



The Scottish Parliament  
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

## EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE

John Swinney MSP  
Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills

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**By email**

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18 May 2020

Dear Mr Swinney

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

Thank you for giving [evidence to the Committee on 6<sup>th</sup> May](#) on the response to Covid-19 and its impact on the wellbeing and education of vulnerable children.

The Committee is of course hugely concerned by the challenges faced by vulnerable children and young people across Scotland and also the increase in the numbers of vulnerable children as a direct result of the pandemic.

#### **Attendance at hubs**

As raised in evidence, of the estimated 97,000 vulnerable children and young people in Scotland, only 1% are currently attending school hubs. This is despite the Scottish Government highlighting that vulnerable children are all eligible, and a priority, for attending hub schooling alongside the children of keyworkers. There will of course be reasons why the hub setting will not be appropriate for many vulnerable children, including those with certain additional support needs.

In evidence you suggested that there was capacity for more children to attend hubs and that parents are often hesitant to send children to these hubs in part in response to the strength of the emphasis on the 'Stay at Home' message.

The Committee appreciates that the Scottish Government is receiving regular updates from local authorities, including on the extent of the available capacity in hubs. The Committee considers that, given the low attendance levels of vulnerable children in hubs, there is a need to ensure as many suitable vulnerable children as possible are encouraged to attend. This includes proactively promoting this message to parents and carers.

The Committee wants to know what is being done at present to promote this message to parents and careers, and what further work could be undertaken.

For example, the Committee would be interested to learn whether any information is being collated on the kinds of reasons given for vulnerable children being away from schools, and whether any common barriers are being identified and addressed. In addition, is any data being collated on the proportion of vulnerable children in individual local authority areas that authorities consider definitely could benefit from attending hubs but are not currently doing so?

The Committee previously requested sight of all information collated from local authorities by the Scottish Government on vulnerable children. In evidence you confirmed that “I receive a daily report from every local authority on the number of young people—whether they are children from vulnerable families or children of essential workers—who attend the hubs.”

The Committee repeats its request that this information be shared with the Committee. This should include a breakdown of the numbers of children attending that are vulnerable and details of the extent of the additional capacity in hubs in different local authorities.

### **Provision over the Summer months**

The Committee also seeks clarity as to what provision will be available over the summer months for vulnerable children. If schools do not have a phased re-opening until August, the period of time that the vast majority of vulnerable children will have been out of school and ELC settings will be approaching 5 months. A key concern is the provision of sufficient food to those experiencing poverty over the Summer.

The Committee has previously undertaken work on the impact of experiencing poverty on school pupils. A clear message from this work was the importance of high levels of uptake of free school meals, as well as free breakfast clubs and community food initiatives during the school year. Another clear message was that many families found the provision of food through the Summer holidays, whether through schools or community initiatives, invaluable.

It is just over a month until the summer holidays are due to start. The Committee seeks your perspective on what form of food provision will continue through the Summer holidays. The Committee also wants to know whether there is sufficient funding allocated to the Food Fund and other national funding streams at present to support this work.

### **Support for learning**

It is widely agreed that the closure of schools and early learning settings will have a disproportionately negative impact on the learning experiences of vulnerable children and young people.

### *Digital exclusion*

Teachers need to be able to establish connections with their pupils to provide them with support for learning and support for their wellbeing. The reliance on home learning through electronic devices increases the levels of digital exclusion, particularly for families experiencing poverty. In addition to affording devices, many families cannot afford a suitable internet connection.

The Committee was concerned to establish that there is no specific data on the numbers of vulnerable children experiencing digital exclusion. The Committee considers that such work could be undertaken centrally by Education Scotland to support local authorities in their endeavours to reduce digital exclusion. The Committee seeks the Scottish Government's perspective on this proposal.

### *Targeted support*

Without tailored support pupils with additional support needs can have very poor educational outcomes. The learning experiences of vulnerable children, including those with additional support needs, has been a priority of this Committee since its establishment in 2016.

The Committee considers that one-to-one tuition or tuition in small groups would enhance learning for many children. Again, the Committee appreciates there is a need for flexibility in local delivery, but considers there is a role for the national education agency, Education Scotland, to lead on the development and co-ordination of such work. The Committee would appreciate your perspective on this proposal.

### **Returning to school**

Finally, a number of members of the Committee explored with you in evidence what a phased re-opening of schools and early learning settings might look like and when this might take place. You referred to scientific advice in your answers to this Committee, including from Imperial College London. I am aware that you also answered questions on scientific advice from the Covid-19 Committee when you appeared before them in your capacity as Deputy First Minister.

Given the importance placed on specific pieces of scientific advice to guide key decisions, such as how long to keep schools and early learning settings closed, this Committee considers this scientific advice should be published.

The Committee is not seeking sight of the deliberations between yourselves and others or any other correspondence that would impact on free and frank discussion. The Committee seeks details of which sources of scientific evidence the Scottish Government is basing its decisions upon, copies of this advice and a sense of the weighting placed upon different pieces of advice.

Your answers on scientific advice to both Committees intimated that you were amenable to the idea of publication and would consider the matter further. I hope you appreciate the value of this information being published to maintain transparency of processes and to ensure confidence in decision making in the coming weeks and months on issues of massive importance to families and schools across Scotland.

In order to inform further work on these important matters, a response from you as soon as is practicable would be very much appreciated.

Yours sincerely

**CLARE ADAMSON MSP  
CONVENER**