If they are not going to deliver the 1,140 hours, that will reduce the number of staff that they might require, but it will increase over the year as more children come in and they are able to open up to 1,140 hours. Some of that is a projection of how long they might be running the current model. People who have decided that they cannot deliver 1,140 hours and have gone back to delivering 600 hours might have had the staffing available to deliver the 1,140. That situation will be different now, because the staffing that they require will have changed because of the physical distancing or the bubble groups in early learning and childcare, and they will be working through that now. It means that there will be some availability of funding, but in some places the amounts will not necessarily be significant.

Also, if there has been a delay in building, local authorities might be looking to use that money in other ways—that would be the flexibility in that budget.

Councillor McCabe: It is fair to say that that flexibility is fairly limited. Quite a number of councils are in a position to deliver the 1,140 hours come August anyway, as in many instances they will have already recruited the staff. Therefore, some additional funding might be available, but it is not sufficient to meet the issue that we face.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): How will teachers be expected to balance the workload between classroom and remote learning? We know that teachers in Scotland work long hours already. At the end of a long day teaching, will they be turning to their emails and finding that much more is awaiting them from pupils whom they have not been teaching in school that day?

Carrie Lindsay: Teacher workload is always an issue for us. Having been a teacher for many years, I know that teachers are sometimes their own worst enemies, because they want to do a really good job for children and young people. Across our local authorities and schools, teachers are trying to get it right for our children and young people.

In relation to teachers delivering in a classroom and maximising the opportunities for our children and young people, having face-to-face contact with half the children for 50 per cent of the time—which is not something that I like to talk about—means that teachers will have 100 per cent contact during a week. That will not allow teachers to provide materials for home learning in the same way. The material might be linked to the classroom practice, but teachers might not be given enough time. Some of the models that have been developed allow a bit of time and capacity to help teachers. This is new to them and to us. That capacity might not be needed after the first wee while, which is why we are using a phased model.

As directors, we talk with our unions all the time about teacher workload to ensure that we support teachers in being able to deliver the blended learning model in a way that is best for our children and young people but which also takes account of our staff wellbeing, which is very important. We cannot run our schools if our staff go off sick, so it is important that we address workload in that way.

Beatrice Wishart: That answer leads on to my questions about teachers with caring responsibilities. We know that quite a high number of teachers have caring responsibilities. Last week, the education secretary told me that

“teachers will be defined as key workers, and there will be a requirement to provide childcare support to meet their needs.”—[*Official Report, Education and Skills Committee*, 12 June 2020; c 19.]

Will you confirm what is in place for teachers now? What might the arrangements look like? Might the support be limited to single parents or to those with a partner who is also a key worker? We need some clarity on those issues.

Eddie Follan: I know that Carrie Lindsay will want to come in on those questions. In the emergency phase, we set up the hubs and the key worker categories were created. Now that we have moved into the recovery phase, we are working with the Scottish Government, ADES and partners on the categories of key workers and the tensions and complexities in that regard. I know that ADES has been working on and thinking about that issue, so I will ask Carrie Lindsay to comment.

Carrie Lindsay: It is quite a challenge, because everyone—whether they are in the teaching profession or in any other profession—has childcare or caring responsibilities. The key worker status was introduced at a time of emergency, as Eddie Follan said, and we are looking forward to seeing the work that will come out of the review on who key workers are as we move into phase 2 and possibly phase 3. Not everybody who is going back to work can be classed as key workers, or all our children will be back in schools. Our schools

are not about childcare; they are about teaching and allowing our children to progress in their learning.

In the emergency phase, teachers and education staff were considered to be key workers, because they worked in the hubs. That will stop before the holidays. Over the summer holidays, key workers will be able to access what we call children activity centres—most places call them hubs. As we move into the new phases, we need to consider what is possible. We have talked about trying to maximise the face-to-face time that our children and young people are in school settings. If we say that all staff who work in a school are considered to be key workers, we will not be able to take in other children for 50 per cent of the time—if that is a figure to which people like to refer.

There is a need for us to be clear about the purpose of what we are offering in terms of what happens in the school and whether there need to be other childcare offers elsewhere. We have had a lot of discussion with directors of education in that regard, and I know that the issue of how we find that extra capacity, with 2m distancing, for childcare staff who have childcare responsibilities is a pressing issue.

