



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Education and Skills Committee

Wednesday 6 May 2020

Session 5



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Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE

10th 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:

John Swinney (Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Roz Thomson

LOCATION

Virtual Meeting

Scottish Parliament

Education and Skills Committee

Wednesday 6 May 2020

[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:00]

Interests

The Convener (Clare Adamson): Good morning, and welcome to the 10th meeting in 2020 of the Education and Skills Committee. We have received apologies from Daniel Johnson. I invite Neil Findlay, who is his substitute, to declare any relevant interests.

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): I am a former secondary and primary school teacher and a member of the Educational Institute of Scotland.

Decision on Taking Business in Private

10:00

The Convener: Our next agenda item is to decide whether to take item 4 in private. Does any member object to our doing so? No member has spoken, so that is agreed.

Response to Covid-19

10:01

The Convener: Our main item of business is an evidence session with the Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills on the response to the coronavirus outbreak. I thank all the organisations that have highlighted issues to the committee. This is the committee's first general session on issues relating to Covid-19; we will, in the coming weeks, undertake more focused work on some areas.

I welcome John Swinney and invite him to make an opening statement.

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): During the coronavirus outbreak, I have been deeply grateful for the overwhelming response from teachers, practitioners, council staff and social workers, who have worked alongside volunteers and third sector organisations to support children, young people and their families through an incredibly difficult time.

None of us wants the physical distancing restrictions to be in place for a moment longer than is necessary—that applies equally in our schools and early learning settings. There are complex issues to consider in relation to reopening schools and early learning settings. We aim to ensure that children and staff are supported to return to the classroom in a phased way and only when it is safe for them to do so.

To help us to make informed decisions that keep the wellbeing and education of Scotland's children at the heart of our considerations, I have set up the Covid-19 education recovery group, which includes local authorities, teachers, parents and others. It will allow us to consider all practical options and it will provide advice. The group's first task is to model what a phased approach to reopening education settings will look like. The group has been asked to consider the "what" and the "how" of phased reopening but not the "when", because that will be a ministerial decision to be guided by the evidence on progress in suppressing the virus. However, I intend to listen carefully to the views of the group on how that timing can be safest and most effective.

Ten workstreams have been established with partners to consider the wide range of policy, tactical and operational issues that relate to reopening schools. That work will build on the unprecedented efforts to date to address the significant challenges that the Covid-19 outbreak has brought—not least in relation to supporting Scotland's most vulnerable children, to enabling home schooling, and to withdrawing the school

examinations and assessments that were due to take place this term.

We are committed to supporting teachers and families to enable Scotland's children and young people to continue, wherever it is practicable, to learn from home, while prioritising their wellbeing. As part of that, we are working with councils across Scotland to ensure that vulnerable children—including, in the first instance, children from low-income households—have access to the devices, connectivity and support that they need in order that they can maintain contact with learning, their peers and their wider support network.

I know that many young people feel anxious, after all the hard work and time that they have invested, because their exams are no longer going ahead as planned. Despite exams not going ahead, the Scottish Qualifications Authority will do its utmost, with the support of the education system, to ensure that their hard work is rightly and fairly recognised and allows them to proceed to employment or to further learning at college or university.

We have also been working closely with Scotland's colleges and universities and we are supporting their incredible efforts to continue teaching and to continue the learning and research that will help us in our public health challenge and economic recovery. I am working with them to make the case to the United Kingdom Government about the investment that is needed to support our universities and colleges. Richard Lochhead has written to the UK Government on that matter, and we are prioritising financial support, where we can. Today, I can share with the committee that an additional £75 million of research funding for our universities will be allocated in the current financial year, to ensure that they can sustain their world-leading research in the face of the impact of Covid-19.

Although we continue to see signs of hope, not least in the declining number of people who require intensive care treatment for the virus, each day brings news of more people who have, sadly, lost their lives to this cruel illness. Our absolute commitment to suppressing the virus remains. We must therefore proceed with caution, so although the time is right to think about what will come next, it is certainly not the time for us to rush into decisions. I consider it likely that it will not be possible for schools and other education settings to reopen fully for some time, but I will continue to work closely with partners, including through the Covid-19 education recovery group, to ensure that they remain safe and welcoming places to be, and that all our children and young people receive the excellent education that they deserve.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): Thank you, convener, and good morning, cabinet secretary.

We know that approximately 97,000 vulnerable children require support from more than one agency. The Government has said that the rights of children do not alter during the pandemic, nor do professional responsibilities in relation to child protection. The Scottish Children's Services Coalition has welcomed the support of the Scottish Government, but has raised the concern—as have Scottish Women's Aid and other third sector organisations—that there should be greater clarity around the classification of "vulnerable", in order to ensure that children are protected and that they have access to learning at this difficult time. Does the most recent data on vulnerable children highlight the pressures that they are under? How are local authorities working with third sector organisations—Scottish Women's Aid, Barnardo's and others—to support referrals, and how is the process for vulnerable children working out?

John Swinney: In answering that question, I have to acknowledge that a significant set of issues for vulnerable young people in our society will arise from the coronavirus pandemic. Indeed, some young people who previously were not viewed as vulnerable will become vulnerable through their experiences during the pandemic. That might well be because they acquire trauma as a consequence of their experience. Many more young people than usual will have been exposed to bereavement—sometimes in circumstances in which, because of the lockdown, they do not have access to the family support that might allow them to come to terms with bereavement. Such issues are very real, and we know from all the work that we have done over the years on adverse childhood experiences that they can contribute to acquisition of trauma. I do not in any way underestimate the scale of the challenge that we face in terms of wider harms being created as a consequence of coronavirus.

Local authorities have done a lot of good work to adapt their provision to deal with much of the support for vulnerable children being delivered through Scotland's formal school system. Local authorities have had to move to a wide range of outreach activities. The most recent data on child protection that I have shows that 90 per cent of the children who have a child protection plan in place were visited in the past week by local authority personnel, which I think is a strong point of reassurance about how seriously the matter is being taken by local authorities.

There are also, of course, the partnerships with third sector organisations. I convened a discussion with a range of third sector organisations that reported to me the scale of increased need and

demand that they are experiencing, as well as how they have adapted delivery of their services to meet the needs of young people. There has been adaptation to deal with the circumstances, but I will not pretend that the absence of formal schooling is anything other than an obstacle to delivery of services. In some circumstances, harm to children might be concealed in the home because of the lockdown arrangements.

In the data that I have on domestic violence, the number of Police Scotland child concern reports is slightly lower than it was for the same month last year, but the proportion that was referred because of concerns about domestic abuse is broadly similar. I think that that tells us that the issues that children and young people are facing are live in our society, but also that there is a sustained effort to address the issues and to refer them for further intervention, as appropriate and necessary.

I give the assurance that our work to gather the data, and the work with local authorities to establish a senior leaders' group—which is looking very assertively at ensuring that we maintain provision—are important parts of our response to Covid-19.

