



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Education and Skills Committee

Friday 12 June 2020

Session 5



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EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE

14th 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

Friday 12 June 2020

[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:00]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Clare Adamson): Good morning, and a warm welcome to the 14th meeting in 2020 of the Education and Skills Committee. We have received apologies from Alex Neil MSP. We are joined by his substitute, Gil Paterson MSP.

I invite the deputy convener to update the committee on his interests.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): I wanted to update the committee, given that I am joining the board of trustees of the ADHD Foundation, which is a charity that is registered in England and Wales. It seeks to promote understanding of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and it is a training provider with regard to ADHD and other neurodevelopmental disorders.

The Convener: Thank you, Mr Johnson.

Agenda item 1 is a decision on whether to take agenda item 6 in private. As no member has objected, we agreed to take item 6 in private.

Subordinate Legislation

Police Act 1997 and the Protection of Vulnerable Groups (Scotland) Act 2007 (Fees) (Coronavirus) Regulations 2020 (SSI 2020/163)

10:01

The Convener: Agenda item 2 is consideration of a negative instrument. Do members have any comments on the instrument?

As no member has indicated otherwise, the committee agrees that it is content with the instrument.

Registration of Independent Schools (Prescribed Person) (Coronavirus) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2020 [Draft]

The Convener: Agenda item 3 is consideration of the draft Registration of Independent Schools (Prescribed Person) (Coronavirus) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2020, which are subject to the affirmative procedure. First, the committee will have the opportunity to ask questions of the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills. After that, we will move to agenda item 4, under which there will be a debate on the motion.

I welcome to the committee John Swinney MSP. I invite him to make an opening statement and to explain the regulations.

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): Thank you very much, convener. I welcome the opportunity to address the committee in connection with the draft regulations.

The Registration of Independent Schools (Prescribed Person) (Scotland) Regulations 2017 provide that, from 1 October 2020, only a teacher who is registered with the General Teaching Council for Scotland can be appointed as a teacher in an independent school. We listened to the views of the sector at the time of consulting on those regulations, and we extended the proposed transition period for those who had been in the system for some time from an initial two-year period to three years. We believed that that was sufficient at the time, given the progress that had been made by the General Teaching Council for Scotland in identifying alternative routes to registration, including the introduction of provisional and conditional registration. However, in April this year, it was clear that, although most teachers were already registered, registration was proving challenging for some and that the period from May to October would be important for

working directly with individual independent schools to resolve that.

In the light of pressures arising from Covid-19, including the potential impact on the ability of individuals to train and study, it has been assessed that there is a risk that not all teachers in independent schools who were employed prior to 1 October 2017 will meet the statutory requirement to be registered with the General Teaching Council for Scotland by 1 October 2020. The regulations that are in front of the committee today were therefore drafted to amend regulation 3 of the 2017 regulations, to extend the deadline to 1 June 2021 for the remaining teachers to register with the GTCS.

On-going direct consultation with key stakeholders has been key to reaching the decision to extend the deadline for compliance and in determining the period of extension that is required. All stakeholders agreed that 1 June 2021 represents a proportionate and practical extension.

A draft of the instrument was shared from 14 to 30 April 2020 across all independent schools in Scotland. Two responses were received, both of which were supportive of the extension.

I will be happy to answer any questions from the committee about the draft regulations.

The Convener: Thank you, cabinet secretary. As no member has indicated that they wish to ask a question, we move to agenda item 4, which is consideration of motion S5M-21829.

Motion moved,

That the Education and Skills Committee recommends that the Registration of Independent Schools (Prescribed Person) (Coronavirus) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2020 [draft] be approved.—[John Swinney]

Motion agreed to.

The Convener: The committee must report on the instrument to the Parliament. Are members content for me, as the convener, to sign off on that report?

No member has indicated that they are not content, so that is agreed.

School Education and Early Learning: Covid-19

10:07

The Convener: Agenda item 5 is an investigation into school education and learning in the context of Covid-19. We are delighted that the cabinet secretary is here, and I invite him to make an opening statement.

John Swinney: Thank you, convener. I welcome the opportunity to discuss important issues about the delivery of school and early learning and childcare provision in the challenging circumstances of Covid-19.

On 21 May, the Government published the strategic framework for reopening schools and early learning and childcare provision in Scotland. The framework provides direction for the whole of Scotland, to enable consistency and equity in a national approach for children and young people that is underpinned by local planning and delivery.

Childminding services and fully outdoor nursery provision have been able to reopen as of 3 June. Subject to scientific advice that it is safe for them to do so, other childcare settings will reopen in phase 3. Our schools will reopen from 11 August. In preparation, teachers are returning to schools in June for planning purposes.

The framework was developed in close collaboration with the education recovery group, which includes our local authority partners, trade unions and parent representatives, with support from key partners across education and the childcare community. It takes account of the requirement to implement physical distancing and other age-appropriate health measures in education settings, in order to control the risks of infection and transmission and to ensure that they are safe places for learning.

To complement that framework, we have also published a suite of supporting guidance that covers cross-cutting issues that local authorities and settings should consider when developing local arrangements. That guidance provides further information on practical implementation measures including transport to and from school; models of curriculum; wider support on wellbeing issues, including transition experiences; provision for those who have additional support needs; and, for each of the early learning and childcare primary and secondary sectors, considerations that are based on scientific health advice and risk factors that are relevant to each age group.

Guidance to support the safe reopening of wider childcare services during phase 3, including age-appropriate public health measures, is being

developed in partnership with the sector and will be published on 15 June. I am committed to working in partnership with the sector, and I recognise that there cannot be a one-size-fits-all approach to implementation across all childcare and education settings.

Local authority flexibility, within clear and consistent national guidelines, will provide an essential balance between equity and pragmatism. The pandemic has meant that the 2020 exam diet did not go ahead, but the certification model that the Scottish Qualifications Authority has developed and is delivering will allow the hard work of learners to be recognised and qualifications to be awarded in August.

Preparations have already started for the 2021 examination diet, and any on-going impacts of the coronavirus outbreak on that will be considered by the Covid-19 education recovery group. The SQA will provide further advice to schools to ensure that appropriate arrangements are in place to capture the learning outcomes met by young people in the senior phase in the school year 2020-21.

The impact of lockdown on our most vulnerable children has been significant. Local authorities have the discretion to increase the number of children who attend critical childcare provision, including hubs—particularly from among those children who would benefit most from early direct contact with education and care staff. There will also be a focus on supporting children at key transition points, which may include some in-school experience in late June. To ensure that there is on-going provision for vulnerable children and the children of key workers, critical childcare will continue throughout June and the summer break.

Lockdown is having a disproportionate impact on children from disadvantaged backgrounds and on progress towards closing the attainment gap. We have been engaged in discussions on the concept of an equity audit, and we will consider that along with the range of associated measures that we already have in place.

We have worked closely with local partnerships to gather data and intelligence to understand how children's services are adapting and responding to the crisis.

The delivery of services to vulnerable children has adapted so that social workers, health workers and family nurses continue to have direct contact with the children who are most at risk, and broader support for other vulnerable groups is being delivered through local hubs, online and telephone contact and other community and place-based initiatives.

We have a mission to make this work, to support and educate Scotland's children and

young people and, above all else, to keep them safe. We do not underestimate the significant impact that the restrictions have placed on practitioners, as well as on children and young people and their carers and parents. I express my thanks to everyone involved in the remarkable effort over the past few months to support the wellbeing of children and the continuity of learning and development in these challenging times.

I look forward to addressing the committee's questions.

The Convener: Thank you, cabinet secretary. We will move to questions.

Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): One of the major themes that we will be asking about is how local authorities are working with parents and school communities to ensure that blended learning works to its full potential. What can or should local authorities be doing to support parents for whom—perhaps for work reasons—part-time schooling presents major challenges?