11:45

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): I will return briefly to the point about newly qualified teachers. My question is for Carrie Lindsay. Feel free to keep your answer brief, because we have been over this quite a bit already.

We already have a shortage of teachers, which has led to acute issues in certain subjects, primary classes sizes being too big and so on. We now have the issue of blended learning and a significantly increased need for teachers. Am I correct in understanding that newly qualified teachers are not being recruited for permanent positions because, until the Government can confirm what the extra resource will be, councils do not know whether they will have the money to pay them?

Carrie Lindsay: We are not saying that we are not taking on people because we do not have the resource. We are saying that, when we developed the plans, we did not know that extra resource might become available. The plans that we developed were based on the existing resource. If further resource becomes available, we will consider how we can use it.

On the need for newly qualified teachers, school rolls are dropping at the moment due to the birth rate—although that is not the case everywhere; in parts of Fife, for example, school rolls are increasing—and there has been an increase in

teacher numbers with those who came through in the last cohort. People are looking at the resource that they need in order to fill the vacancies in their schools before they consider taking on extra staff.

I do not want people to go away with the impression that we are not taking on newly qualified teachers—we are employing a large number of them, but not all of them. If we get more resource, we will look to use it to maximise face-to-face contact.

Ross Greer: Councils do not yet know what the extra resource will be, so they cannot make recruitment decisions. My concern is that if it will be some weeks before there is clarity around that and more staff can be recruited, we will be placing newly qualified teachers—whether they have a permanent position or a one-year temporary contract—in schools immediately before a complex and challenging term starts, which means that they will not have had the weeks that are required for them to prepare their work.

Carrie Lindsay: We take in large numbers of probationers and newly qualified teachers. Last year, we took in nearly 300 probationers—I met them all during the summer holidays last year—who will be our NQTs this year. Local authorities always ensure that NQTs are provided with support through in-service days at the start of term.

I do not think that NQTs would be using the whole summer holiday to prepare for the term. If we are making changes over the summer, we will still be in a really good position to support NQTs. That could perhaps be done alongside work with probationers, because the NQTs will not have the time to prepare at the end of the last term that they would normally have in school. We will be looking at how we can support them if they are coming back to work in our schools.

Ross Greer: I will stick with the wider point about additional resources. Councillor McCabe is probably the best person to answer the question. What clarity, if any, is there about additional resource? What are the challenges with a delay in that regard?

There has been much discussion of the requirement for additional facilities. If we were to use community centres, libraries, church halls and so on as temporary school facilities, upgrades to them would be needed. Many of those buildings do not even have controlled entry, so they are not currently safe enough to enable them simply to become schools overnight. That work would need to be done before schools return in August, and it would need to be understood that the resource would be available to pay for it.

What are the implications and the challenges of not having certainty around additional resource?

Do you have an idea of when there will be certainty? What is the process for allocation of additional resource?

Councillor McCabe: You alluded to the challenges in your question. We are engaging with the Government, which has given a clear public indication that additional resources will be made available. The Deputy First Minister and I have discussed the matter, and detailed discussions are taking place at officer level. Eddie Follan is probably best placed to give you a bit more detail.

The matter is certainly urgent. If that money is available, we need to sit down and scrutinise the plans as they currently exist and look at ways in which we can increase the amount of face-to-face learning. We can then identify the resources that are required. Time is not on our side—we need to move forward on this pretty quickly.

Eddie Follan: We have been working on the issue at pace, through the education recovery resources group, which includes representatives of local government and the Scottish Government, to understand what the resource requirements are. We are also working pretty quickly to get information from local authorities on what they see as being the resource implications. Many of the topics that we have discussed today are the top-line issues—transport, infrastructure changes and staffing, for example.

We are aware of the challenges—COSLA has been engaging with local authorities to get a sense of what they need, and we should have that information very soon. We have had an offer of potential additional resources, and we are engaging with Government urgently to understand what that offer includes and what we need, so that we can match the two things up.

Ross Greer: I will move on to another topic. I am not entirely sure who would be the best person to answer the question, which relates to questions that Beatrice Wishart asked about childcare issues for teachers. Many teachers work in one local authority but live in another, so their children go to school in a different area. I am already hearing concerns from teachers that their children's timetable for being physically present in school and their own timetable for teaching are not lining up.