Rona Mackay: My final question is about how the children's hearings system is bearing up in all this. If there were to be a backlog of child protection referrals, how would that pan out?

John Swinney: The children's hearings system is still functioning effectively. It obviously faces pressures on its capacity; it is working remotely in order to observe the social distancing requirement, so a longer time frame will be inevitable for cases that are being considered. However, the information that the children's hearings system has provided to us indicates a strong and active agenda to ensure that support is in place, where it is required to meet the needs and circumstances of children and young people.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): Good morning, cabinet secretary. I will follow on from the previous line of questioning. The submission by the Scottish Children's Services Coalition says that, according to its classification of vulnerable children, only 1 per cent of children are attending childcare hubs, which begs the question where the other 99 per cent are. Problems in the home are often picked up at school. If children are not attending school or childcare hubs, does that raise issues about problems at home not being picked up?

Other submissions include mention of cuts to the budgets of youth services that are the front line of dealing with vulnerable children; mention of a tremendously long backlog for child mental health treatment, which started long before the current crisis; and mention of worrying Police Scotland

figures about its generating 2,500 child concern reports in just one week. Some people have said that we are sitting in the eye of a perfect storm and that we will let down a whole generation of vulnerable young people in Scotland during this lockdown. What do you say to those concerns?

John Swinney: In my answer to Rona Mackay, I acknowledged that Covid-19 will have significant implications for our population that will be broader than the direct Covid-19 health harms. I refer the committee back to the framework that the First Minister published a week past Thursday. The Government has acknowledged that Covid-19 creates four harms. First is the direct health-related harm. Then there are non-Covid-19-related health harms, whereby a significant reduction in presentation by individuals for elective healthcare treatment and screening programmes will inevitably store up greater challenges. There is social harm from young people not being in formal education or, perhaps, being in homes in which support is not what it should be, or in which they are exposed to domestic violence or other forms of abuse. There is also economic harm. The Government has been very open about the fact that a range of harms will be created as a consequence: we are striving to mitigate them as effectively as possible.

10:15

The partnerships that we have in place with local authorities and third sector organisations are designed to reach individuals who need support from public authorities and public bodies when they need it, but as I explained to Rona Mackay, the absence of formal school meeting points makes provision of some of that support more challenging.

I compliment local authorities and third sector organisations on how they have changed their ways of working in order to reach children and young people who need support. A lot of outreach work has had to be undertaken, and work has had to be done to identify how best to put in place new support. We have put in place new support as part of the £350 million fund that the Government announced several weeks ago, which provides a broad range of social support for young people and vulnerable individuals in our society. That money is being used well and effectively by local authorities and third sector organisations. A range of steps are being taken to address the points that Mr Greene raises.

I must accept that the absence of formal interaction through school will make it more difficult for us to identify child harm in our society. That is why it is important that we have the hubs in place to provide support. Yesterday, there were about 1,400 vulnerable young people in the hubs

around the country. The hubs have attracted only about 1 per cent of the entire school population; the figure has varied slightly but, broadly, it has been around 1 per cent.

It is the case that more children and young people could be accommodated at the hubs, but attendance at the hubs has been affected by the strength of the “Stay at home” message. Parents who hear that message are less likely to send their children and young people to the hubs. That emphasises the importance of reaching out and making sure that we take support to children and young people when it is possible to do that.

Jamie Greene: I appreciate that comprehensive answer, but you seem to be implying that we are not seeing the take-up by vulnerable children of places at the hubs that we should be seeing because parents are complying with the Government’s advice to stay at home. That suggests to me that there is a conflict in the advice, to the extent that parents are not aware that they should be sending their children to the hubs. If there is capacity, why is that capacity not being used? What is the Government doing to monitor take-up of those places? What is it doing to ensure that vulnerable children are being caught up in the system?

Part of the reason for that situation is perhaps related to the criticism that has been voiced of how we categorise a vulnerable person. In its submission, Scottish Women’s Aid said:

“there is a lack of consistency ... as to what is classed as ‘vulnerable’”.

It seems that the Government does not want to take the lead on that classification. Why does it not want to do so?

John Swinney: I think that the classification of what constitutes vulnerability in a child is pretty well established, although I will look at the information that has been presented in the submission to which Mr Greene refers to make sure that we have a sufficiently comprehensive and effective definition. I will take that issue away and consider it.

With regard to what the Government is doing to monitor the situation, 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. In addition, I asked for a data set to be created that further analyses the vulnerability of children in relation to child protection issues; I think that that has been shared with the committee. I now see that on a weekly basis, and it has been responded to by all 32 local authorities.

Through Education Scotland, I have been monitoring the work that has been undertaken by individual local authorities to ensure that there has been sufficient constancy in the provision of food support to families in the absence of free school meal provision in schools, although the hubs are providing free school meals for the young people who attend them. There has been a pretty comprehensive gathering of information and evidence from local authorities about the steps that they have taken in that respect.

I accept that, over the past weeks, the overwhelming message to families from the United Kingdom and Scottish Governments has been that people should stay at home and should not leave unless they have very good reason to do so. Some members of the public will have heard that message while being invited to send their children to school, and they might be unnerved by that because they want to keep their children close to home. I understand that sentiment entirely.

That situation is understandable, and it means that we have to reach and support families in different ways. Local authorities, individual schools and third sector organisations have been doing that work systematically to reach children and young people by different methods of contact. Education Scotland has provided material for me on the approach of individual schools. Teachers and headteachers have been phoning families and providing support directly, particularly where they know of concerns about wellbeing. All of that adds up to a comprehensive approach to ensuring that we reach those who we need to reach in our society in order to provide the support to which they are entitled.

I come back to the central point that I have made on the first couple of areas that the committee has discussed: greater problems will arise as a consequence of Covid-19 that will affect the mental wellbeing and physical health and safety of individuals, and we must be ready to address that, which is why the Government has set up the education recovery group and why I am involved in discussions with the third sector on the holistic support that it can provide to address some of the trauma that will undoubtedly be created as a consequence of Covid-19.

Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): My question is on the theme of vulnerable children. You mentioned that a fair amount of outreach work is going on to provide support to children at home, and you acknowledge that the proportion of vulnerable children attending hubs is quite small. Is any effort being made on a family by family basis to bring more people into the hubs? Would you like the number of vulnerable children at the hubs to increase?

John Swinney: I am keen to encourage an increase in the number of vulnerable children who attend the hubs, and our local authority partners have been working to achieve that. The local authorities put in place the hub arrangements in a very short space of time. The hubs have been well staffed and supported by a range of professionals. We have not made provision only for the numbers that are in the hubs—they have capacity to accommodate more children, which could be utilised. The challenge comes with the willingness of families to send their children to the hubs. In my answer to Jamie Greene, I accepted the challenge for families who are hearing a message about staying at home or leaving only for very limited purposes, and who might want to keep their children close to home. That is an understandable sentiment.