John Swinney: It is important to start from the point of principle and the advice that the Government has received—the advice has been shared with the education recovery group—about the safe reopening of formal schooling. In essence, the public health advice that has come to us indicates that, when formal schooling is safe to reopen, which we believe will be the case in August, there will still be the requirement to observe physical distancing constraints. There are various elements to the advice, but physical distancing is the principal issue affecting the delivery of formal schooling.

As a consequence of the need to follow that principle and that advice, it is not practical for us to accommodate all children who would ordinarily be present in schools. The logical conclusion of that process is that we will end up with a blended learning model. That is not a choice that I would really want to make, but it is one that I feel we have to make, to ensure that it is safe for schools to reopen and deliver formal schooling. As a consequence, there will be more limited opportunity for young people to be present in school. That will vary around the country, because of the varying levels of school occupancy. Some schools will be able to offer young people more face-to-face schooling and, therefore, more time in school than others can offer.

10:15

With the blended learning model, there is an acceptance that there will be a need for children to be educated at home for part of the time. As part of that process, we need to get to a position in which we have good collaboration between the

world of education and the world of business. The Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Fair Work and Culture, Fiona Hyslop, and I regularly discuss with the business community the importance of employers being sympathetic towards parents and supportive in enabling them to address the challenges that they will face as a consequence of their children not being in school full time, which will mean that some better time will require to be spent at home.

Because, since March, we have had a prolonged period in which people have been told to stay at home, our society has become more accustomed to that model. We must reach a position in which there is an understanding and a dialogue between employers and employees on such questions.

The final point that I want to make in response to Dr Allan's question is that, fundamentally, the blended learning model will work successfully only if there is good and active dialogue between local authorities, schools and parents with a view to understanding the unique circumstances that individuals will face. We are encouraging such dialogue across the country.

Dr Allan: Another area where dialogue will be important is identifying whether there are any specific subject areas that present their own particular challenges. One such area might be Gaelic-medium education—you might have anticipated that I would ask about that—where the pupils' parents do not necessarily speak Gaelic. There are many other subject areas in which I am sure that dialogue is necessary. I am keen to know what is being done around the country to bring parents in on some of those conversations.

John Swinney: I have been anxious for us to be active in listening to the voice of parents during this process. The chair of the National Parent Forum of Scotland has been a member of the education recovery group to voice those issues in the group. In addition, just last weekend, I took part in a question-and-answer discussion with representatives of the parental community around the country, and further engagement is planned in due course. Dr Allan is absolutely correct in saying that there must be active dialogue with the parental community at all times to build confidence around the blended learning model.

I want to make two specific points in relation to the issues that have been raised. First, on Gaelic-medium education, I understand the significance of the challenge that is posed for the encouragement and the support of pupils who are being educated in Gaelic-medium education; there is a particular need for support for pupils who live in a household where the parents do not speak Gaelic. We are looking actively at how we can pursue a model that enables us to sustain the

critical characteristics of the immersive experience that is the beauty and the strength of Gaelic-medium education and that is critical to the successful acquisition of the language by learners. We are actively considering how, within the blended learning model, we can enable that to be taken forward, and very focused work is being done within Government on that question.

Work on the wider issue of access to subjects is now under way and has been piloted in the north of Scotland. I am increasingly confident—not confident, but certain—that it will be rolled out across the rest of the country. That work involves a venture in Dr Allan's constituency that is called e-Sgoil, which is a concept that was created by Comhairle nan Eilean Siar to assist in the delivery of a broad curriculum across the four secondary schools in the Western Isles—they are, of course, not in close proximity to each other—to address some of the challenges of delivery over such a wide geographical area.

Schools being over 100 miles apart and separated by land and water meant that a digital-based education service was developed and supported financially by the Government some time ago. That service has developed and, over time, it has increasingly been delivering education remotely to a range of centres around the country.

Education Scotland is now working closely with Comhairle nan Eilean Siar and e-Sgoil to ensure that a broad range of lessons and learning opportunities are available to support the delivery of education around the country and to reinforce the face-to-face formal schooling that will be undertaken by teachers once schools resume, in August.

Active support will be in place to ensure that the breadth and depth of the curriculum can be successfully delivered across the country. That work is being piloted in the northern alliance, in the north of Scotland. It is being delivered successfully, and I am confident that it can be deployed across a wider geographical area.

Dr Allan: I will now ask the cabinet secretary a question on a subject that I am sure others in the committee will also want to talk about—the 2021 exam diet. As far as can be seen into the future, what are your thoughts on planning ahead for the 2021 exam diet, both on when a decision might have to be made about whether there will be traditional exams and on the interventions that will be necessary to ensure that next year's cohort of pupils get the most out of their education for the next year?

John Swinney: There are a number of elements to the answer to that question. The first is confirmation that—as the education recovery group confirmed in the strategic framework—

planning for the 2021 exam diet is proceeding, as we speak, for the delivery of a traditional examination diet in the spring.

The second element is that the SQA has already indicated to schools the importance of collecting information and evidence to support the judgments about the achievements of young people on an on-going basis during the next school year. We will follow that up with further guidance. That is important should we find that we cannot successfully deliver an exam diet in the spring of 2021. Although we are planning for an exam diet, I cannot say with absolute certainty that it will take place. Therefore, we are asking schools to gather evidence on an on-going basis to support the judgments that might be required to be made in the spring of 2021.

The third element is that it is important that young people in the senior phase have an appropriate and adequate learning experience in their various subjects. The point that I made in my previous answer to Dr Allan, about the work that will be done through the combination of formal schooling and the delivery of supplementary educational input through the medium of e-Sgoil, will be significant in ensuring that young people have an adequate breadth and depth of education in individual courses to enable them to perform effectively if an examination diet takes place in the spring of 2021.

Providing guidance to the system about the importance of gathering evidence, and delivering resources, lessons and interventions that support the delivery of the breadth and depth of the curriculum, are important contributions to ensure that young people are given every opportunity to have their achievements recognised through national qualifications in the spring of 2021.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): I have a brief supplementary question on the 2021 exam diet. Can the cabinet secretary confirm whether an equality impact assessment is being conducted now on the decision to start the school term on the understanding that there will be exams at the conclusion of the school year next spring?

John Swinney: As I said in my opening remarks, we are considering our approach to an equity audit within our system. We are embarking on the school year on the basis of the scientific advice that is available to us. The advice provides us with, in essence, no alternative to the route that we are taking, but we have to be mindful of, and give consideration to, all questions of equity and equalities as we make our judgments through the year.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): I have questions on schools and on the early years. I will leave it to the convener's discretion whether I

should ask all my questions at the same time. I am happy to come back in later, if that will ease the flow of the conversation.

I will start with my questions on schools. Half the number of deaths from Covid have, unfortunately, been in care homes, and fewer than 1 per cent of people who test positive for Covid are under the age of 15, but the plans that I have seen show that some councils are proposing that some pupils should attend school for as few as two days per week in August and beyond. Does that sound like a justified and proportionate response to the threat that is posed by the virus? If so, will you explain why?

John Swinney: The Government has a duty to consider all the scientific advice and evidence that is available to us, given the scale of the public health challenge that we face. We have to recognise that all aspects of society must be part of that judgment. It is impossible to insulate or compartmentalise an element of society as somehow potentially unaffected by Covid. The manner in which schools undertake their activities involves a tremendous amount of connections and activity in society as a whole. Therefore, we need to consider how young people get to school, whom they interact with at home, what connections they make, whom they work with at school and the range of the school population—schools are not just full of young people; many adults also work in them.

Schools are, in essence, a gathering point for significant numbers of people, and one of the key lessons in the scientific advice is that large gatherings of people can pose a significant threat by spreading coronavirus. The scientific advice says that we should maintain the principle of physical distancing—on the basis of the advice that is available to us, we have set that distance at 2m—along with the hygiene arrangements with which Mr Greene will be very familiar. When we take the point of principle about the need for physical distancing and apply it in a school setting, that reduces the number of pupils who can be there.