On a much wider level, I am hearing concerns from parents who have children in different school settings—early years, primary and secondary. The primary-secondary split can be particularly difficult for families, as can having one child in a special school and another in a primary or secondary setting. Within a family, the timetables might not line up. Can someone give me a little bit of detail on, or an explanation of, what discussions are taking place between local authorities about

attempting alignment or understanding the challenges? What is—*[Inaudible.]*—on consistency of timetables for families in that situation?

Councillor McCabe: I think that that is a question for Carrie Lindsay.

Carrie Lindsay: It is true that all parents who are returning to work will have childcare issues, so we need to think about how we work together in communities to support them. There is some helpful advice on the Government's parentzone web pages, which suggests that we should think about how we can work together in communities, especially now that people can be in more than one household, to support each other with childcare. Because of the numbers of people who will need childcare, we will not, as education or childcare services, be able to provide the required amount.

You are right that a lot of parents have been speaking about family groupings, so in discussions with my directors everybody is considering how we support families. However, it has to be said that it is not easy. We are innovative and creative, but we do not have a magic wand, so trying to track the children in a family grouping in nursery, primary and secondary settings in order to give them the option of being there on absolutely the same days is difficult.

Some people are definitely looking at what they can do with nursery and primary, but they are not necessarily able to match that up with secondary—if that is the point—or to use many permutations within the different models. People are trying really hard to make sure that the family groupings are taken account of, and are asking parents to tell us if they have particular reasons for certain groupings to be considered together. That work is under way and people will be given information about that as the models go out to parents.

Ross Greer: I will ask one brief final question to clarify that. That work is being done council by council. Is there any strong guidance or an attempt at co-ordination among councils in order to get consistency, or is it left entirely to each local authority to make the best arrangements for itself?

Councillor McCabe: Do you want to come in on that, Carrie?

Carrie Lindsay: I am happy to come in. ADES has discussed what we would do on that, but we have not come up with an answer. At the moment, we are not able to look at how we can match provision across the local authorities. We are talking about it; if we find a way with which we think that it is possible to do to support people, we will certainly try it. Discussion about how we might support each other across local authorities in that way is at an early stage.

Ross Greer: Thank you for that answer; I understand that the matter is incredibly complex.

The Convener: I have a final question on that area, if the panel does not mind. It is born somewhat of frustration, because we have been told that the emergency plan was agreed in consultation between local authorities, Government, the teaching unions and parents.

However, I am a wee bit confused about what I have heard today on use of extra buildings, because I do not think that any of us would realistically expect that learning and teaching as they are in schools could be replicated in those buildings. We have talked about the difference between school and home. My understanding of use of extra buildings was that they could be used as sort of support areas where pupils who were able to attend would have access to technology, the internet and supervision, but not necessarily to replication of learning and teaching. That would give parents a lot of confidence that work was continuing in that setting and that teachers could, obviously, interact with pupils remotely in that setting as well.

I would like reassurance about whether that has been considered, because although the expectation was that extra buildings would be examined and brought into use, I am now seeing and hearing that doing so will not be a practical option for learning and teaching.

Councillor McCabe: I will come in first. I do not think that it is not a practical option; it is, potentially, a practical option at the margins, but not on the scale that some people obviously view it to be. Part of the strategic framework is that we consider expanding the school estate through utilising other premises. However, there are huge challenges when we get down to addressing the practicalities of that. I am sure that councils will, nonetheless, consider the potential for homework hubs or support hubs for providing the type of service that the convener talked about.

Carrie wants to come in.

Carrie Lindsay: The convener is absolutely right that people are looking at that. I do not want to give the wrong impression, so I apologise if that is what you picked up from what I said, Clare.

I am saying that it cannot be done on a large scale because that is simply not practical. For example, we have some very large primary schools, so we are considering buildings near them for providing the model that we want in order that we can maximise support in those areas.

You are right that we might use facilities such as you describe for different purposes, such as childcare. The facilities might not have the resources that are required for high-quality

teaching and learning, but would have enough for childcare.