We have to ensure that, where children are at risk, we provide them with support to meet their needs. As I rehearsed in relation to child protection issues, 90 per cent of children who have a child protection plan have been contacted by a professional in the past week. Approximately 150,000 free school meals—or equivalent provision through vouchers or payments that local authorities have chosen to take forward—are being delivered to children and young people around the country. There is a range of provision in place to address the vulnerability that arises, as Dr Allan raised with me, when we cannot get children to come into the hubs because of anxiety around coming into a formal setting.

Dr Allan: I have a related question on the process by which children and young people will return to school. Will vulnerable children be prioritised in that process to ensure that they are among the first to return to school when it is possible and safe for them to do so?

John Swinney: We are wrestling with some of the issues around the phasing of the return in the education recovery group. As I indicated in my previous answer, I am keen to increase the number of vulnerable children and young people who are attending the hubs. That number has increased significantly since the Easter break—it has almost doubled since then, so it is moving in the right direction, which is what I would like to see.

We obviously have to be careful in deciding to increase the number of children and young people who come into schools because, as the First Minister rehearsed yesterday, as we bring more people together, we run the risk of increasing the circulation of Covid-19. We have to take great care with that, given the very limited margins of flexibility that exist within the presence of Covid-19 and the impact that what we do could have on the reproduction number.

We are keen to ensure that vulnerable young people have access to education at the earliest possible opportunity, but we have to take those decisions in a way that is consistent with the wider decisions with which we are wrestling in relation to the restoration of formal schooling for all young people.

The Convener: Before we move on, there are a couple of supplementary questions. The first is from me. How will young carers be looked after in the current situation, especially given that their caring responsibilities might present an additional barrier to their attendance at the hubs?

The second supplementary question is from Neil Findlay.

Neil Findlay: Given that 1 per cent of 97,000 vulnerable young people are attending the hubs, what is the rate of digital attendance among the remaining 99 per cent, and what access do they have to digital resources?

John Swinney: In response to the convener's question on young carers, I can say that we have in place a range of support through third sector organisations, and we are also providing support through YoungScot to reach young carers and ensure that they receive the support that they require. Much of that support will be delivered by organisations on behalf of local authorities, although there will be some direct local authority provision involved. That fits in with my previous answer on the general importance of ensuring that we deliver that support directly to those young people in the absence of formal schooling.

As we look at how we can restart formal schooling, we need to identify how we can reach young carers as one cohort of the whole range of young people and how we configure support to ensure that it is appropriate to their circumstances.

10:30

On Mr Findlay's point, we do not collect comprehensive data on the level of digital access, but local authorities are providing a range of types of access to digital technology. In some circumstances, local authorities are providing young people who have challenges in accessing digital technology with that technology. The Government is making available about £5 million of support from the fund for vulnerable people to ensure that we have in place the support and access to digital technology that young people require.

We have given schools two years of foresight data on pupil equity funding, which enables them to exercise flexibility in the purchasing of any technology that may be required to enable people to access education, and we have given schools

much more flexibility in how they can utilise that £120 million per annum.

The Convener: We will now have a question from Mr Neil.

Alex Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I am down as having the last question on theme 1 and the first one on theme 2. If it is okay with you, I will—[*Temporary loss of sound.*]

First, I want to ask the cabinet secretary about another specialist group. Many of them can potentially—[*Temporary loss of sound.*]

The Convener: Mr Neil, there seems to be a bit of trouble with your microphone. If you do not mind, I will come back to you. Mr Halcro Johnston has a brief supplementary question.

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I have a question relating to the point about data on the number of students who do not have access to technology. It seems concerning that, as education secretary, you do not have any figures on that. Do you have any estimate of the number of children and young people who do not have access to the technology that is required? What information can you find? Obviously, a huge number of young people are potentially missing out, and it concerns me that the Scottish Government does not have any estimates of that.

John Swinney: We have information on the extent of digital connectivity in our society in general, which indicates that about 90 per cent of households have some form of digital connectivity. We have that data, which enables us to understand the position at a societal level.

In certain local authority areas—Highland, in Mr Halcro Johnston's region, being one example—the local authority has essentially rolled out a digital platform to all school pupils with devices. There are a range of different approaches. We also know that individual schools and local authorities have been providing young people with devices where they know that they do not have access to devices, which enables them to sustain digital connectivity.

We have data on the levels of connectivity in society in general. We also have information about the work that is going on at local authority level to enable technology to be provided to individuals who do not currently have it. Obviously, the Government is putting other support in place to enable that provision to be delivered in greater volume, either through pupil equity funding or through the funds have been allocated through the vulnerable people funding that was announced by the Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government.

The Convener: Ms Ross, do you want to come in on the issue of information technology?

Gail Ross (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP): No, thank you, convener—my questions have been covered, so I will just go with my other questions when the time comes.

The Convener: I can see that Mr Neil is still trying to solve his technical problems, so we will move to Mr Gray.

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): Mr Swinney has mentioned the education recovery group in several answers. That it is called the “education recovery group” is interesting and optimistic: it implies that the Scottish Government is looking at not just getting children back into school but what can be done to recover from some of the damage that might have been done to children's education as a result of the closure of schools—and we do not yet know how long that will last.

It is widely agreed that the group of children who will suffer the most damage in this period are those who are at the wrong end of the attainment gap. The Scottish Government has made closing that gap its priority, but it is likely to be widening every day that our schools stay closed. What new and additional measures are being considered, whether by the education recovery group or others, to help those children recover some of the ground that has been lost during the recent period?

John Swinney: It is important to set my answer within the context of what schools have been doing since they closed in March. They have been taking a very focused approach to make sure that they reach all their learners and provide them with support, educational materials and tasks that can be completed to sustain their learning. That will take a number of different forms in different communities; schools know their children and young people best, and they know how to reach them more effectively than anyone else. A huge amount of activity is under way to enable that focused approach.

Of course, some schools will have had very significant profiles in relation to the support that is in place through the Scottish attainment challenge and pupil equity funding. That support enables them to use resources to directly support the closure of the attainment gap, where it has presented itself. In the absence of formal schooling, schools are able to use those resources in a different way to try to make sure that they support young people. Some of that will involve the dispatch of learning materials, either digitally or physically, directly to young people. Schools are interacting with that in a range of different ways around the country.

So far, the education recovery group has spent most of its time looking at the practical steps that we need to take to enable the resumption of formal schooling. However, I want to make sure that, at the heart of the steps that we are taking through the group, we pay particular regard to the challenges facing young people from deprived backgrounds and provide the additional support that they require to enable them to overcome some of the challenges that have been created by Covid-19. Those challenges were at the heart of my answer to Rona Mackay, where I acknowledged that the wellbeing of some of those young people may have been affected by the onset of further trauma as a result of Covid-19.

The identification of measures and interventions to support young people from deprived backgrounds will be at the heart of the education recovery group's considerations. One of the options that we can look at is the possibility of bringing some young people from deprived backgrounds back into formal schooling at an earlier stage than others to try to sustain their education. How that option could be deployed would have to be very carefully considered.