10:30

As Mr Greene will know, there are some very large school establishments in the region that he represents. However, we need to reduce the number of pupils who are in school, so the judgments that we make must reflect that. We have to be careful, and I accept that such judgments need to be proportionate. I would like to see the level of schooling being as close to 50 per cent as I can possibly get it. For me, that would be the ideal situation. However, I accept that, in some circumstances, that will not be possible. In such cases, there must be a clear rationale, based on

the number of pupils and the physical layout of the school, to justify such decisions being taken. I should also point out that it might be possible to exceed the 50 per cent level in schools with low occupancy—frankly, because there is plenty of space there for young people to be safely physically distanced within them.

As I have said, I accept that there is a need for proportionate judgment to be applied, and I would like to see it being applied at as close to 50 per cent as it possibly can be.

Jamie Greene: Why is your ambition for a level of 50 per cent and not 100 per cent? In your previous answer, you mentioned that gatherings of large numbers of people are hotbeds for transmission of the virus. The reality is that, when people watch television, they are seeing scenes of the crowds who filled our parks and squares last weekend, during various protests—of which there might be more to come—and they are questioning why that seems to be allowed but their children cannot go to school full time.

This morning I received an email from a parent, who said:

“Educating my son on a part-time basis is wholly inadequate. He will not garner any real depth or critique of his subjects in preparation for future development. Surely it is not beyond the wit of the Government to enable full-time education at some point.”

What is the science telling you, cabinet secretary? Is it saying that a level of 50 per cent should be the maximum because of the 2m rule? If there were to be changes to that rule, how much more capacity would there be in a classroom? Why have we created a glass ceiling at 50 per cent?

John Swinney: There are a significant number of points there, all of which I would like to address. My response to the first point is that the scientific advice tells us that we need to continue to apply the 2m distancing rule, so it would be reckless of me not to follow it. If that advice should change, of course, more pupils could be accommodated in schools. However, if the advice at this stage is that the 2m rule should be applied, I do not feel that I am in any position to ignore it. That would be playing with the health of individual members of the public, and I am not prepared to do that.

Jamie Greene: Is that the advice of the UK Government or your own scientific advice? Are you given a range of advice from which you make a choice?

John Swinney: It is the scientific advice that the Scottish Government has from the advisory group that we have established, which is informed by the work of the scientific advisory group for emergencies, the scientific pandemic influenza group on modelling—SPI-M—and a variety of

experienced epidemiologists. That is the advice that is available to us, and I feel that the right thing to do is to follow it.

The second point was about the volume of learning. I have indicated that we should aim to have the level of formal attendance at school at 50 per cent. However, there is also the support for learning at home that I went through in my answer to Dr Allan, which will be extensive and will also be supported by teachers. There will be part-time learning in school, but there will also be part-time learning at home to supplement that activity. That is how we will navigate our way through the scientific advice and guarantee that comprehensive education is available for young people.

There is also a difference between the scenarios that Mr Greene put to me. He talked about people gathering in public parks and outdoors, which are fundamentally different settings to schools. In large measure, young people spend time indoors at school. We know that the indoor transmission risks of Covid are significantly higher than they are outdoors. Consequently, in the general phasing advice that the Government has put out to our country, we have allowed and enabled outdoor meetings between individuals in small numbers, whereas we have made no provision for indoor meetings with people from other households, because of the risk of transmission. The indoor-outdoor element is a significant differentiating factor between the circumstances that can be accommodated in resuming formal schooling.

Jamie Greene: Okay. The issue with schools going back only part-time is not just the effect that that will have on a child's education. I think that some people find part-time school acceptable if it is for a few months—which it has been—given the crisis that we are all facing. However, if schooling will be only part-time for the long term, that will have a profound effect on children's education. I know that you share that view.

It is an issue for parents who are simply unable to go back to work as a result of that decision. A recent Connect survey shows that fewer than 30 per cent of parents said that they were “fine” with the Government's part-time learning proposal, and one in five said that it would simply not be possible for them to go to work at all in those circumstances. Not all employers will be as flexible as you hope they will be or would like them to be.

Therefore, another consequence of part-time learning is the effect that it will have on our economy, given that some parents will not be able to go to work if their child is at school for only two days a week. That does not sound acceptable to me.

John Swinney: I do not want the blended learning model to go on for a minute longer than is required; I do not want it to be a long-term educational model. I do not think that it is the best educational model, but it is the best model in the circumstances, because I cannot ignore the public health advice and the issues that we face.

Mr Greene raises a legitimate issue about the position of working parents who will need to think about support for their children when they are at home. The phasing approach of the Government's route map is crucial in that regard, and we have tried to establish the connections in individual phases between the different elements of our approach.

For example, the resumption of schooling in August is part of a phase in which we are saying that the default position should be to work from home, if it is possible to do so. We are taking that position in our negotiations and discussions with employers, to encourage employers—as I recounted in my earlier answers to Dr Allan—to take a supportive approach to how individual employees can be assisted to support their children at home and make a contribution to their employment while working from home, which, of course, many people have had to do since lockdown began, in March.

The idea that, somehow, it is only schools that are doing things differently is wrong. The whole of our society must do things differently, to accommodate the impact of Covid. That extends into the world of work, too.

Jamie Greene: Convener, my other questions are on early years education. I can leave it there and come back in later, if that would be helpful.

The Convener: Yes, that would be helpful, as there are a couple of supplementary questions. I will bring in Mr Paterson first.

Gil Paterson (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP): The most crucial questions on the matters that we are discussing are the ones raised by Jamie Greene. It looks as though the scientific evidence says that children are less vulnerable to the virus, although not immune. What does the evidence say about children? Do they carry the virus? Do they transmit it to each other? If they do transmit it to each other, and if we ease restrictions in schools, what will happen when children return home? Is any work being done on that? Do we know what that cohort of individuals does within the wider population?

John Swinney: The evidence about Covid is still growing, and the research that will allow us to understand its effects and its transmission is continuing. We have not reached a definitive answer to that question—the issue of transmission

among children and young people is still being explored.

We have set out the scientific advice that we have received. I arranged for the education recovery group to be briefed on the science questions by Professor Andrew Morris, who spoke on behalf of the advisory group, and we have published the material that informed our decisions on the scientific information.

We know that the youngest children are the least likely to be affected by Covid and that it becomes more significant among older children and young people. What we do not definitively know is the extent to which those children and young people may transmit the virus, despite the fact that they themselves appear to be pretty much unaffected by having it.

One of the strengths of the position that we are in today is that the level of public compliance has been so strong that we have seen a dramatic reduction in the prevalence of Covid. Every time that we move further out of lockdown—the more connections that there are, the more journeys that are made and the more that people interact with each other—the greater is the risk of the spread of Covid. It is still in our community, albeit to a lesser extent. That was demonstrated by the chief statistician's report yesterday.

When we restart formal schooling and more people come into school buildings, there will be a mixing of pupils, adults, families and friends, which will increase the risk of transmission. That is why we have to take care with the model that we have put in place to reduce the intensity of those connections, and it is why rules such as the 2m physical distancing rule will be applied in those circumstances.

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Cabinet secretary, you have mentioned school occupancy and how that may lead to variations in the face-to-face element of blended learning. Where have you identified potential problems? Are those problems more likely to occur in areas with a high school roll and where there are already issues with attainment? What can you do to minimise the impact of those problems by providing additional venues, to encourage face-to-face learning? The risk is that areas where attainment is already a problem may be the ones that are most punished.

10:45

John Swinney: As with all such matters, there is no general answer that addresses that. There will be high-performing schools in Scotland where occupancy is above 100 per cent—some schools have occupancy of 102 or 103 per cent—that will face a challenge in accommodating pupils. At the

other end of the spectrum, there will be schools with occupancy levels of 65 or 70 per cent. Some of those schools might be in more rural areas and some of them might well be in areas of deprivation. I understand what Mr Halcro Johnston is getting at, but there is no uniform answer to the issue, because school occupancy will vary to a considerable degree.

