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Dear Convener

Covid-19: The wellbeing and learning experiences of vulnerable children and young people

26 May 2020

Thank you for your letter of 18 May 2020 which followed on from my appearance at Committee on 6 May 2020. Your letter indicates that the Committee are concerned about the experiences of vulnerable children and young people during the Covid-19 pandemic. I understand and recognise those concerns, and I have sought, throughout, to prioritise and consider carefully the needs of vulnerable children and young people, whilst also acting to protect the health and wellbeing of our children, families and communities, as part of our national response to the pandemic.

The Committee, will understand, that since my appearance at Committee earlier this month, there have been a range of developments. The most significant has been the publication by the First Minister of the Route Map for the easing of lockdown restrictions, of which the proposed phased return to school is a significant part. I have set out information on that as part of my response to the Committee's comments on returning to school. Otherwise, the Committee has raised a range of points and I will respond to each in turn.

Attendance at Hubs

In your letter the committee acknowledges that there may be a range of reasons why children and young people who may be considered vulnerable are not attending hubs. This remains the case.

Since my appearance at the Committee earlier in the month, the numbers of children and young people classified as 'vulnerable' who are attending the hubs has risen to an average of over 2,000 every day, though that remains a small percentage of the overall number. As I said when I spoke to the Committee, there are a range of different ways in which local authorities and children's services partnerships are providing support to children and young

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people at risk, and attendance at the hubs is only one such approach. As I noted in my letter to the Committee of 29 April, we are now gathering weekly data on a range of indicators relating to vulnerable children and young people, and gather wider intelligence from a range of public and third sector organisations about how services are providing support. We have published the latest data and intelligence report on the Scottish Government website at <https://www.gov.scot/isbn/9781839607592>

In partnership with SOLACE, we have established a Children and Families Leadership Group, involving key partners responsible for developing and delivering children's services. This Group meets weekly to discuss issues arising from the data and intelligence, including the support that's in place for vulnerable children and young people, and to agree our collective response. As part of the Group's work, it will consider and provide advice on the most appropriate mechanisms to ensure support is in place for all children and young people who need it, including appropriate messaging relating to attendance at the hubs.

In addition to the data and intelligence on vulnerable children and young people, the Government also collects daily data on the numbers of children attending the hubs, which provides a breakdown between those who are vulnerable and those who are the children of key workers. I have included the daily summary report from 19th May for the Committee's information. We do not gather specific data on capacity at the hubs but I am confident that authorities are taking appropriate steps to keep the capacity of the hubs under review, especially as the number of vulnerable children and young people slowly increases.

Provision over the Summer months

I recognise that the Committee are concerned about the need for continued provision over the summer months. This is recognised as part of our approach to responding to COVID-19 and I confirm that educational hubs will remain in place during the summer period. I note that the Committee is particularly concerned that the provision of free school meals and alternatives should continue during the summer months.

The Scottish Government recognises that free school meals are a key support for low income families during term time. The unprecedented situation with schools being closed due to COVID-19 has led to new approaches being put in place to ensure that children and young people continued to receive a free school meal provision. The Scottish Government has provided additional support to local authorities to ensure this support can be maintained while schools have been closed. In addition to existing budgets, we have provided £30 million to local authorities to support those facing barriers to accessing food during the pandemic, including families eligible for free school meals.

The additional £30 million has enabled local authorities, supported by Scottish Government guidance, to establish flexible approaches to provision – most notably through direct payments, vouchers and home deliveries – and to reach over 170,000 families with a free school meal provision Monday to Friday.

This funding covers the period until the end of June this year. Ministers are currently reviewing budgets and pressures which are likely to extend beyond this period. We are working closely with Local Authorities to monitor spend and understand what ongoing needs might be.

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Support for Learning

The Committee raised a number of specific points in relation to support for learning. The Committee sought reassurance that work to understand digital exclusion was being undertaken.

I can confirm that Education Scotland and local authorities are actively working to address digital exclusion in their areas to support educational continuity with work being undertaken with local authorities and the Connecting Scotland programme to establish what more could be done to address digital exclusion. I indicated that I will turn to educational recovery in due course, however, it is recognised that as part of the new model of schooling, some pupils will need extra help, particularly those who don't have the technology at home to learn effectively.