Fundamentally, schools will be taking forward an agenda that is focused on meeting the needs of those young people, albeit in different ways and by different routes around the country, consistent with the Government's policy objective—which is supported and shared across the education system—to deliver the closure of the poverty-related attainment gap.

Iain Gray: That is true. Mr Swinney knows that I am a supporter of the attainment challenge and pupil equity funding. However, the key thing, of course, is that we were providing that support before, and we will have to look at additional support as a result of the crisis. For example, a group of MPs in the north of England have suggested that, on return to school, pupils from deprived backgrounds—those who face the greatest barriers to education—should be provided with additional tutoring in small groups, or maybe even one-to-one tutoring, to help them to recover some of the lost ground. Might that kind of initiative be considered here?

Pupils with additional support needs traditionally have very poor educational outcomes. Surely the Morgan review should be one of the starting points when we are looking at serving those pupils better when the schools return. I believe that the Deputy First Minister has that review. It was due to be published this spring, which is now. Will the review be published in the near future to inform these discussions?

John Swinney: There are two fair and substantial points in there. My first answer to Mr Gray was designed to highlight that a distinctive

approach has to be taken to meet the needs of young people from deprived backgrounds as they return to formal schooling. The idea that he put forward seems reasonable to me, and I will ensure that it is considered in the education recovery group workstream that is looking at providing support to children and young people who come from deprived backgrounds. A wide range of partners are involved in that group, and it will look at what more we need to do, in the light of Covid-19 and given our objective of closing the poverty-related attainment gap, to make an impact on those issues.

I recognise that the disruption to formal education probably affects young people with additional support needs even more than it affects most other young people. A range of young people with additional support needs benefit enormously from the routine of regular participation in formal education that, obviously, they are unable to have at the moment. Ensuring that we establish stability around the education of those young people is therefore an early priority. However, I know that Mr Gray will appreciate that we have to ensure that that is done in a safe and sustainable way for children and staff. That is part of what the education recovery group is now exploring.

Mr Gray is correct about Angela Morgan's review: I have taken receipt of that report. I hope that members of the committee will appreciate that my focus has been unreservedly on Covid-19 issues, so I have not reached the point of publishing it, but I will do so in early course. Mr Gray has raised the matter with me, and I have answered parliamentary questions from Mr Greer on it as well. I certainly want to publish the report in early course, but that will require me to give it consideration. I hope that the committee will appreciate that I have had to wrestle with quite a number of other issues in the past few weeks. However, I will do that as soon as possible.

The Convener: We move back to Mr Neil.

Alex Neil: I hope that you can hear me this time, convener.

I want to ask the cabinet secretary about kinship carers. Many kinship carers will themselves be [*Temporary loss of sound.*] in the shielding and vulnerable groups, and in many cases they will look after people in those groups—I presume that children in kinship care will be classed as vulnerable. Is there special help for kinship carers, particularly older kinship carers who are shielded and who are perhaps less likely than the younger generation are to have access to computer equipment in the house?

10:45

John Swinney: That is a very important issue. Mr Neil highlights one of the complicated interactions that will exist in relation to how we move to the resumption of formal schooling. The chief medical officer has asked more than 170,000 individuals to shield at present. If children in households in which individuals are shielding start going back to school, that can raise significant obstacles and challenges for the shielding population. We have to take care with that very complicated interaction.

The shielding period is due to end on 18 June. If that had to be extended for a more sustained period, or if some vulnerable individuals were encouraged to, in essence, shield as part of the longer-term advice, that would affect the education of any children who were in such households, but particularly the education of children in kinship care. We have to look very carefully at ensuring that the support and arrangements that we put in place mean that such children are at no greater disadvantage than they are currently. We must ensure that their education can be supported without at any stage compromising the health advice that has been given to those who look after them.

Alex Neil: Will integration joint boards and the education authorities report on how they are managing that situation within a reasonable timeframe?

John Swinney: We are encouraging a series of joint working between different public services. One of the things that the Covid-19 experience has taught us is that public services have interacted and interrelated differently from how they have done so in the past. During the pandemic, they have been more successful in focusing on providing holistic support to individuals, as opposed to some of the compartmentalised support that individual public services can put in place. I am very keen, as are my ministerial colleagues who are working on the leadership of public services in Scotland, to ensure that we maximise the maintenance of that way of working, so that models of holistic individual and family support are used as a consequence of Covid-19.

That point corresponds with the important learning that we have received from the independent care review, which argued for holistic family support to be the priority so that we avoid young people being taken into care and sustain family groupings, in order that young people have the best possible experience and outcomes. That will very much be the focus of how we respond to Covid-19 in a practical sense. Mr Neil referred to the gathering of data, which will be an important priority to ensure that we monitor the effectiveness

of public authorities in handling that important question.

Alex Neil: I have a wider question. We will head into the school holidays in a few weeks' time. Assuming that there is no full return to school before then, what will happen during the summer holidays? Will there be any special activities to ensure that we continue to support children, particularly those who are vulnerable, and give them a chance to catch up? By the time they go back after the summer holidays, many of them will not have been in school for nearly five months. That does not apply only to vulnerable kids; there are issues relating to the wider school population.

My next question is allied to that issue and is about the provision of school meals to vulnerable kids during the school holidays. The £70 million food fund was very welcome. However, given the likelihood of a fairly strict lockdown continuing for the foreseeable future, will that money be topped up so that we can ensure that those who need free schools meals and access to food banks will have access to them during the school holidays? Although the £70 million fund was extremely helpful, it will obviously run out; I think that the Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government said the other day that that will happen sometime in the next few weeks. Is the Government looking at that?

John Swinney: On the first question, through the education recovery group, we are looking at likely provision over the summer holidays. We will have to take account of the circumstances that we will face at that time.

During the Easter holidays, all local authorities in all parts of the country sustained their hub provision, which was very welcome. Mr Neil raises an important issue. I am very keen to ensure that we have effective provision in place during the summer holidays, given our recognition of the interruption to their formal education that young people have experienced. I do not have a definitive answer today. However, the school holidays are still just about a couple of months away, and we are working with the education recovery group to ensure that we address the very legitimate point that Mr Neil raises.

I welcome the comments that Mr Neil made about the food support fund. It has provided very practical support to children and families at a time when household incomes have been under enormous pressure and when people will have lost access to various forms of income. I think that that period of pressure will be sustained for quite some time. The Government will actively look at what further measures need to be put in place. During the experience of Covid-19, I have been struck by the significant impact of that food support and the practical assistance that it has represented for

families throughout the country. It is important that we recognise that as having been a necessity as part of our response to Covid-19 and that we recognise that such support will need to be in place over a sustained period.

Some very welcome consequential elements of funding have come to the Scottish Government by way of changes in priorities that have been made by the UK Government. However, I have to acknowledge the strain on public finances that has come as a consequence of handling Covid-19. I encourage the UK Government to continue to reflect on that. For example, if the profile of public finances moved away from investing in tackling the effects of Covid-19 and towards some form of constraint on public finances, and there was a reprioritisation of UK Government expenditure and an unwillingness to continue to sustain those consequential elements of funding, the Scottish Government's ability to meet people's needs would be significantly challenged.