The level of occupancy will normally be influenced by rurality and by deprivation, but not all schools in areas of deprivation will have an occupancy level that is at the lower end of the spectrum. There is no general pattern, which is why we opted for an approach that involves setting out a framework at a national level but giving schools and local authorities the flexibility to design an approach that reflects their individual circumstances. I thought that that was the correct and pragmatic thing to do.

The Convener: I have a quick supplementary question. A number of newer primary schools in my area are open plan. Do schools of such a design present a bigger problem for social distancing? How might social distancing be done in an open-plan school?

John Swinney: I do not think that an open-plan layout poses more of a problem. The strength of our handling of the situation will depend on the ability to deploy flexibility, and the more the accommodation lends itself to being rearranged and redesigned to maximise the use of the space and the protection that the space offers to staff and pupils, the more children and young people will be able to be accommodated. I do not think that an open-plan layout represents an impediment to progressing the new model.

A slightly greater challenge is presented by accommodation that is more rigid. An arrangement that is based on square classroom blocks restricts what can be achieved in the space.

The Convener: We move to questions from Mr Gray.

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): In your opening remarks, you mentioned the disproportionate impact that the closure of schools is having on disadvantaged pupils and your expectation—which is widely shared—that that will have increased the attainment gap. I think that that is right. You said that you are considering an equity audit to measure what has happened in that regard. Last week, the committee heard from the Educational Institute of Scotland and School Leaders Scotland, which were firmly of the view that such an audit is urgently needed. Why can you not today commit to carrying out an equity audit instead of just saying that you will consider the idea?

John Swinney: A few weeks ago, I took part in some fascinating and helpful discussions with Larry Flanagan of the EIS at a virtual international summit of the teaching profession. It was an opportunity for us to hear about international experience and thinking from Education International, which is the gathering of education trade unions from around the world, and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, on some of the thinking of how to deal with the implications of Covid.

One issue that was raised at the summit was the concept of the equity audit. There is significant merit in such an approach, as it would align closely with the work that the Government has been committed to, for the duration of this Parliamentary term, on closing the poverty-related attainment gap. Having listened carefully to the thinking and experience at the international summit on the teaching profession, I am sympathetic to the concept and to exploring how best to take it forward.

Iain Gray: There seems to be a compelling case for going ahead with it. Time is not on our side. There are only a couple of months until schools return.

There are concerns about the blended learning model, once schools return. Albeit that you have explained the reasons for that model, the concern is that it will exacerbate the poverty-related attainment gap, because of the significant element of home schooling that will still be in place.

Earlier this week—or maybe last week; I cannot remember for sure—you announced that, this year, you will not ask schools to gather information on the achievement of curriculum for excellence levels. That being the case, how, when schools return, will you be able to track progress, or the lack of it, on closing the poverty-related attainment gap?

John Swinney: We will expect schools to continue to follow the agenda of the pursuit of equity and excellence, which is at the heart of the strategic framework. In that respect, the Government's policy agenda will remain absolutely clear. One of the strengths of our position is that the education system is wholly bound to the agenda of delivering equity and excellence.

Iain Gray: But how are you going to measure that?

John Swinney: I will come on to that.

One of the contributory factors in that is my confirmation of the resources that will be available to schools and local authorities to support activity to close the poverty-related attainment gap. I have given that certainty of funding as a basis on which schools can plan, so that practical interventions

will be successfully delivered for children and young people and make an impact on closing the gap.

On the collection of curriculum for excellence levels data, I made the judgment, after consultation with local authorities and the teaching trade unions, that, given the priority of focusing on the delivery of learning and teaching for children and young people in Scotland, it would be an extra burden to ask for that data to be collected on a census date of 8 June, particularly given the fact that teachers have not been in a formal schooling environment with children and young people for the best part of two months. My judgment was that the effort of collecting the data at that time would be disproportionate to its value, given that I was pressing the education system to deliver learning and teaching to children and young people.

We will resume the collection of the data in the spring of 2021. It will give us a line of sight to the impact that has taken place, and we will be able to see the effects, once formal schooling returns in August, of the focus on equity and excellence in the education system. We will have that line of sight from the data that we would ordinarily collect.

Iain Gray: You are saying that the data that would normally be collected will be collected once schools return. That is helpful to know.

John Swinney: So that there is no misunderstanding, what I am saying is that we will collect the data on the census date in June 2021.

Iain Gray: Will that involve a look back at the impact of schooling from August through to spring?

John Swinney: Yes.

Iain Gray: You mentioned the resources that the Government has allocated to closing the attainment gap. This week, you talked about £50 million being confirmed from the attainment challenge fund. That is extremely welcome. However, is it not the case that those funds were always available and were intended to address the problem? Now that we have the additional impact of Covid and school closures, there is surely a requirement for new, additional funding to provide additional support for vulnerable children who have suffered a disproportionate impact. Will there be any additional funding for that Government priority?

John Swinney: The Government will always consider what resources can be made available. However, I have to be open with the committee and say that there are absolutely colossal demands on public finances at the moment. All arms of Government have had to incur very significant additional costs to support the population during an incredibly difficult period—

whether that has been support for food, for business sustainability or for the national health service and its expansion.

Of course, we will look at whether there are opportunities to deploy further resources. However, what is important in what I set out this week is the certainty of the resources that will be available to the education system and its ability to plan for the resources that will be put in place to assist in closing the attainment gap. We have also announced further resources that will be made available to support the closure of the digital divide for children who are involved in education but who will not ordinarily have access to such technology.

New resources are being put in, but I have to set that in the context of the challenges that the Government faces right across the board because of the financial effect of Covid and the necessity to meet a range of different demands across all sectors of Scottish society so that our country is able to navigate its way through these challenging times.

Iain Gray: I think that we all appreciate the challenges that are faced by Government and society in general. However, it has always been the case—you reaffirmed it this morning, Mr Swinney—that education is a priority for the Scottish Government. Therefore, when it comes to looking at how resources can be deployed, surely education is a top priority for additional resources.

This morning, you made the case for blended learning being the way in which we have to return to schooling, and you acknowledged that there will be a significant impact on the poverty-related attainment gap. You made the case very well that everybody has to play their part in making this work. Businesses and employers have to play their part in allowing parents the flexibility to cope with flexible learning. However, the role of Government in delivering that priority surely has to be to somehow find additional resources to enable local authorities to deliver a far more expensive way of teaching our young people and to mitigate the additional effects on the most disadvantaged pupils. There must be additional resources that could go to local government and schools to ensure that all of this works.

11:00

John Swinney: We have delivered additional resources to local government in the recent past. Local government has had in excess of £300 million-worth of new additional resources from the Government to support its efforts, and local government is free to make that resource available to education in order to support the objectives that we all share. In addition, the education recovery group's report made it clear that the Government

and local authorities will discuss the specific financial implications of the blended learning model. We will have those discussions when we identify what their real impact will be.

As I explained in my previous answer, the Government has put in additional resource through support for digital services. That enables us to work with local authorities to address situations in which young people do not have ready access to devices and internet connectivity by providing them with support to enable them to participate fully in the education to which they are entitled.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): Good morning, colleagues and cabinet secretary. I would like to go back to the issue of childcare. I know that we have touched on it already, but it is important.

I have previously asked about the options that will be available to parents who cannot work from home. The EIS survey tells us that a third of teachers have their own childcare responsibilities. Come August, they will be back at school full time—from Monday to Friday—but their children will not be. How might teachers with their own childcare responsibilities be helped through that situation?

John Swinney: In that context, teachers will be defined as key workers, and there will be a requirement to provide childcare support to meet their needs. However, there will still have to be co-operation and dialogue between local authorities—which, in that respect, are themselves employers—and their staff to enable such issues to be resolved satisfactorily.

Beatrice Wishart: Like other members, I have been contacted by parents asking what they are supposed to do. We hope to see the reopening of the tourism sector, which is, of course, an urgent issue, on 15 July. However, it will not be possible for some sole traders—for example, those who own shops—to work from home, but their children might later be learning at home on a few days each week. Families therefore face big dilemmas in the future, and they are trying to plan for those. That point also touches on Iain Gray's question about the further provision that might be available during the blended learning period. Will the cabinet secretary expand on that aspect? Who will pick up the relevant costs?

