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Mary Fee MSP

cc. Covid-19 Committee, The Scottish Parliament

05 November 2020

Dear Mary

I am writing to address a question you raised with Michael Russell, Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, Europe and External Affairs, when he attended the Covid-19 Committee meeting on 28 October 2020 to give evidence on the 'Coronavirus Acts: third report to Parliament'. During this session you asked a specific question in relation to children's access to learning, and Mr Russell undertook that I would respond to this point directly.

As set out by Mr Russell, the priority of this Government has been to ensure that schools are open, young people are in them and they have an opportunity to have as near to normal a learning experience as they can. This is the best way to provide access to learning for all. None of the levels of Scotland's Strategic Framework require an automatic move to school closures or blended learning, and this was made clear in the recently updated [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): guidance on reducing the risks in schools](#). This strengthened guidance, produced in light of updated scientific and health advice, adds to the health mitigations that have been in place since schools opened in August. We constantly review this guidance along with our local authority partners, trades unions, parental representatives and other stakeholders to ensure we are taking all the necessary measures to ensure our schools are safe.

However, no one can predict what the coming weeks and months will bring, nor can we rule out the need for a school or schools to be closed temporarily to help control virus transmission. That is why every local authority has been asked to prepare contingency plans (as required under the [Educational Continuity \(No. 5\) Direction](#) which I gave in August) that it will implement in the event that closures or blended learning is necessary, and to support pupils that are required to self-isolate. There has been considerable progress made in the

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provision of remote learning, should that be required, and I would expect these plans to focus on ensuring that all pupils are able to access remote learning as effectively as possible.

You may also be interested to note that, in recognising that not all learners have access to an appropriate device and the internet to be able to engage with online learning, the Scottish Government is investing £25m to support digital inclusion amongst school-aged learners. This is in addition to the monies invested in Connecting Scotland. All councils have been allocated a proportion of the funds and are in the process of securing and distributing devices and connectivity to meet local needs. It is expected that up to 70,000 individuals will benefit from this investment.

In addition, the Scottish Government continues to invest in the national online learning environment, Glow. The core Glow services of Microsoft Office 365, Google G-Suite for Education and Wordpress Blogs are freely available to all learners and teachers across Scotland, providing access to a range of digital learning and teaching opportunities. Glow has seen a huge uptick in usage since the start of the pandemic with almost 430,000 unique users in September 2020.

**JOHN SWINNEY**

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