12:00

Some people are thinking of using such facilities for homework clubs to support senior-phase pupils to get their qualifications. However, if we can provide that only where there is an available building, that will create a difference between a village that has a building and one that does not. We want to make sure that there is equity in what we offer to our children and young people. We are trying to maximise use of the buildings that we have, and local authorities will examine that. If they have the resource to support use of such buildings, they will make the best possible use of them.

The Convener: Thank you. We have two more topics to touch on, and one member has not yet come in, so I will move us on to topic 3, although we will come back to early learning and childcare, which we have touched on.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): It has been a particularly difficult time for vulnerable children and their families. Jim Thewliss told the committee that due to lockdown schools would have a challenge in identifying children who will need more support as they return to school. He said that schools would need to develop

“a completely new system and a completely new understanding of the lives and the lifestyles that young people have experienced during the present period.” — [Official Report, Education and Skills Committee, 5 June 2020; c 16.]

Is there a clear and consistent understanding of what constitutes a vulnerable child? Do you believe that local authorities have delivered and are delivering sufficient and appropriate support to vulnerable and deprived families?

Councillor McCabe: Councillors have been doing a tremendous amount of work to engage with and support vulnerable families during the pandemic. The childcare hubs are one way to do that, so we try to encourage as many families as possible to send their children to them, but there has been a lot of direct engagement beyond that, including through telephone calls, visits and delivery of food parcels. However, that is, and will continue to be, a huge challenge.

There have been discussions about the definition of “vulnerable child”; recently, at national level the definition of “vulnerable family” was revised. Perhaps Carrie Lindsay or Eddie Follan can come in with more detail.

Eddie Follan: I can talk about the definition. In May, the children and families collective leadership group—which is chaired by the Society

of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers and the chief social work officer, and includes wide representation from the third sector, social work and local government—worked on a consistent definition. In broad terms, the definition includes children who require support through more than one agency. It is worth my while to read this out, so that we all understand the definition. The definition includes children who have a child protection plan, those who are looked after at home or away from home, those who are on the edge of care, those who have additional support needs, those who require significant and co-ordinated support and those who are affected by disability.

In local authorities, we have focused on the need to support many of those children. We get a report on contact with children who have a child protection plan. Up to 10 June, 97 per cent of children with a child protection plan had been seen by a professional in the previous two weeks, and between 4 and 10 June, 68 per cent of all children with a multi-agency plan had been contacted by a professional in the past week. Local authorities are working very hard and are aware of the pressure on vulnerable families.

We have also been doing a lot of work on digital engagement; the children's hearings system and multi-agency assessments have been done virtually, so we have been making good use of technology.

Another key point that has come out is that we are seeing much more resilience in families. Anecdotal evidence certainly tells us that. That families who are under pressure are being resilient in dealing with the situation is coming across from social work colleagues in local government and from people in the third sector. Carrie Lindsay will have a good bit of detail about what is happening locally.

Carrie Lindsay: I am a director of education and children's services, so obviously I have insight into vulnerable families not just from an education perspective, but from a social work perspective.

Local authorities are good at working across community planning partnerships to ensure that we prioritise our vulnerable children. I know that there is good data in local authorities; we have been gathering data about which children have been seen. Eddie Follan has given some of the national data that we have gathered. We have also been looking locally at who is seeing and having contact with which children—whether it is a health visitor, a school nurse or a teacher, for example.

We have continued to deliver services: we still have our child protection processes and our—*[Inaudible.]*—processes in place. It has been very

much about the children's services approach, and that will continue when we get back to a different norm.

As well as seeing families who are struggling a bit, we have seen some families demonstrating amazing resilience. I have certainly seen that through my children and families team. Those families have had a different way of living their lives over the past wee while and have supported one another—they have come together and been very resilient.

We need to work with our families. This is not about what we do to families; it is about how we work with them to ensure that we listen to what they need and are vigilant for signs that we might not have seen before that a family is vulnerable. As the economy changes and we see a lot of unemployment, we need to think about the families who come forward and the range of support that we offer, so that we ensure that we are being vigilant about the needs of all our children and young people.

Rona Mackay: Thank you for those answers.

Children with additional support needs and their families have been among the most impacted groups of people during the pandemic. In its submission to the committee, Aberlour Child Care Trust stated:

"Families we support with children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder are particularly struggling with lockdown and the consequential impact on behaviour, as a result of disruption to routines and increased family stress."