To maximise the time pupils can have in the classroom and support children in the new model of schooling, including digital home learning, the Scottish Government is investing an initial £9m which will provide devices and connectivity for 25,000 learners across Scotland. We are committed to delivering digital equity for our most disadvantaged children and young people and this is the first phase of our £30m commitment to support digital inclusion. We are working closely with local authority partners to deliver this. Education Scotland will support digital learning through new national digital learning resources that will bolster schools' own arrangements for children and young people.

We recognise that children and young people with additional support needs may be finding this difficult time particularly challenging. Local authorities are best placed to identify how best to meet the needs of the children and young people in their local area, especially those with additional support needs. We are aware through direct contact with local authorities that they are using creative ways of supporting children and young people with additional support needs during this challenging time, for example using direct support from Educational Psychologists, using outreach support, creating bespoke learning packages, and developing specific resources and advice for their parents and carers.

For Term 4, and looking ahead to the next session, schools, clusters and local authorities are considering new and innovative approaches to transition in relation to curriculum and wellbeing matters. This will include consideration of a wide range of factors, including the challenges faced by children and young people who have additional support needs. Planning by practitioners to support children and young people with additional support needs will continue to be focused on individual need providing a flexible approach that meets the specific needs of learners, this could include one to one support or group support.

In addition as part of our plans for educational recovery we have specific work on developing a holistic, framework to support the learning journey and wellbeing of all children, young people and their families. This will include a range of actions, including taking specific account of children and young people with additional support needs providing support to learners and families most adversely affected by Covid-19.

On the Committee's specific proposal, it is recognised that children with Additional Support Needs do benefit from learning in small groups and this work is the responsibility of the Local Authority, as highlighted above. Over the last two months Education Scotland have seen excellent examples of provision for children with additional support needs which has included small groups and provision in hubs based in their own school.

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Local authorities have taken extra care to try as far as possible to continue provision for these children, in some cases, Education Scotland staff have assisted directly in the hubs or supported schools and hubs to continue provision. In addition, it has been proactive in ensuring that there are accessible materials for both parents and practitioners on the website and also by offering one to one support to individual schools/hubs.

Returning to school

The Committee has made some very specific points on the return to school and have sought the publication of the scientific advice, which has informed my considerations.

As per my letter to you of 21 May, there have been significant developments in relation to plans to re-open schools. As part of a package of measures within the route map for the easing of lockdown restrictions, we published *Excellence and Equity during the Covid 19 Pandemic: - A strategic framework for the reopening of schools and early learning and childcare provision in Scotland*.

The framework has been jointly developed by the Scottish Government and Local Government, with support from key partners across the education system, and provides the strategic framework to be used at local level in conjunction with Local Phasing Delivery Plans for the reopening of schools and early learning and childcare (ELC) provision in Scotland. The content of the Strategic Framework is representative of the breadth of experience and advice which we have been able to draw upon in reaching these decisions.

The Committee has asked, and I agreed to consider, the publication of the scientific advice which has influenced our considerations. The Scottish Government has made it clear that decisions in relation to the relaxation of restrictions imposed as a result of Coronavirus (COVID-19) will be, first and foremost, tested against the scientific evidence and public health advice that is available. Today, we have published *Coronavirus (COVID-19): Scientific evidence on schools and ELC settings* which is available from <http://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-schools-early-learning-and-childcare-settings---scientific-evidence/>.

This sets out what advice we have considered, and the evidence we are drawing on. It focuses on the evidence and advice specifically relating to transmission and exposure, and does not include discussion of wider public health advice in relation to, for example, health inequalities or behaviours, or on educational impacts of school closures.

That evidence is being built internationally, across the UK and within Scotland. The principle sources of evidence and advice are the Scottish COVID-19 Advisory Group, the World Health Organisation (WHO), the UK Government's Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE), the Children's Task and Finish Working Group (a sub-group of SAGE), Public Health Scotland and lessons from international experience. It is for SAGE and its Children's Task and Finish Working Group to publish their papers and advice.

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I am grateful to the Committee for their continued consideration of these matters, and trust that the information that I have provided in response to your letter provides reassurance.

Yours Sincerely

JOHN SWINNEY

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Annex

School and ELC provision – Tuesday 19th May

As of 4pm, we have today received responses from all LAs (Glasgow's figures are based on their figures from Friday).