John Swinney: There is a deeper question here, which I think it is important to explore. Although we are taking gradual steps to open up activity in our society, not every aspect of our lives will yet have gone back to normal by the time that schools return in August. As is set out in the Government's route map document, restrictions on what people are able to do will still be in place at

that time. That is why I gave my earlier response to Jamie Greene in the terms that I did.

The worlds of business and of education will need to work co-operatively. One will not be operating at 100 per cent, and the other will be doing so at only 50 per cent. Our whole society will have to go through a gradual process of returning to our previous levels of activity. Our country will therefore be involved in a gradual, phased process to ensure that we do not intensify our activity to the extent that we refuel coronavirus. That would be a disastrous outcome, which is why the Government is treading with such caution. We want to avoid, at all possible costs, a resurgence in coronavirus later this year. If it were to reappear then at significant magnitude, our country would have very deep economic and social problems. The Government is operating with care and caution in order to avoid that happening. There will therefore be a very gradual and phased return to activity in the course of the next few months.

Beatrice Wishart: That has answered my intended second question about what would happen if there was a second wave.

On a different topic, why are no young people, or their representatives, on the education recovery group?

John Swinney: During my tenure as the education secretary, I have encouraged input from young people and listened carefully to their views. One of the challenges that we have faced is the requirement to move with urgency. We needed to establish a strategic framework on how we would progress matters, recognising that there had to be space for extensive local dialogue about how arrangements were put in place at a local level, where I would expect detailed discussions to be taking place with young people on how to take forward those approaches.

I think that, given the urgency, it would have proven quite difficult to try to identify an individual young person who could contribute across the spectrum of ages that would be required around that table. I opted to look carefully at the available survey information from a number of organisations, including Young Scot and the Children's Parliament, to identify young people's issues, considerations and concerns as they presented themselves.

One of the key themes that has come out of that work has been young people's concern for their wellbeing. Consequently, in our guidance to teachers on what should be the focus of their work on and their thinking in their approach to the curriculum, the importance of recognising that support for young people's wellbeing—particularly their mental wellbeing, given the extensive trauma that is likely to have been experienced during the

period—is the central consideration with regard to how our education system should be looking to restart its formal activity.

That was the rationale for the way in which we heard the views, concerns and aspirations of young people. I would expect the local dialogue, which I am certain will be undertaken at school level, to give every opportunity for children and young people to influence how arrangements are designed.

Ross Greer: I lodged a written question on the Government's consultation with young people. In your reply, you mentioned the use of Young Scot's survey. The answer was slightly strange. In response to a question about consulting with young people, it seems to indicate that the fact that the National Parent Forum of Scotland is on the education recovery group somehow covers that base. I suggest that consulting with young people is distinctly different from speaking to their parents.

I hear what you have said about local consultation, but much of what we are talking about are matters of national policy. How are you personally hearing from young people? That is quite different from reading the results of a survey that another organisation has conducted. How are you and the Scottish Government listening directly to the concerns of young people? There is no evidence of that so far.

John Swinney: I will look at the written answer that Mr Greer has received. If I judge that it is not an appropriate answer and needs to be revised, I will revise it.

I ordinarily spend a vast amount of my time in the company of young people, listening to their views and aspirations. Indeed, during the Covid emergency, I have had some—albeit much more limited—opportunities to hear their views directly.

Through our various channels of communication, the Government is trying to listen to the views that young people express. We have used the channel of communication through Young Scot to hear those views, to make sure that we can best reflect those in our priorities. We have a number of channels of dialogue, such as the learner panel, through which we have heard the views of young people, and we will continue to listen to those views as we move forward.

Gail Ross (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP): Good morning. I have spoken to quite a few parents about the blended learning proposal and, to be completely honest, many parents, who have already been struggling over past weeks, are absolutely dreading it.

What support could and should be given to parents who are struggling with the home learning

side? Rather than children being punished for non-attendance, their parents should be given emotional support. You spoke about the mental health aspect, which has knock-on effects on learning.

John Swinney: In our headline messaging, we have tried to take the approach of saying to parents that they should avoid thinking that they need to assume the role of teacher as part of the home learning model. We have expressly encouraged parents not to think that they must recreate the classroom experience on a daily basis at home.

We have done that for two reasons. First, we recognise that this is a disruptive and stressful period for everyone. If we were to add to the stress that people are naturally experiencing and all the worries that families have about the circumstances that they face by imposing an obligation to follow the school routine throughout the day, we would simply exacerbate that stress. Secondly, we must acknowledge that, although parents can make a certain contribution to the process, the home experience cannot fully replicate the school experience.

If the committee looks at the work that we have undertaken through Parent Club, which is the reference point that we encourage all parents to look to for guidance and advice, it will see that that resource provides supportive and sympathetic explanations of how parents should approach the situation that we will continue to face. We have attempted to send out to parents the message that they should not feel as though they ought to recreate the school environment.

In addition, resources are available through Education Scotland. For example, parents can use the "Scotland Learns" educational materials that are available on the Education Scotland website, should they wish to do so. That is another place that parents can go to that is reliable in the event that there is an issue with school support for a child.

I was interested in the most recent Connect survey on parental attitudes to the support that they have received to deliver education. Interestingly, from the previous survey to the most recent one, there was an increase in parental confidence in and satisfaction with the level of support that they had received from 64 per cent to 77 per cent. Only 8 per cent of parents said that they did not think that the level of support that they had received had been adequate. That figure is too high, but I take some encouragement from the improving position that has emerged from the Connect survey.

Gail Ross: I want to go back to the line of questioning that Iain Gray pursued about school

finances and in particular the pupil equity fund. There has been a relaxation of the guidance on pupil equity funding. Can you give us an overview of how schools can use the funding to their advantage during the crisis?

11:15

John Swinney: The crucial point on that is that pupil equity funding is available for the decision making of schools, so whatever happens about flexibility, that flexibility has to be exercised by the school. The school has to take account of the circumstances that it faces and consider whether better use could be made of the resources than what was originally planned to support the closure of the poverty-related attainment gap.

I reinforce the point that the decision must be made by the school. The resources are allocated directly by the Government to individual schools based on eligibility for free school meals in order to tackle the issues of the poverty-related attainment gap in those schools. The resource is for no other purpose, and must continue to be used for that but, obviously, the school has some flexibility in how it can be used. I would not go on to prescribe that use, because the beauty of pupil equity funding is that it empowers our educators to make what they consider to be the best decisions that they can make in that respect.

Gail Ross: My final question is on an issue that we have not discussed before. I have been contacted by a couple of parents over the past week about school uniforms. I know that that is another subject that is for schools to decide on, but one of those parents who contacted me has lost their job, and school uniforms are expensive. Do you have an opinion on what schools should be doing to relax the rules on the wearing of uniforms, at least for the first term when pupils go back?

John Swinney: I start from the principle that I am a school uniform fan, and a simple school uniform fan, because I think that it makes life an awful lot easier. In my house, we much prefer school uniform days to non-school uniform days, because the former are much more straightforward. I stress that I am a supporter of simple and affordable school uniform, because it makes things a lot easier for families.

However, Gail Ross raises an important question about the return to school in August and the fact that there are many pressures on families, including many financial pressures. There will probably also be practical shopping challenges for families. Fundamentally, we are saying to people that they should not go out of the house unless they absolutely need to. Food is essential, but going out to purchase a school uniform is perhaps

not that essential. Therefore, schools have to show a bit of sensitivity on that question. It is not for me to prescribe what should happen, but with my son's school, we got a message from the headteacher the other day to say that we should not be in a hurry to go and buy a school uniform, which I thought was sensitive advice to families that, in essence, we should get our priorities right.

Gil Paterson: I want to take you back to the prospect of making it easier for schools to open. Of course, that is combined with the economy and the pressure that we will likely be under if people return to work while children are not in full-time education.