The financial challenge that Covid-19 presents to the Scottish Government must be acknowledged, and the UK Government must be encouraged to take action to ensure that we have access to the resources that enable us to resolve some of these issues.

Neil Findlay: Cabinet secretary, you have spoken about some of the issues around attainment. I think that we would all acknowledge that the attainment gap is going to increase as a result of this situation, particularly for children in the most deprived communities, including many of those that I represent.

Can you expand on what planning has been done to address that issue and invest in those communities, to pull back on the damage that has been done during this process as well as the damage that was done previously?

John Swinney: Mr Findlay raises a fair and reasonable point. My answer makes two important points. The first is that, before Covid-19, the Government had as a policy imperative closing the poverty-related attainment gap. We have now put in place a range of measures, which I have set out today in my other answers, that are about working with schools and local authorities to enable that to happen.

The second part of my answer is about the implications of Covid-19 for policy thinking. The Covid-19 experience has said to the country in general a number of pretty challenging things about the contribution that is made to our society by individuals who were perhaps thought to be undertaking—I am going to use an awful term—"low-skilled work". As we have now found out, we cannot live without those individuals putting

themselves in danger to look after those whom we love.

What does that say to us, as a society, about what we should value and what we should ensure is supported? It all tends to say that even greater priority will be placed on improving the life chances of individuals in our society who previously have not had good chances to go on to good life outcomes.

With regard to the policy issues that come out of that, I am chairing in Government a grouping of public service ministers that is looking very actively at the implications of the Covid-19 experience for our policy priorities. We are looking at what we should focus on, not just in the battle to close the poverty-related attainment gap but in order to tackle poverty in and of itself. We are looking to intensify some of those activities, so that we do not face the disparity that Mr Findlay fairly raises.

Education is an important element in that, and I completely sign up to that challenge, but a wider policy objective of tackling poverty needs to be pursued, and the Government is determined to deliver the leadership that is necessary on that.

Neil Findlay: That raises a fundamental point, if we think about what has happened over the course of the crisis. On Thursday evenings, we stand up and applaud key workers, but many of them are the very same types of workers, such as classroom assistants, who have lost their jobs over the past 10 years. They are also the janitors who have had their hours and pay cut; in my own area, they have had significant pay cuts. There are classrooms that no longer get cleaned—Unison has done some great work in exposing how cuts in the cleaning of classrooms have been a huge issue in schools. We could go on and on about the 40,000 jobs that have been lost in local government.

I hope that the world will change. I hope that we will end the massive cuts to local government that we have seen year on year. Those at Government level can deny it all they want, but the people that we stand up and applaud on a Thursday evening know, because they have been on the front line and have seen those cuts, which are impacting on pupil attainment and on the ability of the most vulnerable children in our society to succeed. I hope that the world will change after this.

11:00

John Swinney: Mr Findlay, you have had to listen to me for long enough to know that I am an opponent of austerity. I have always been an opponent of austerity, which was the wrong solution to the fundamental challenges that we

faced in the aftermath of the financial crash in 2008.

However, austerity has been the sustained policy agenda of the UK Government since 2010. We have had to operate within that framework, although we have taken decisions at different times to deviate from that agenda—I took a number of such decisions when I was the finance minister and I have done so as the education secretary. I have supported Cabinet changes of position on tax relative to the position of the United Kingdom Government, to generate the investment that is required in our public services.

The Covid-19 experience has made people sit up and think about what is actually valued in our society and what our society relies on. I wholeheartedly agree with you about that. My family has had very recent experience of the social care sector, and I cannot speak too highly of the devoted support that social care personnel provide.

How society responds in the aftermath of Covid-19 is just as important as how it responds to the immediate health threat—in which context, many of the people to whom you referred have made a huge contribution—so that we take a different approach as a consequence of Covid-19. I assure you and the committee that the Government is actively engaging in that question, which is at the heart of the policy response that we want to put in place as a consequence of Covid-19.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): Good morning Mr Swinney. I will ask about the phased reopening of schools. I wrote to you over the weekend, proposing that you look to the example of New Zealand. For the benefit of members, I should say that I pointed the cabinet secretary to that country's four-level alert system, which sets out what each phase of lockdown could look like in schools.

Do you agree that such an approach could give welcome clarity to staff, parents, pupils and employers? Are you hoping that the education recovery group will secure that outcome? In yesterday's publication, "Covid-19: Framework for Decision Making—Further Information", there was mention of

"Developing a chronological list of priority groups who would return to school in an agreed order".

John Swinney: I very much welcomed the material that you sent me. We are actively looking at international examples of how countries that are at a different stage from us in their Covid-19 recovery have handled the situation and at what steps they have taken to restore formal schooling.

I have to add a couple of important caveats. Before we open up any possibility of a return to

formal schooling, we must be confident that we have effectively suppressed the coronavirus in our society. We have to be confident that we have reduced the reproduction number and the number of infectious cases in the country. As we said in yesterday's document, we have not yet reached that point, although important progress has been made, as a result of public co-operation over the past few weeks, in reducing the reproduction number from well in excess of 3 to somewhere between 0.7 and 1. Public participation has been significant in that respect.

Bearing that caveat in mind, we then have to consider the steps to a phased resumption of education, and we are looking at international examples to see what that looks like. The education recovery group is convened by the Government but has been deliberately constructed to bring together our partners in local government, the professional associations, voices from the parental community and other voices from the teaching profession to ensure that we proceed on an agreed, system-wide basis. That is a huge priority for me, because we will not successfully restore formal schooling in Scotland if we do not build public confidence around the steps that we are taking. Therefore, the material that Beatrice Wishart has drawn to my attention is helpful with regard to building the information base about what steps we might need to take to build that public confidence and enable a return to formal schooling. The Government will look closely at that and at other international examples as part of the education recovery group's work and in close consultation with our partners.

Beatrice Wishart: I accept those caveats. It is a fluid situation, and at the forefront of any framework should be the safety of everyone involved. However, I think that clearer foresight would ease some of the worry that exists and would help people to plan their lives and work together, especially if there are distinct alert levels.

My final question concerns the fact that a Scottish Youth Parliament survey found that 42 per cent of people were extremely or moderately worried about education closures. Does the Government recognise the value, from a mental health and wellbeing perspective, of providing some light at the end of the tunnel and explaining to pupils what each stage might be?

John Swinney: I hope that, in the course of my evidence to the committee this morning, I have provided adequate reassurance with regard to the concerns that I have about the wellbeing of children and young people in Scotland. This is a really tough time for children and young people, many of whom are missing out on significant moments in their school lives.

Pupils at Breadalbane academy, in my constituency, raised lots of money for their school prom, which is now not taking place, and they have donated it to vulnerable families in the Aberfeldy area through a magnificent project called #Feldy-Roo, which delivers food to individual households facing vulnerability. Events such as proms are some of the moments that young people cherish, but those pupils are not experiencing them; instead, they are deploying the resources in a different way.