The estimated results for Scotland (as at 19 May 2020) based on these responses are as follows (differences from yesterday are in brackets):

- There were **503** (+3) LA educational and early years settings open today
- There were **1,816** (+171) **teaching staff** working in these LA educational and early years settings today (noting Glasgow didn't provide a teaching/support staff breakdown so all staff have been included as support staff)
- There were an additional **1,105** (-31) ELC practitioners, ELC lead practitioners and ELC managers working in these LA educational and early years settings today
- There were a further **2,192** (+98) **support staff** working in these LA educational and early years settings today (noting Glasgow didn't provide a teaching/support staff breakdown so all staff have been included as support staff)
- There were a **8,630** (+560) children and young people attending these LA educational and early years settings today (**1.1% of the ELC and pupil roll**)
- Of which there were **6,493** (+548) children and young people were of key workers (i.e. **75.2%** of all pupils attending– all LAs now provide this breakdown)
- Of which there were **2,177** (+32) children and young people were vulnerable (i.e. **25.2%** of all pupils attending– all LAs now provide this breakdown)

- There were **12,295** (+621) free school lunches taken at LA educational and early years settings today (either eaten on the premises or picked up/collected) (note we are to assume everyone attending in Glasgow are being given free lunches)
- On **Wednesday 13 May**, vouchers, direct payments or home deliveries were provided by local authorities to **159,499** children and young people to support the provision of free school lunches.

Private and voluntary childcare provision – Tuesday 19th May

On a daily basis we continue to receive responses after the deadline and we are therefore aware that these figures are an underestimate of the actual number of open settings and children attending.

The estimated results for Scotland (as at **19 May 2020 at 16:00**) based on these responses are as follows.

- Within these **1,054** settings, **878** were open to receive children. Of these **878** settings, **146** were private providers and **19** were voluntary providers. **713** childminders were able to receive children.
- Among the **146** private providers open, there were a total of **736** childcare staff working and **1,704** children attended.
- Among the **19** voluntary providers open, there were a total of **116** childcare staff working and **256** children attended.

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- Among the **713** childminders who were able to receive children, **1,022** children attended.

In the **878** settings that opened:

- **2,738** children of keyworkers attended
- **249** vulnerable children attended
- **28** children attended to receive a free meal
- **806** children who would normally be at school attended
- Overall, a total of **2,982** children attended a private provider, voluntary provider or childminder. The sum of the figures above is larger than the total number of children as some children will fall into more than one category.

Care Inspectorate records as at 12th May showed that 1,206 childminding services were open (26.2% of all childminding services), and 506 day care of children services were open (14.0% of services in this sector).

Of the 506 day care of children services that were open around half were local authority settings (265), compared with 171 open private services, 68 voluntary services, and 2 health board services. However as a percentage of the services, this represents 15% of all local authority day care of children services operating, 16% of private services, 8% of voluntary services, and 67% of health board services.

Comparing the Care Inspectorate figures with the data we receive through the daily PVI childcare monitoring survey suggests around 80% of open private providers, around 30% of open voluntary providers, and around 60% of open childminders completed this daily survey on the 12th May. Therefore the daily figures should be used with caution as they are likely to be an underestimate of the number of services operating that day, and the number of children accessing critical childcare and staff currently working to deliver this service.