I am aware that the root cause of the problem is a lack of capacity in schools, which has been caused by the pandemic and the need to have children keeping a safe distance from each other. You have covered that issue well, and I am satisfied with that. At the same time, the Government wishes to have as much face-to-face teaching as possible in these very difficult circumstances.

You may well have covered this somewhere else, but I have been looking for it and cannot find it—maybe I am remiss in asking the question, but I will ask it nevertheless: has the Scottish Government considered utilising libraries, public halls, scout halls, churches, and so on? That would ease the capacity issue.

Perhaps big screens could be used in those facilities, so that a teacher could conduct the lesson in person, but on a big screen. It might even be possible to amalgamate classes, so that, for example, a teacher could teach two full classes at the same time. If that was possible, it would overcome some of the broadband issues that are bound to arise. Those arise even with the platform that MSPs use, which is very sophisticated, and we are well attended by information technology staff.

There would a lot of wins in that regard. It would also help the pupil teacher ratio. A big screen would be much more affordable than equipping everyone with IT equipment. Has that been looked at? Forgive me if you have looked at that and answered in some other forum; I have not seen it.

John Swinney: The question is important, because it is about the potential to expand the capacity of formal schooling in Scotland.

In the education recovery group's proposition, we have set out the blended learning approach. However, we also include an opportunity for local authorities to explore the use of other premises, which could provide accommodation for more pupils, on a more regular basis. Gil Paterson has listed some of those premises, which might include a collection of public halls, church halls

and leisure facilities. Most local authorities, for example, have—albeit leased to arm's-length companies—some leisure facilities such as big sports halls, which are not being used in the current context. The report envisaged the opportunity, should local authorities choose to take it, to make available wider accommodation.

The other day, I heard from the leader of East Renfrewshire Council that that local authority is exploring the possibility of using other accommodation to expand opportunities for face-to-face learning. Taking that sort of opportunity is not prescribed but is encouraged by the education recovery group's report.

The second relevant factor is that, obviously, it would have to be done safely. There would have to be appropriate arrangements in place around child safety and health and safety in the facilities that were being used. Such arrangements will, of course, also be required in schools.

The third element is that the General Teaching Council for Scotland is contacting teachers who are on its register but who are not actively teaching, to explore whether they would consider supplementing teaching capacity and resource at a local level, in order to accommodate initiatives of the type that Gil Paterson has suggested. We are making an appeal to teachers who have perhaps recently retired, are on sabbatical or are working elsewhere, to consider—provided that their registration is current—whether they could come back into teaching and make a contribution.

The fourth element, in which the big screen strategy—if I may call it that—perhaps comes in, goes back to the point that Dr Allan raised with me at the start of the session. I responded by talking about e-Sgoil, which is based in the Western Isles. In essence, it consists of lessons that are delivered by teachers and lecturers. They are broadcast live and can be recorded, and because of the expansion of the work that we are undertaking with local authorities to expand the pool of teachers who are involved, we can have a wider range of lessons and subjects being taught. Through the e-Sgoil network, a teacher in Clydebank high school could broadcast a lesson on a particular subject from their classroom to any pupil in the country, because it is all done through the glow digital platform. That extends the opportunity for deeper learning to be broadcast to young people around the country through digital means, in a safe environment in a fashion that enhances their learning. Education Scotland is working closely with e-Sgoil to draw all that work together, so that we have a much broader proposition available to supplement face-to-face learning for children and young people.

It may also be possible to expand face-to-face learning by the use of non-school accommodation, and the Government would welcome that.

Gil Paterson: I am grateful for that answer and for the progress that is being made. Some of some of the premises that I am thinking about, which are presently not being used, are big public premises or churches that could accommodate more than one class—a primary school class would be like a pea rattling in a drum. Would there be any objections to co-operation between two schools—primaries 4 or 5, or whatever? Would the Government or the EIS object to two classes being taught at the same time in the one room or hall? Classroom assistants or retired teachers could come in to assist the presenter, who, in that situation, would hopefully be a teacher from one of the schools. Does the cabinet secretary have a view on that?

John Swinney: The question of collaboration between schools and classes is at the heart of Scottish education and is encouraged by the Government, local authority partners and the EIS, as teaching professionals. The proposition that Mr Paterson puts forward is entirely conceivable within the arrangements that we have in place in the strategic framework. There would be a number of stipulations: it would have to be a safe environment, physical distancing would have to be observed, and appropriate registered teachers would have to be present and delivering the education. Those are the three things that immediately come to mind that would have to be considered, but the concept is entirely conceivable.

The point that I have been trying to get across this morning is that we decided not to be prescriptive at a national level about what should happen, but to be permissive. Everything that Mr Paterson suggests is permitted and conceivable within the arrangements; it is up to schools and local authorities to consider whether that would be appropriate and would work for them in their circumstances.

11:30

The Convener: I am very conscious of the time. We have three themes left to discuss today, so I ask the committee to stick to the themes so that we can get through the questions still to come.

On the theme of early learning and childcare, can you advise how much flexibility parents have with and what the priorities will be for ELC? Parents may well be balancing time at home and time at work when trying to fulfil the blended model for older children in their family, for example.

You have mentioned discussions with business. You also spoke about societal change. Although

we are very conscious of the impact on disadvantaged children in the current situation, what discussions are taking place with business about the impact on women, whom we know have historically taken on the bulk of childcare? How do we ensure that women are not disadvantaged in the workplace because of the blended model and the pressures that that might put on a family?

John Swinney: Those are significant issues. We are working with local authorities to make sure that the 600 hours of childcare, which is the statutory entitlement, is provided.

The committee will be familiar with our decision that, in the light of the Covid emergency, it was not practicable to require local authorities to deliver 1,140 hours of ELC by August, which was the policy intent. We are working to make sure that the delivery of 600 hours of ELC can be achieved. As I said in my earlier remarks, we also hope that early learning centres will be able to reopen by phase 3. Obviously, careful judgments will have to be made.

I am keen that, as we navigate through all the questions, we are mindful of the importance of ensuring—this has run through the Government's priorities during the past few weeks—that the private, voluntary and independent sector can be made sustainable. We need that sector to make a significant contribution to the delivery of early learning and childcare.

The Covid emergency is having significant impacts on different population groups, and I recognise its significance for the position of women in society, particularly in relation to the delivery of childcare. We are working closely with local authorities to ensure that the ELC opportunities are available for families to benefit from as early as it is safe for them to do so.

The Convener: I call Mr Greene.

Jamie Greene: I appreciate your bringing me back in, convener—I will try to be brief.

A lot of nurseries are approaching us with concerns about the rolling back from the provision of 1,140 hours. Some councils have already moved to 600 hours, reneging on their promises to nurseries; others are trying to be fair and are sticking to 1,140 hours; and some are somewhere in the middle. It is a mixed bag, depending on which part of the country you live in. The problem is that not all private providers will survive if that reduction continues. Can you give us a bit more detail on when you think that the 1,140 hours will be reintroduced? Doing that may be difficult, but it lies at the heart of what local authorities should be doing. Some of them are using the pandemic as an excuse to reduce the number of hours that they had promised to fund.

John Swinney: At this stage, it is difficult for me to give a definitive commitment to the provision of 1,140 hours. Up until Covid, we believed that we were on track to deliver that in August, and we are very disappointed that we are not in a position to do that. We want to do it as quickly as possible. I hope that Mr Greene appreciates that, given the situation that we are in, we do not have a clear line of sight as to how events will turn out.

We want the introduction of 1,140 hours at the earliest possible opportunity, although I appreciate that there are varied positions across the country. Some local authorities have extensively moved to 1,140 hours and others are much closer to 600 hours as the predominant element of the provision that is available. There is a mixed economy around the country, which is a product of the phasing in of 1,140 hours, and it defines the context in which we operate now.