How are young people with complex needs being supported at home and in hubs?

In his opening statement, Councillor McCabe said that Education Scotland was monitoring arrangements. Does that include monitoring of the arrangements for ASN pupils in schools? Will that information be published? What will we know about the monitoring that Education Scotland has done?

Councillor McCabe: Education Scotland was looking at the plans that councils had in place for the return to face-to-face learning. Obviously, that will include the ASN sector and ASN schools.

I am sure that Carrie Lindsay can comment on the detail of how we are providing support. I have a child with autistic spectrum disorder, and I know from personal experience how much support he and I have received from council services and the third sector. I know the challenges that are faced only too well. A lot of support is being given by councils and third sector organisations that work in partnership with councils.

Carrie, would you like to provide more detail?

Carrie Lindsay: Yes. Similarly, I have personal experience in that regard. My nephew is on the autistic spectrum. He is an adult now, and he lives in specialist provision. I know that the situation has been really challenging for him. We have had to use a lot of online resources to support him. Therefore, I absolutely understand the situation.

It is an extremely challenging time for some of those families. A number of local authorities have kept their special schools open. In Fife, we have had two special schools open for the past three months, and I know that many of my colleagues have done the same with special schools. We have also been allowing parents to access resources that young people have been using in schools. Those resources, which might be particular adaptations or technology supports, have been delivered to the young people's homes to enable them to continue with some of their learning.

Educational psychologists have been active in providing support directly to parents in a number of authority areas. In Fife, through our supporting learners service, staff have been in direct contact. In some other local authorities, many staff have been in direct contact to find out whether families need extra support. When we talk about vulnerable children, we need to remember that there are lots of groups of vulnerable children. We need to think about young carers, looked-after children, children with additional support needs and children who are struggling because of social problems or poverty. We are aware of all those groups and are providing as much support as we possibly can in the circumstances.

It is important that we work together with children's services. We have been able to provide a bit of support for that and, over the few weeks that the schools have been back, staff have been able to provide a bit of support. We are now going into the summer holiday period, which is another challenging time for some families. Councils are thinking about how they can step up their respite services and support through social work as we move into the phased return to school under the route map.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: I am conscious of the time, so I will be quick. I recently attended an online meeting with the Scottish Youth Parliament's education and lifelong learning committee, and one of the issues that came up was mental health. A survey for the Scottish Youth Parliament's "Lockdown Lowdown—what young people in Scotland are thinking about COVID-19" found that 31 per cent of respondents had concerns about their mental health. Obviously, that figure is only likely to increase as we continue with restrictions and as pupils come back to school. What can councils and schools do in the

short and medium terms to support mental health, given that a lot of the support from the national health service and child and adolescent mental health services has not been available?

Councillor McCabe: Mental health is a huge issue. It was a huge issue before the pandemic, and a number of national initiatives were being taken forward at that time. The pandemic will only have reinforced and increased the need for that. Eddie Follan might want to touch on the national picture, and Carrie Lindsay can come in with some more operational detail on how councils are supporting young people in the current period.

Eddie Follan: Before the pandemic, we were working closely on mental health with the Scottish Government and other partners. As Councillor McCabe said, we recognise that the challenge has become even greater. Obviously, we had issues with children and young people's mental health before the pandemic, but those have been intensified. We are continuing to work with the Scottish Government and other partners on that. Professionals in local areas will be very aware of the issue. I know that Carrie Lindsay has done some work on that.

Carrie Lindsay: I agree with Eddie Follan and Councillor McCabe on mental and emotional wellbeing, as I like to refer to it. We want our children to be emotionally well, and we know that that is a struggle for large numbers of them. In answering the previous question, we talked about some of the groups for whom that is a particular issue, but it is not an issue only for those groups. Society is a difficult place for young people to grow up in at the moment. We are alert to the fact that we need to think about the mental and emotional wellbeing of our young people.

We are thinking about a recovery curriculum and how we can ensure that we take children from where they are now. We will not suddenly deliver what young people might have expected if they had come back as normal after the summer holiday period. It will be a recovery curriculum that takes account of children's emotional wellbeing, where they are at, what experiences they have had and their anxieties about coming back into school. A lot of it will be focused on building up their wellbeing if it has had a knock in the current period.