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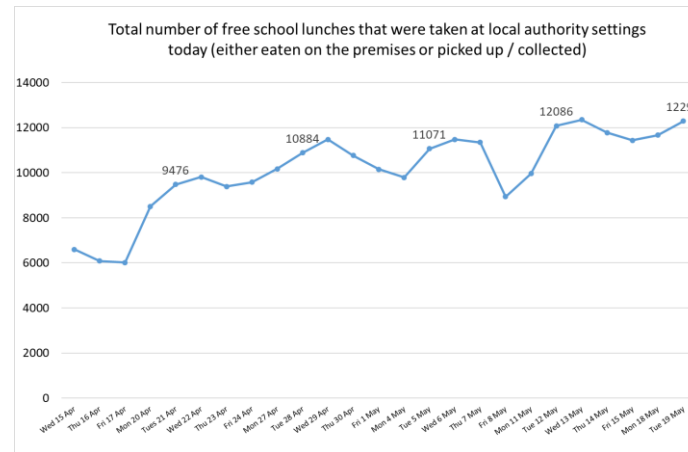
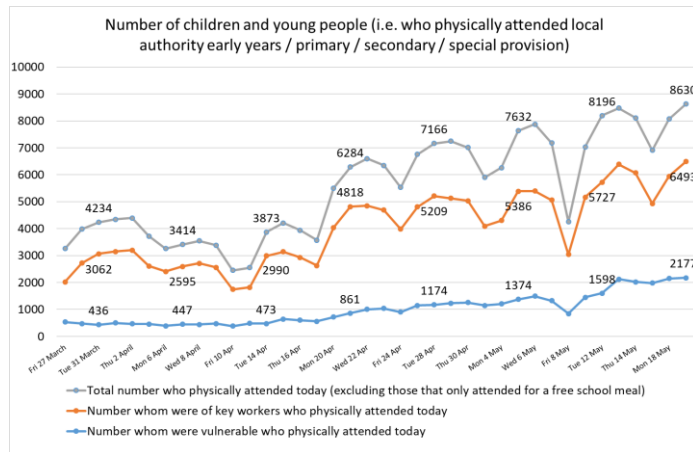
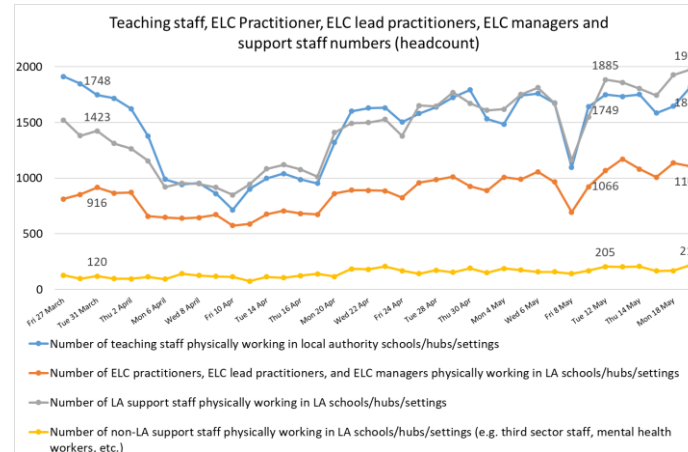
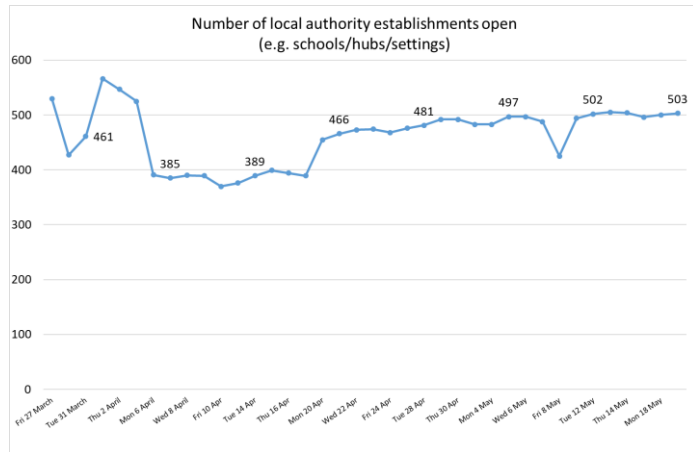
ANNEX A – Data returns at LA level - Tuesday 19th May