However, I am very keen to ensure that we at no stage lose the important capacity and quality in the private, voluntary and independent sector as a consequence of what we are experiencing. I am keen to ensure that we have the best possible channel of communication with that sector. We talk to Early Years Scotland regularly, and Maree Todd, who is the Minister for Children and Young People, is very involved in those discussions. I want to signal to that sector the importance that the Government attaches to its work and role. If there are any particular issues or scenarios, Mr Greene and others should bring them to ministers, and we will do what we can do resolve them. We have had a very good, participative discussion with local authorities about the delivery of 1,140 hours, and I certainly want to use those mechanisms in the future to preserve the importance of the sector in the delivery of early learning and childcare.

Jamie Greene: Can I request two things of the Government? First, I ask that, in those conversations with the private sector—I already know of some businesses that are looking at closing down, because they have contacted us to say they are desperate—the Government does everything it can to communicate the message about what support it will give them and, indeed, that it is quite up-front and honest now about what support it has or does not have, so that the sector can start to make decisions now.

The second request is around local authorities. I ask that the cabinet secretary does a stock check of which local authorities are delivering only the bare minimum and which ones are delivering almost double that, because it creates a postcode lottery for parents, depending on which part of the country they are in.

The Government really needs to do everything it can to ensure that we get nearer to 1,140 hours

than to 600, because people will do only the minimum if that is all that is asked of them.

John Swinney: Those are reasonable points, and I give Mr Greene the assurance that we will explore all those questions through the joint delivery board that the Government has established with local government.

I reiterate my offer that, if Mr Greene or any other member of the committee or Parliament is concerned about particular scenarios or issues, they should please draw them to my attention and to the attention of Maree Todd, and we will do our level best to resolve them.

I come back to the fundamental point that we need that sector to be able to make a contribution in the future. Therefore, we cannot allow it to be jeopardised by the circumstances that we face. I have exactly the same interest as Mr Greene in ensuring that the sector is supported and sustained, and I will do all that I can to resolve those issues.

The Convener: Jamie Halcro Johnston has the next question.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: Convener, my question relates to vulnerable children. Do you want me to cover it later or come in now?

The Convener: You can come in now, and I will take it that we have moved on to the topic of vulnerable children and ask members to keep their questions to that topic.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: Can the cabinet secretary confirm whether blended learning is possible without access to online learning?

John Swinney: Yes, it is possible.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: Okay. Online learning is important to the process, and I have had discussions with you and some of your colleagues about the number of young people who do not have access to the technology that is required for online learning. Will the £9 million investment in 25,000 laptops be enough to ensure that online learning is available for all young people in Scotland who need it?

John Swinney: I do not think that the number of devices will fix the issue that we are concerned about.

I will give a little more detail, as I probably should have said more in my previous answer to Mr Halcro Johnston. Digital learning has a place, but it is also possible for blended learning to be delivered without reliance on digital technology. I observe a lot of activity that goes on in schools, and Education Scotland advises me about a variety of intelligence that it gathers. Plenty of schools are delivering work plans and workbooks to families where there is no digital connectivity

and supporting learning through other means, such as textbooks and other materials. That is possible. However, obviously, in the interests of equity, it is important that we address the challenge of digital technology, and that is where we are coming from.

As with almost everything in education, we have a mixed economy. There is extensive distribution of devices in some parts of the country, but less so in others. The Government has taken on a commitment to work with local authorities to try to resolve that. That is why we have taken that initiative and managed to secure, in a time of congested global demand for devices, 25,000 Chromebooks in an early order. I believe that they will be with us very soon. We will work with local authorities to distribute them to young people who require that connectivity.

As Mr Halcro Johnston knows, further funding is available, and we will establish what more needs to be done in the light of the availability of that funding.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: I am encouraged that you have confidence that the Chromebooks are on their way. Will you be able to ensure that they are with the people who require them by the time the schools go back and blended learning starts?

John Swinney: Yes.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: That is encouraging. It is good to get a clear answer on that.

Iain Gray mentioned an equity audit. What analysis or monitoring have you done so far of the impact of Covid and the closure of schools on some of the most vulnerable pupils and on attainment?

John Swinney: We have not done a systematic audit of impact. However, through the work of the education recovery group, we judge that, as I have acknowledged in my evidence to the committee this morning, the current model for the delivery of education is not as effective as the model that we had prior to Covid. As a consequence, educational outcomes will be jeopardised. Therefore, at the earliest possible opportunity, we have to strengthen the opportunities to achieve better outcomes. That is what is driving the agenda that the Government is taking forward.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: Iain Gray asked why you cannot confirm today that you will do an equity audit. Is there any reason why an equity audit would not be helpful?

John Swinney: I think that Mr Gray took from my comments in responding to him that I am very supportive of and sympathetic to his arguments, and I am. An equity audit is an important part of the learning that we have to undertake. However, my absolute priority is to get us into a position in

which we are strengthening the delivery of education at the earliest possible opportunity at which it is safe to do so, given the constraints within which we have to operate.

I am very interested in making sure that the policy objective that has driven my tenure as education secretary—that of closing the poverty-related attainment gap—remains the central priority of Scottish education, so I have every interest in ensuring that, as we continue to pursue that objective, we understand the implications in that regard of the impact of Covid.

11:45

Jamie Halcro Johnston: I have a quick final question. In your answer to Jamie Greene, you mentioned the scientific evidence that you received on social distancing and the 2m rule. If the prescribed distance was reduced to 1.5m or 1m, as some scientists—including those at the World Health Organization—have suggested should happen, that would have an impact on the number of young people who could receive face-to-face teaching.

Could you tell us about the scientific advice that you received, which you think supersedes the advice of the WHO?

John Swinney: We have published the advice that we received—we did so at least a couple of weeks ago. That advice, some of which the chief medical officer reiterated from the podium at the daily press conference a few days ago, came from the advisory group to the Scottish Government. The advice is that, based on the current prevalence of Covid within our society and the strategy to reduce the incidence of Covid, observing the 2m distance rule will be essential in enabling us to reduce the prevalence of the virus and, as a consequence, suppress it so that the test and protect strategy can have the most significant and controlling effect that it is possible for it to have. The advice that I have is no different from the advice that the Scottish Government has.

Scientific advice comes to us as a Government, and I think that it would be unwise for different parts of Government to say, “We’re going to proceed on the basis of different scientific advice.” That is a recipe for anarchy in our approach. We are following the advice that has been set out to us.

Mr Halcro Johnston makes a fair point. There are different views about which distance is appropriate. Different countries operate to different specifications. There might well be a change in the advice at some stage in the future. If that happens, the framework that we have put in place will be adapted to reflect that. However, I thought it important that the scientific advice that the

Scottish Government received was published. I hope that it has helped members of Parliament to understand the judgments that the Government has made. If there was any change to that advice, that would be communicated in a similar way and would be reflected in our policy approach.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: I will leave it there, following that dramatic reference to “anarchy”.

John Swinney: The word “anarchy” comes to mind when I think of Mr Halcro Johnston.

The Convener: Moving swiftly on, I invite questions from Ms Mackay.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): How are young people with complex additional support needs being supported? The National Autistic Society Scotland says that 10,000 autistic children have faced severe challenges during lockdown. I can only imagine how difficult that has been. Will individualised transition plans be put in place for autistic children to help them to return to school? Will blended learning work for them? Will the experience of children with additional support needs be researched once lockdown ends?

John Swinney: Covid has given rise to a number of significant and serious issues for children with additional support needs. For many children and young people—particularly those who are on the autistic spectrum, but not just them—the routine of going to school is central to their whole way of life. For me, there is probably nothing much more beautiful than seeing a young person on the autistic spectrum happy and motivated in a school environment. Where the approach works, it is incredibly reassuring, because it means that the social isolation that is normally characteristic of children on the autistic spectrum has been overcome to enable their participation in school.

I recognise how disruptive the situation is. We have to look at individual circumstances to make sure that every young person is supported to make the return to school.

I know that that journey will be quite challenging for some young people, because they have experienced a big disruption since March. I would encourage a focus on individuals in order to ensure that that journey can be undertaken.

We must look carefully at the research experience in the light of Covid and its implications for young people on the autistic spectrum. It is vital that we understand the implications and reflect them in our policy making.