I completely accept that there is a negative impact on children and young people as a result of the current environment, and we have to ensure that we provide the support that is necessary. It is important that we provide clarity on the way forward, which is what the discussion that the Government is taking forward through the framework documents is designed to do. The first document, which we published a week past Thursday, recognised that impact and set out the four harms that exist across the Covid-19 response: direct health harm from Covid-19, non-Covid-19 health harms, social harms and economic harms.

The document that was published yesterday was designed to begin to open up the conversation about exactly the ground that Beatrice Wishart raises with me, which concerns the practical steps that need to be taken to enable us to move out of the conditions that we are currently experiencing. Those steps will, inevitably, be cautious. They can be taken only when it is safe to take them, and, for education, they will inevitably involve a phased approach. There is a sequence of steps that we have to take to enable that to happen, and the Government and I are keen to engage the public on that question.

We should certainly engage young people, and the evidence that Beatrice Wishart puts to me from the survey by the Scottish Youth Parliament—as well as the evidence from a range of surveys that have been undertaken by YoungScot—is important because it reflects the issues, the priorities and the concerns of young people. It is vital that the Government hears those concerns as we proceed.

Iain Gray: You mentioned learning from the international experience of restoring formal schooling. The position is summed up in an alarming graph in “Covid-19: Framework for Decision Making—Further Information”, which was published yesterday, which shows the national health service being overwhelmed if schools return too quickly. Will you publish the data that is behind that graph, so that we can understand what it is based on?

John Swinney: The graph is based on an application of the Imperial College London model,

to which the Government has access, which shows the impact of policy changes on the reproduction number. It utilises data that has emerged from the Danish example.

I will consider what it is possible to publish—I am not sure what constraints Imperial College London applies on the circulation of that information, so I will explore that and write to the committee. The ICL model is the foundation of that graph in the framework.

Gail Ross: I want to ask about online learning and home schooling. What support is Education Scotland giving to teachers and practitioners, and how can parents and carers best support learning? As several constituents have told me, parents are not teachers, so what would you say to parents who are struggling with home schooling at the moment?

John Swinney: I say to parents that they should try their best but they should not think that they are supposed to be full-time teachers of their children or the young people in their house.

We are in an incredibly unusual and disrupted set of circumstances, with multiple pressures on families—from employment and business to caring responsibilities for others and worry for others in the family whom they cannot go to see and support as they would like in these very strange times. There is also the impact of education in the home.

I say to parents—we have made this clear in the new term guidance; we are also working in partnership with the National Parent Forum of Scotland, which has done fantastic work to explain the issues to members of the public—that they should do their best but they should not think that they have to replicate the full school day. It would be unrealistic to expect many people with other responsibilities to do that.

On the first part of your question, Education Scotland has been making support available to the education system since the lockdown came into force, in March, including a whole range of material on its website, which supports teachers with lesson planning for distance learning and with the delivery of digital learning, because some teachers will not have experience of that. There has been a sizeable take-up of those modules by teachers.

During the coronavirus period, Education Scotland has been providing the teaching profession with access to materials that can be utilised for digital learning. It has also been working closely with local authorities and individual schools to the extent that some of its staff are supporting the hubs that are available at a local level. Its staff are now deployed throughout the

country, so they are able to go in to support provision where those hubs exist.

Education Scotland underpins the glow system, which is the digital learning infrastructure that many but not all schools around the country use—some schools choose to use other apps and approaches. There has been a significant increase in the use of the glow system by pupils and teachers.

Lastly, Education Scotland has been providing specific training and discussion modules for headteachers, depute headteachers and other members of the teaching profession on how to operate in the unusual situation in which we find ourselves. Those modules have been actively deployed to enable that work to be undertaken through digital connectivity and through some physical support to local authorities and schools.

11:15

Gail Ross: I will move on to practical subjects—physical education, home economics, science, technical education, art and music. What can be done on the practical aspects of those subjects is limited, at the moment. What support is being given to enable people to work creatively in order to deliver those practical aspects, and is there enough theory coursework to get the kids to the summer holidays?

John Swinney: A variety of approaches are being taken. In the Swinney household, a good amount of PE is being done in front of an iPad at 9 o'clock in the morning, through the Joe Wicks PE lesson, which everyone has been required to take part in. I was excused from participating this morning because of the committee meeting, but on most other mornings I am involved in that.

In the case of home economics, schools are encouraging young people to cook at home and then to upload images of their work. I have looked at a lot of examples from schools around the country of young people's posts showing what they have cooked or baked at the request of teachers.

There are a lot of practical implications: not all households will be able to participate in such activities, so we have to make sure that support is in place. Schools are working to make sure that practical support is available. Schools have reported on how they have delivered materials to households for children to use, particularly in areas of deprivation, which is giving families access to materials that they might not have in the house, and enables them to sustain learning. There is a range of practical steps to take.

Gail Ross has highlighted an important challenge for us in the current situation, because it

is clear that we will not return entirely to the pre-Covid-19 model of schooling for some time. That throws up some important challenges around delivery of learning and teaching in subjects that Gail Ross mentioned. It is important to note that the education recovery group is considering the implications for the curriculum of the Covid-19 pandemic, and what steps we will be required to undertake. The pandemic will have an effect on delivery of the curriculum and on learning and teaching. The difficulties and challenges will also have an effect on assessment.

Gail Ross: I have a final question on transition and year groups. I know that some schools have already moved their cohorts up a year. Is there guidance on that for local authorities, or are schools just doing that independently? Are there processes in place for the transition of primary 7 pupils into secondary 1, which can be a difficult time for a lot of pupils?

John Swinney: Transition is very much on my agenda, and we are discussing it actively in the education recovery group. Gail Ross is correct that times of transition can be very disruptive for young people, even before we get anywhere near thinking about the implications of Covid-19.

I am looking at whether there is, before we get to the summer break, an opportunity to focus on and to address pupils who are due to make a transition. Primary 7 pupils who are going into S1 in a new secondary school will probably be affected most acutely. Perhaps less affected will be the transition from an early-learning setting to P1. In most parts of the country, the P1 structure and play-based curriculum will not be dissimilar to the approach that is used in the environment in which a child has been. That transition will be less of an issue than the one from P7 to S1.

With regard to the senior phase, schools generally move pupils at the end of the SQA exam diet, so most schools would move to the new year groups in early June. Some schools are trying to bring that forward—some might even do it in the next week or so.

It is obvious that schools have to adapt to make sure that young people are getting access to the materials that they require in order to sustain their learning. That will remain a central focus for schools.

My final point is about the importance of coming to a conclusion about transition arrangements as early as possible, in order to provide the staged clarity that Beatrice Wishart raised in her questions. I acknowledged that that would be beneficial for individuals, but we cannot give clarity until we are certain that we will be in a safe enough position to enable numbers of young people and staff to meet in schools.

The Convener: Thank you. We will move to Dr Allan.