Date	Local Authority	Teaching staff and ELC Practitioner, ELC lead practitioners, and ELC managers numbers (headcount)			Support Staff Numbers (headcount)			Percentage of children and young people (i.e. who physically attended local authority early years / primary / secondary /			Free school lunch provision	
		Number of local authority establishments (e.g. schools / early years settings / hubs) open	Number of teaching staff physically working in local authority schools/hubs or LA ELC settings today	Number of ELC practitioners, ELC lead practitioners, and ELC managers physically working in local authority schools/hubs or LA ELC settings today	Number of LA support staff physically working in local authority schools/hubs or LA ELC settings today	Number of non-LA support staff physically working in local authority schools/hubs or LA ELC settings today (e.g. third sector staff, mental health workers, etc.)	Percentage of children & young people who physically attended today (excluding those that only attended for a free school meal)	Percentage of children & young people who physically attended today whom were of key workers	Percentage of children & young people who physically attended today whom were vulnerable	Total number of free school lunches that were taken at local authority settings today (either eaten on the premises or picked up / collected)	Total number of children and young people for whom vouchers, direct payments or home deliveries have been provided by local authorities today to support the provision of free school lunches (as of Wed 13 May)	
19/05/2020	Aberdeen City	11	66	47	105	16	0.8%	71%	29%	0	4450	
19/05/2020	Aberdeenshire	21	68	56	147	14	1.1%	68%	32%	0	3303	
19/05/2020	Angus	11	58	17	36	0	1.5%	72%	28%	0	3091	
19/05/2020	Argyll & Bute	16	47	30	21	1	1.2%	85%	15%	124	576	
19/05/2020	Clackmannanshire	4	36	12	18	3	1.2%	90%	10%	68	1394	
19/05/2020	Dumfries & Galloway	12	83	42	71	33	1.3%	83%	17%	39	3307	
19/05/2020	Dundee City	11	169	88	103	9	2.7%	73%	27%	797	6783	
19/05/2020	East Ayrshire	10	35	34	28	0	1.0%	70%	30%	189	3171	
19/05/2020	East Dunbartonshire	16	75	38	32	0	1.2%	77%	19%	13	2464	
19/05/2020	East Lothian	6	57	21	59	5	1.6%	72%	28%	132	996	
19/05/2020	East Renfrewshire	8	78	24	41	0	2.2%	73%	27%	110	1350	
19/05/2020	Edinburgh City	12	107	9	57	8	0.7%	90%	12%	373	9936	
19/05/2020	Falkirk	20	88	53	52	2	1.1%	71%	29%	2602	0	
19/05/2020	Fife	33	138	45	147	20	0.8%	68%	32%	337	11254	
15/05/2020	Glasgow City	63	0	116	197	0	1.1%	55%	45%	810	33000	
19/05/2020	Highland	14	41	15	113	0	0.6%	100%	2%	0	4170	
19/05/2020	Inverclyde	9	52	28	43	3	1.6%	65%	35%	194	3609	
19/05/2020	Midlothian	9	73	0	45	29	1.3%	84%	19%	298	3108	
19/05/2020	Moray	8	36	0	33	0	1.6%	95%	5%	135	1676	
19/05/2020	Na h-Eileanan Siar	11	25	15	44	11	2.8%	64%	36%	46	360	
19/05/2020	North Ayrshire	9	35	26	5	0	0.6%	100%	46%	111	1037	
19/05/2020	North Lanarkshire	39	91	134	40	0	1.2%	65%	32%	638	18511	
19/05/2020	Orkney Islands	6	16	6	16	0	1.2%	72%	28%	0	245	
19/05/2020	Perth & Kinross	7	14	56	48	33	0.6%	71%	29%	118	3277	
19/05/2020	Renfrewshire	13	57	52	71	2	1.2%	94%	3%	310	11650	
19/05/2020	Scottish Borders	12	48	24	34	18	2.9%	70%	31%	630	1480	
19/05/2020	Shetland Islands	6	0	14	0	0	0.9%	94%	0%	48	441	
19/05/2020	South Ayrshire	10	32	0	52	0	0.6%	56%	44%	0	3165	
19/05/2020	South Lanarkshire	30	0	0	145	0	0.9%	92%	10%	279	9357	
19/05/2020	Stirling	6	79	61	31	0	1.5%	97%	3%	203	1907	
19/05/2020	West Dunbartonshire	14	27	22	80	1	0.9%	75%	25%	125	5525	
19/05/2020	West Lothian	46	85	20	60	10	0.9%	83%	17%	3566	4906	
19/05/2020	Scotland Estimate	503	1816	1105	1974	218	1.1%	75%	25%	12295	159499	