12:15

Although we have not had young people in our buildings and we are not seeing them face to face, we have been gathering information from them. Young Scot did a survey, and local authorities are doing their own surveys. Young people tell us that they are struggling and that they want to be with their friends. Some of those anxieties will be

alleviated quite quickly once they see that they can get back to school and be with their friends and engage with the support networks that are important to them.

We also have other support mechanisms in place. In our area, we have “Our minds matter: A framework to support children and young people’s emotional wellbeing in Fife”, which is about providing support for mental and emotional health. Staff wellbeing is equally important to us, as our staff cannot support children and young people unless they themselves are well.

Other local authorities are looking at those issues, too—there is a range of frameworks and resources in place. Educational psychologists will be key in supporting that work; they have been providing resources and materials, which appear on a lot of local authority websites, to support schools and families, and—crucially—to support children and young people as they come back to school. Everybody has been working on that area. A lot of information has been going out to headteachers, not only in my local authority but across Scotland. We know that people take those issues seriously and want to work with our young people to give them the best chance possible to get back into things.

The Convener: Our final area of questioning is on early learning and childcare, which Jamie Greene will ask about.

Jamie Greene: Thank you, convener. It has been a long session, so I will keep my questions short. My first is a simple one: how many of Scotland’s 32 local authorities are still planning to deliver 1,140 hours of funded childcare? If an authority is not planning to do so, why is that?

Councillor McCabe: I will bring in Eddie Follan first.

Eddie Follan: I am afraid that I do not have a number to give the committee in respect of those local authorities that are delivering 1,140 hours. I do not know whether Carrie Lindsay has a number. There are councils that are delivering that amount of childcare. Where councils are not doing so, it will be because of pressures in different areas, such as staffing or accommodation.

On Monday, COSLA produced guidance on the opening of ELC settings. Our aim is for councils to provide as much support, and as much childcare, to as many people as possible. However, that will be complex, and we will work through the issues with the Scottish Government and our partners as we move forward. I do not know whether Carrie Lindsay wants to add anything.

Carrie Lindsay: My background is in early years—I started my career as a nursery nurse, so early years provision is very important to me. We

know how important it is to get it right for our children and young people, because it makes a big difference to their future if they get the best start.

I do not think that any local authority in Scotland is not looking to maximise the number of hours that it is able to offer. However, there will be a number of restrictions—for example, councils may not be able to build the buildings that they need or to bring in all the staff that they require because they could not hold interviews. There are some practical barriers that will prevent councils from being able to deliver 1,140 hours of childcare at this point in time. However, I reassure people that all local authorities are looking at how they will be able to deliver 1,140 hours in the future.

In my local authority, we had sought to deliver 1,140 hours in almost all our nurseries, apart from those where our new builds had not been completed. However, because children now need to be in smaller groupings, our approach has had to change again. The current circumstances, as a result of the pandemic in which we find ourselves, mean that we may have to deliver something different at this point in time. Nonetheless, everybody is aware that the early years stage is really important for all our children, and we want to maximise their time in that environment to help them to learn as they go into the future.

Councillor McCabe: I co-chair, with the Minister for Children and Young People, the early learning and childcare joint delivery board, which is meeting on Monday to take stock of where we are and to look at potentially planning for when we can fully roll out the delivery of 1,140 hours of childcare.

I know that a number of councils are pretty well advanced. A report to our emergency committee on Tuesday said that we are, in effect, in place to deliver 1,140 hours by August but that, in practical terms, we will not do that, because of the social distancing requirements and other issues to do with the pandemic. However, as soon as we are in some sense back to normality, we can deliver that target. I think that most councils are pretty well advanced in that regard, but we will get a clearer national picture when we have a meeting of the delivery board.

Jamie Greene: That is the good news. The bad news is that I know that many councils are not planning to deliver 1,140 hours—in fact, some councils have told providers that they are going to deliver only 600 hours, which is the statutory minimum. That is concerning to the providers, which had already made plans based on that funding, and it is concerning to the parents who were relying on those hours being provided. There is a double whammy for parents who want to get back to work, because the number of funded

childcare hours in some council areas has reduced and they will have to teach their children part time at home. You can see the issue here.