Dr Allan: Thank you, convener. A recent feature of learning and the curriculum in Scotland has been the tracking of learners' individual needs and progress. Will that be possible in the current situation, and will it impact on some subject areas more than it will on others?

John Swinney: We have to look carefully at the gathering of information for assessment of the progress that is made by children and young people through the education system. For example, I am currently considering what approach we should take to gathering data on curriculum for excellence levels. We would normally invite schools to identify at P1, P4, P7 and S3 data on achievement of CFE levels, which is material to the data that we publish on closing the poverty-related attainment gap. That information would normally be gathered in early June, so I have to consider carefully whether that will be practical and possible, given the circumstances that we face, including members of staff currently being unable to engage in education because of illness, shielding or other issues. I am considering the implications for the education system. Collection of data is an example for which the situation has consequences.

We will also have to consider the implications for learning and teaching in the school year 2020-21. For the school year 2019-20, young people in the senior phase will have lost only about two weeks of their formal learning prior to the Easter holidays, after which they would have expected to be on study leave, preparing for examinations. Obviously, young people who are in the broad general education phase will have lost a larger part of the school year.

As I said in an answer to Gail Ross, we expect the new school year to start in the next few weeks in all circumstances, and certainly by the beginning of June, but I cannot foresee resumption of formal schooling during June, so we are beginning to see an accumulating period of loss of access to formal schooling. For example, by the time we get to the end of June, a pupil who is in the broad general education phase in S2 will have lost the best part of 2.5 months of formal schooling.

We must be mindful of the implications that that will have on young people's ability to pursue their education during 2020-21, and of the fact that the curriculum needs to reflect that. There are implications. Obviously, although there are eight curricular areas, the core of the curricular guidance encourages and requires schools to concentrate on literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing, within those eight areas. That is an important foundation of our education system,

because it gives great clarity to everyone about what is expected and what should be focused on in education. We might well have to look directly at the implications of that during the next school year.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): I have a couple of questions about this year's SQA qualifications system. A couple of weeks ago, when further detail came out about that, there was a bit of confusion. You had said that historical school results would be used only as a comparison to see whether the historical estimates that teachers had made were accurate. However, the SQA has confirmed that that is not the case: it has said that historical school results will be used as a direct data point from which the SQA can adjust pupils' grades during its moderation process.

Do you accept that the statistical reality is that using historical school-level results makes it more likely that a pupil in a working-class community, where historical results have been lower, will have their grade lowered, and that a pupil in a middle-class community, where results have historically been higher, will have their grade raised? Can you confirm that an equality impact assessment either has been or will be undertaken for every element of the system, including for use of historical school-level data, and that the impact assessment will be published before the deadline for teachers to submit estimated grades?

John Swinney: The most important thing to say about the situation that we face in relation to assessment this year is that we will be reliant on the quality of estimates by individual teachers. Teacher judgment is right at the heart of the Scottish education system. In the answer that I just gave to Dr Allan, I talked about achievement of curriculum for excellence levels, which are anchored in the concept of teacher judgment and rely on the professional judgment of teachers in assessing the performance of individual pupils. That is the foundation for assessment that will be made in 2020 of the performance of young people in the senior phase.

The SQA has been investing significant time and resource in supporting the teaching profession in making those judgments. Some of the work that has been undertaken through the SQA academy is very valuable and beneficial to teachers; I have certainly seen a lot of appreciation for it.

11:30

We should anchor analysis in teacher judgments. The SQA moderation process is designed to apply a degree of cross-checking across the whole country in order to ensure that, in all circumstances, we can be confident that

standards have been applied consistently. In order to inform that process, the SQA will gather a range of information, which I imagine will involve engaging in dialogue with individual schools about issues that arise as a result of estimates.

On the specific question about equality impact assessments, I know that the chief examiner was asked about that by the committee at its meeting on Friday, and that she said that she is discussing the matter with the Equality and Human Rights Commission. It is a matter for the SQA, which must, as the organisation that is charged with running the assessment system, undertake whatever scrutiny it considers is required. I am sure that the chief examiner is considering all the connected issues for the guidance that she is giving across the education system.

Ross Greer: It is interesting that you bring up the point that the SQA is working with the EHRC. After the SQA chief executive's appearance before the committee last Friday, the EHRC had to put out a press release to clarify that what was said at the meeting was not quite the case: it said that it had been in touch with the SQA to remind that organisation of its duties under the Equality Act 2010, and it clarified that the SQA is not working with the EHRC in exactly the way that was implied in committee.

I want to follow that up briefly. You are the cabinet secretary who is responsible for the process. Do you believe that an equality impact assessment that covers the whole system should be conducted and published before the end of this month?

John Swinney: On the question whether an equality impact assessment is required for this particular aspect of policy, any such requirement will be set out in statute, and the SQA would have to consider that.

Whether an assessment would have to be published before teachers finish submitting their estimates is a different question. Fundamentally—this is the reason why I answered Ross Greer's first question as I did—the system relies on teachers making realistic and effective judgments of every pupil's performance as they see it, through taking a holistic and evidence-based view of the young person's contribution during the academic year. That involves teachers coming to their own conclusions about the performance of their pupils; it does not involve any moderation by the SQA at that stage.

I accept that there is a legitimate question, but I do not think that it applies to formulation of teacher estimates, on which the SQA has given clear guidance. The SQA is supporting the those in the teaching profession to make the best possible holistic judgments—I am confident that they can

do that—of the performance of pupils and their entitlement to certification.

Ross Greer: My point about the timescale for when an assessment might be published is about ensuring that there is teacher confidence in the process, because there have been widespread concerns raised by teachers.

I will roll my final two questions into one, because I am conscious of the time. You will be aware that teachers have raised quite serious concerns about the requirement that they rank their pupils. In a focus group session that the committee conducted, that requirement was described as abhorrent and as running contrary to the ethos of curriculum for excellence.

As well as those in-principle concerns, the question of statistical value has been raised with us. Specifically, when teachers are asked to rank multiple pupils within very narrow bands and a couple of percentage points, distinguishing between those pupils creates a false precision. It does not reflect the relative abilities of the pupils, but it might reflect any unconscious biases that teachers have. For example, if a teacher has half a dozen pupils in the new band 8, which is between 62 per cent and 64 per cent—it is very narrow—do you accept that ranking those pupils without ties, as the SQA has requested, will create a false level of precision at fractions of a percentage point that does not accurately reflect those pupils' abilities?

More widely, can you confirm that the SQA's model and methodology will be published before teachers have to submit estimated grades, for the purpose of ensuring that there is confidence in the system?

John Swinney: There are two points there: the point about ranking and the point about the publication of the methodology.

I understand the concerns that have been raised about ranking, but it strikes me that, when teachers have to submit estimates about the potential achievement of individual pupils, they are essentially, in some shape or form, putting a relative distinction between them. If a teacher decides that a pupil should get an A or B, they are essentially ranking, or putting a relative difference between, the achievements of those young people.