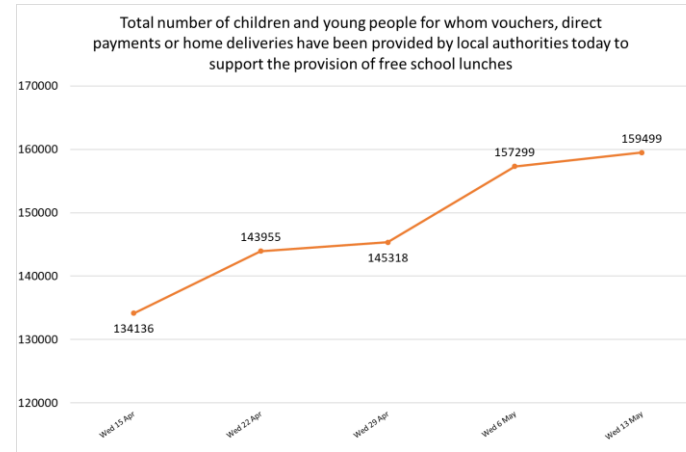
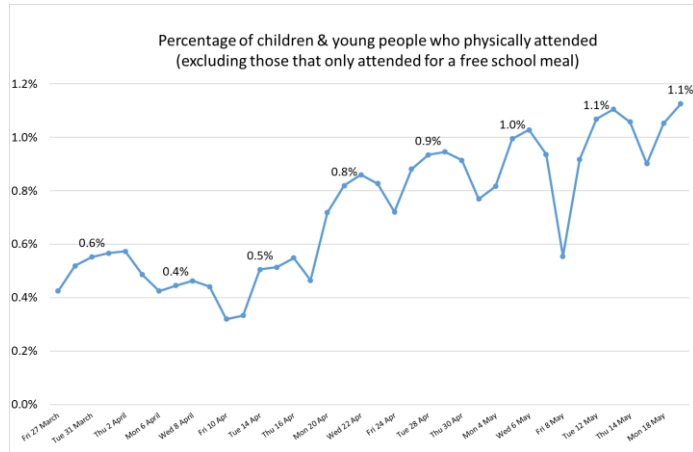
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ANNEX B – Time series of data returns from LAs - Tuesday 19th May



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Please note the following:

- The increase in the number of settings on 1 April was due to Glasgow supplying figures when they had not previously
- Figures from Glasgow between 6 April and 22 April were based on 'expected' figures not 'actuals'. From 12 May they also include an estimated split of children and young people attending between those of key workers and those who are vulnerable
- Most figures are lower around public holiday weekends (10 and 13 April, and 8 May)
- Previously provided figures may have been revised to the initial figures provided each day due to late or revised returns from local authorities.

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ANNEX C – Private and voluntary childcare returns at LA level - Tuesday 19th May

Local authority area	Open and closed settings		Open settings by type of provider			Number of childcare staff by type of provider		Number of children attending
	Closed	Open	Private	Voluntary	Childminder	Private	Voluntary	
Aberdeen City	7	34	8	0	26	80	0	217
Aberdeenshire	13	63	6	1	56	30	6	157
Angus	9	25	3	0	22	10	0	53
Argyll & Bute	3	4	1	0	3	3	0	7
City of Edinburgh	5	52	23	2	27	125	8	332
Clackmannanshire	2	7	1	0	6	4	0	16
Dumfries & Galloway	1	38	3	1	34	12	6	135
Dundee City	6	39	12	1	26	55	4	175
East Ayrshire	7	34	3	1	30	7	5	65
East Dunbartonshire	6	14	3	0	11	15	0	41
East Lothian	5	25	6	0	19	25	0	83
East Renfrewshire	3	18	4	0	14	10	0	55
Falkirk	5	25	1	0	24	7	0	52
Fife	17	60	6	0	54	21	0	110
Glasgow City	14	32	10	3	19	59	13	166
Highland	6	45	11	2	32	40	9	149
Inverclyde	5	7	0	0	7	0	0	9
Midlothian	4	21	2	2	17	15	32	133
Moray	1	33	5	1	27	30	3	83
Na h-Eileanan Siar	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	1
North Ayrshire	4	41	2	0	39	5	0	63
North Lanarkshire	11	67	4	0	63	24	0	108
Orkney Islands	1	2	0	0	2	0	0	2
Perth & Kinross	6	30	5	0	25	22	0	124
Renfrewshire	7	18	6	2	10	23	13.5	85
Scottish Borders	2	23	6	1	16	36	6	144
Shetland Islands	0	4	1	0	3	3	0	14
South Ayrshire	4	13	5	1	7	29	4	120
South Lanarkshire	7	37	3	0	34	16	0	85
Stirling	5	12	0	0	12	0	0	16
West Dunbartonshire	1	10	0	0	10	0	0	10
West Lothian	8	44	6	1	37	30	6	172
Total	176	878	146	19	713	736	116	2982

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