I am slightly concerned that no one knows the answer to my question. It might be a question for the minister with responsibility for childcare, and I will be happy to pose it in Parliament next week. We should surely have a bigger-picture view of what is happening across the country. From what I am hearing from nurseries, childcare providers and parents, it seems that we are facing an issue that is of real concern.

Councillor McCabe: We can certainly arrange to provide the committee with an update on the picture across the country as we understand it, through the mechanisms that are available—Eddie Follan will make a note of that.

As we discussed earlier, childcare is a huge issue, and there is no desire on the part of councils not to provide the childcare that parents require. However, councils are operating in enormously challenging circumstances, which vary from council to council. If you look at the plan for the expansion to 1,140 hours, you will see that much of the implementation of that was factored in to take place between March and August, so it is not a surprise that many councils might not be in a position to deliver that number of hours, when most of the additional provision—I am talking about the recruitment of staff and so on—was going to be put in place over that period. Obviously, construction work has stopped and it is difficult to recruit staff in the middle of a pandemic.

The Convener: Miss Lindsay wants to come in.

Carrie Lindsay: I have not been called Miss Lindsay for a long time—that takes me back to my teaching days, so thank you for that.

The social distancing and bubble groupings guidance for early learning and childcare settings came out only on Monday, so it is not practical to expect us to have information about what all the local authorities are doing in that regard at this point. The early learning and childcare group will certainly be looking at that, as Councillor McCabe said. People who might have thought that they were going to provide 1,140 hours might find that that might change, because of that guidance.

I am sure that we can get information to you once people have put in place the new models.

Jamie Greene: In the interests of time, I will say only that a number of providers have told me that they will not survive the next few months. If a lot of childcare providers go under, councils will have to deliver childcare in a nursery environment. Are you planning for that?

Councillor McCabe: Throughout the pandemic, our objective has been to ensure that private

providers do not go out of business. We want to ensure that they are sustainable so that they are available at the other side of this to provide the childcare and early learning that we require. If there are issues with that at individual council level, I would encourage providers to engage with their council. If that requires engagement at the political level, I will have that engagement. It is certainly not in the interests of councils to allow providers to go out of business. Councils operate very much in partnership with the providers.

The Convener: The final question comes from Ms Wishart.

Beatrice Wishart: I am very conscious of the time, so I will keep this brief. I have been asked why no one is discussing ELC and nursery provision in this debate, given that that is an essential part of getting parents back to work. I hope that our discussions today will have changed that view.

Will the panel comment on whether reduced ELC capacity and a lack of childcare, along with reduced school hours, are having a detrimental effect on women? Do you have information or equality assessments that you can share with us?

Councillor McCabe: Eddie Follan might be able to talk about how we are approaching that at policy level, and Carrie Lindsay might want to say something.

Eddie Follan: There is absolutely a recognition that there is likely to be a disproportionate impact on women. We will want to pick up that issue as we get to the next stages. In the first stage, when we paused the 1,140 hours approach, the focus was on hubs and emergency childcare, but as we start to ramp up provision, we need to take the issue very seriously.

Carrie Lindsay: I want to ask Ms Wishart whether, when she said that there has been no focus on ELC, she meant in this conversation or in the national debate. If it is the latter, I think that that is because the guidance came out only on Monday, so the plans are not out there in the same numbers as the plans for primary and secondary. I am sorry if I got that wrong and you were talking about this conversation.

Beatrice Wishart: No, I was talking about the wider context. Some parents feel that they have been left out.

Carrie Lindsay: That is because the guidance came out only on Monday. We need to get better at communicating, but now that the guidance is out, the information will start to go out to parents.

I absolutely agree with you about the impact on women, which is something that I feel strongly about. We are happy to look at equality impact assessments for a range of equality groups as we

go forward with our plans. On childcare, we are waiting to find out about support, funding and the review of key workers, because it is in those areas that local authorities are best placed to think about how we can ensure that women are not as disadvantaged as they might appear to be.

Beatrice Wishart: Thank you. That is helpful.

The Convener: I thank everyone, especially Councillor McCabe, Ms Lindsay and Mr Follan, for their attendance. It has been a long meeting, and we really appreciate your giving up your time.

12:28

Meeting continued in private until 13:03.

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