The ranking principle puts a bit more detail into a process that must be an inherent part of the estimation process that says which candidate deserves which level of qualification or which grade within the qualification that they achieve. There is nothing inherently unusual about the concept of ranking. I accept that it has not been used recently, but the SQA has used it in the past, and we are in unusual circumstances so, in the

absence of the formal examination process, it is inevitable that some other means needs to be put in place.

I am not sure that the publication of the SQA model is an issue for me. I am not the guardian of decisions on who gets certificated for what; that is entirely the preserve of the SQA as the certificating body. I have not prescribed the approach to certification to the SQA, although I have asked it to come up with one because we cannot run the exams. It is a matter for the SQA to determine its approach. It has set out that it will act to exercise its responsibilities fairly, appropriately and effectively in relation to the delivery of those qualifications but, fundamentally, it has to resolve professionally how that can be undertaken. I am certain that it will have extensive dialogue with the teaching profession about how that can be done.

Neil Findlay: Cabinet secretary, teachers and education experts have expressed serious concerns about the system that has been developed this year. You are the cabinet secretary and you are accountable. Why can you not tell us whether you support the equalities impact assessment being done now to ensure that pupils, parents, and the teachers who are going to be tasked with using the system can have confidence in it?

John Swinney: I am saying that whatever statute says should be followed in this circumstance is what should happen. It is up to the SQA, as an independent body, to exercise its responsibility. The proper route for the SQA is to look at its obligations in statute and to fulfil those obligations. It is not for me to direct the SQA on how it exercises its functions—that would be wholly inappropriate. I have taken a strategic decision, based on public health advice, that it is not possible for us to run an exam diet. I have said to the SQA that it has to come up with a credible alternative certification model, which is what it is doing. It is up to the SQA to ensure that it fulfils all its statutory functions as part of that process.

The Convener: I am conscious of the time, as we have only a short time left.

Jamie Greene: Cabinet secretary, the SQA confirmed last week that it was your decision to cancel this year's exam diet. Was that its recommendation to you or did it simply present options, after which you took a view on what should happen? Further to your previous answers, if we truly value and trust the judgment of teachers, why will the SQA still be able to mark down or fail pupils, in direct contrast to the recommendations made by teachers, who surely know their pupils best?

John Swinney: On the cancellation of this year's exam diet, events moved very quickly as

the coronavirus took its course and as we recognised that there was going to be significant disruption to education as a consequence. Essentially, the SQA was working on a range of contingency options to see what might be possible—that could have been a condensed diet, a change to the timetable or a variety of reconfigurations of the approaches. We were discussing those options and I came to the conclusion, given public health advice, that there was no realistic prospect of us being able to gather pupils together—in any shape or form—to undertake an exam diet in one physical place, or even in multiple physical places, within a school, commencing in late April and going all the way through to June. That view has been rather vindicated by the passage of events.

Cancelling the exam diet was, in my view, an inevitability. I made it clear to Parliament that it was my decision. Obviously, I was discussing the possibilities with the SQA and I then asked it to develop an alternative certification model that would command confidence.

With regard to the second point, we have to be satisfied that consistency of standards is appropriately maintained across the country—that is where we have to be fair to learners. Put simply, we have to be confident that a B in a qualification in one part of the country is the same as a B in a qualification in another, which is the essential role of moderation that the SQA performs—or will perform, on this occasion.

The SQA is investing heavily in equipping teachers with the capacity to mark to those standards. In one of my earlier answers, I mentioned the SQA academy, which has substantially engaged teachers on the formulation of judgments about standards. That is a crucial point, because we need to make sure that teachers make strong, credible estimates of the potential grades that would be achieved by young people, so that they can be certificated accordingly. We have to make sure that there is comparable value in those qualifications from one part of the country to another.

The Convener: Was that to be your final question, Mr Greene?

11:45

Jamie Greene: Sorry, convener—I did not want to take up too much time. I accept that consistency, either year on year or regionally across the country, is important for ensuring that qualifications are acceptable to the organisations to which pupils move on. I get that. However, it remains the case that, although teachers may make a recommendation based on their holistic view and knowledge about their pupils, which we

value and trust, that may be overruled through some form of national averaging, consistency measures or moderation, as you put it. That strikes me as not putting the judgment into the hands of teachers; it puts it into the hands of somebody in an office far away who does not know the pupil. That remains a concern to teachers.

John Swinney: One thing that is often said about the SQA that I think misunderstands the nature of who does what in the authority is that it is somehow a body apart from Scottish education. The SQA functions because of the contribution of thousands of teachers around the country, whether in setting papers, in marking papers or in taking part in discussions on moderation. It is not a bunch of bureaucrats who undertake moderation; it is teachers who do that, to ensure consistency of standards around the country.

The SQA has invested in supporting the profession in making wise and effective judgments about the performance of pupils. The necessity for moderation is limited, because we have a good set of estimates that reflect the performance of young people in the senior phase.

For completeness, I should add that the point has been put to me that a teacher's judgment could be overruled, and a pupil could be marked down. The reverse is also the case: a teacher could be overruled and a pupil could be marked up. That point has been made. It is important to recognise that we need to ensure that young people achieve the certification to which they are entitled, and the investment of a great deal of energy and commitment by the SQA has enabled that to be the case.

I thank teachers, who I know are giving a lot of careful thought to the challenge that has been put in front of them and are ensuring that they do justice by the pupils they have had the privilege to teach.

The Convener: We have a final question from Mr Halcro Johnston.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: This relates to the points that Jamie Greene was raising. I am getting a lot of correspondence from teachers who are frustrated with the ranking and the assessment process. Is that reflected in what the cabinet secretary has been hearing? Does he recognise those frustrations, which many teachers are feeling?

John Swinney: My experience as education secretary tells me that there will always be differing opinions about how to do things in Scottish education. Yes, of course I hear that people do not like aspects of the assessment system that we have in place this year. Equally, I hear from plenty of people who think that the

guidance is clear, straightforward, understandable and intelligible. They know what they have to do, and they are getting on with doing it.

There will be diversity of opinion, but it is important that we invest the energy and time to ensure that we have sound, well-supported teacher judgments in place about the performance of young people, which will enable us to certificate the learning that they have undertaken.

I accept that this year is a very unusual year for Scottish education, particularly for those young people who are sitting—or should have been sitting—their exams. I understand that—I understand the nervousness and anxiety that they have. They have future routes to pursue, and they want to get on with that. That is a challenge.

In these exceptional circumstances, I asked the SQA to put in place an alternative credible and effective certification model, and I believe that that is what it has done.

The Convener: Thank you for your attendance at committee this morning, cabinet secretary.

That concludes the public part of the committee's meeting. Before we move into private session, I remind everyone that the next meeting will be next Friday morning, when we will take evidence from the Scottish Funding Council. We hope that the Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science will talk to us following that about universities and colleges, which we did not get to today.

I thank everyone for attending this morning.

11:50

Meeting continued in private until 12:13.

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Published in Edinburgh by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, the Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP

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