Rona Mackay: When will Angela Morgan’s independent review on additional support for learning be published? Will the Government

response take into account the impact of Covid-19 on those with additional support needs?

John Swinney: I am keen for the report to be published soon, and I am optimistic about doing so during the next couple of weeks.

The Government will have to look carefully at Angela Morgan's report in the light of the Covid experience and make sure that our response is commensurate with the issues that she raises.

The Convener: I apologise for not bringing Daniel Johnson in earlier, but I am delighted that you can come in now.

Daniel Johnson: That is quite all right, convener—I will not take it personally. Indeed, in some ways, it is quite useful that I am coming in on this sequence, because my questions follow on from Rona Mackay's questions.

Delivering on our aims for equity in education is challenged at this time because of home learning and blended learning. That is particularly true for children with autism. You mentioned that there would need to be an individualised approach. Will you elaborate on what input there has been to the Government's thinking and planning, and the degree to which children with autism and neurodevelopmental disorders informed the thinking and planning, and the materials that Education Scotland is developing?

John Swinney: We gathered feedback and input to enable us to draft and then publish fresh guidance on the implications of Covid for young people with additional support needs. That input informed the guidance on continuity of learning for young people with additional support needs and we expect schools to reflect on it as they work out how best to support young people in making their journey back into formal schooling.

The guidance comes out of dialogue with the community, and it informs the school community about how it can best support the needs of individual children and young people.

Daniel Johnson: Jamie Halcro Johnston asked a number of questions about the use of technology, and in your answer to Rona Mackay you noted that the routine of school is important to children with autism.

Delivering learning through technology using media such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams and other platforms may be particularly challenging for children with autism, given the issues that they can have with empathy, for example. What research has been undertaken on the use of technology and how might that impact learning for children with autism?

John Swinney: I would have to commit to write to Mr Johnson on the detail of that issue, as my

knowledge in that area is not sufficiently detailed to do justice to his question now.

However, I come back to my central answer to Mr Johnson's previous question, which was about the importance of taking an approach that is tailored to each individual. I hope that my saying that that thinking—which will obviously have a bearing on any digital questions—must be at the heart of all that we do reassures Mr Johnson, but if he will forgive me, I would prefer to give a more substantive answer once I have explored the issue that he has raised with me.

Daniel Johnson: I appreciate that, and I appreciate that my question was very specific.

My final question is about free school meals. Concerns about holiday hunger were prevalent before the crisis, but they have become more acute now. I understand that, under the latest set of directives from the Scottish Government to local authorities, the requirement for local authorities to provide free school meals has been extended until the end of June. Has the Scottish Government considered directing local authorities to make free school meals available over the summer period?

John Swinney: The educational continuity direction that I have issued, which deals with the issue that Daniel Johnson has raised, will last until the end of June for the simple reason that such continuity directions can last for only 21 days—in other words, they are time limited. I am currently considering provision of free schools meals over the summer holiday period: I recognise the significance of the issue. We made meals available over the Easter holidays; that policy was well delivered in a well-ordered fashion by local authorities. I am currently examining, as a priority, the issue that Mr Johnson has raised.

Daniel Johnson: Will consideration be given to the financial implications? If you make such a direction, it will come at a cost for local authorities.

John Swinney: The financial implications are what I am giving most consideration to.

The Convener: The final area of questioning is one that we have already touched on: the exam diet and certification in 2020-21.

Ross Greer: A few weeks ago, the Equality and Human Rights Commission expressed concern that the SQA might not be meeting its legal obligations under the Equality Act 2010. I expect that you will reassure us that the SQA will of course comply with that act, and I will take you at your word on that. Are you aware of the Equality and Human Rights Commission's specific concerns? What is your understanding of those concerns?

John Swinney: I understand that the Equality and Human Rights Commission considers that it

might be appropriate that each stage of the process that has been developed by the SQA be the subject of a published equality impact assessment, whereas the SQA takes the view that it is not practical for that process to take place in stages and that it should, instead, be undertaken as a complete exercise.

Ross Greer: Thank you. That is useful to know. What is your position on that? When should the SQA publish the equality impact assessment? I realise that that will depend on your position on whether the process should be undertaken in stages or a single assessment should be carried out. It has, however, been raised repeatedly that in order to strengthen public confidence in the grading system—in this year of all years, it is critical that there is public confidence in the grading system—an equality impact assessment be published as early as possible. Should it be done in stages or as a single process, which you have just mentioned?

12:00

John Swinney: I know that my previous answer to the committee on that caused a certain amount of turbulence, if I can use that word. I am in no way saying that the issue is nothing to do with me, but the SQA is an independent body and has to fulfil its obligations in law. That was the nature of my previous answer to the committee, and is the foundation of my answer now. The SQA must satisfy itself that it is complying fully with its statutory obligations. That is my expectation of the SQA, and it must do that. There must be an equality impact assessment, and there will be one.

On Ross Greer's question, I can understand the issue on which the SQA is focused. It is undertaking its equality impact assessment and is satisfying itself on an on-going basis that it is, through the steps that it is taking, taking due account of all the equalities issues of which it must be mindful. However, it is difficult to publish that, given that it is an on-going process that requires the SQA to exercise judgments in individual cases.

I hope that people can take confidence from two things that I have said: first, that there is a legal duty to undertake the process, which will be done; and secondly, that the SQA is mindful of its obligations under the equalities provisions at every stage in the process.

Ross Greer: I understand that answer, but could you at least confirm whether you believe that the final equality impact assessment should be published before the results are issued on 4 August?

John Swinney: That is in the territory that I have just explored. The difficulty is that the SQA is making, on an on-going basis, judgments that are

material to the outcomes that will be communicated on 4 August. I accept that the assessment must certainly be published on 4 August, but it would be difficult to publish it before that, given that the SQA is going through a process in which those considerations are material to the outcomes that will be achieved. That is my opinion. The SQA must decide what is the right thing to do in the circumstances, while observing its statutory duties.

Ross Greer: My next question continues on the theme of when documents should be published, but is on the SQA's methodology for grading. The SQA previously said to the committee, in response to our request that it publish that model, that it will not do so until results have been issued.

Last week, we took evidence from witnesses from the EIS and School Leaders Scotland, both of whom repeated comments that have been made by many others to the effect that they can see no rationale for holding back publication of the model, especially now that teachers have submitted estimated grades. This, too, comes back to public confidence and the confidence of young people and teachers in the system. What is your position on when the methodology for grading should be published?

John Swinney: Before I answer that, I would like to be clear about what detail Mr Greer is referring to, so that I understand the context of the question and of the timing issues that he has raised.

Ross Greer: As you will be aware, concerns have been raised about the system of ranking and use of historical data, both for individual pupils and at school level. For example, there is a question about whether the school-level data will be used to moderate individual young people's grades, or will be used at school level to see whether schools' estimations are broadly in line with those of previous years. The issue is the weighting that is given to different sets of data, how they are to be used and the SQA's plans for engaging with schools and teachers. There is no clarity on how individual sets of data will be used in deciding whether a grade is to be altered.

John Swinney: I am a grateful for that follow-up information. It seems to me that the answer is in the same place as the answer that I gave about publication in stages of the equality impact assessment. The SQA is engaged in a process that relates to all the circumstances that Mr Greer has put to me, which I think will have an effect on the outcome. It is difficult for the work to which Mr Greer refers to be undertaken before the outcome is known. At that point, there must be full transparency about how the process has been undertaken.

My answer to the question is the same as it was in relation to the issues with which the SQA wrestles in connection with the equality impact assessment.

Ross Greer: I have a final question, if there is time, convener. I am conscious that other members might wish to come in.

The Convener: You are fine, Ross. On you go.

Ross Greer: Thank you very much.

I want to return to the earlier questions on next year's exam diet. You have previously commented on the disruption to and impact on young people's wellbeing and attainment that school closures are causing. We will face from August an undetermined time for which some level of disruption will continue—that is, the period of blended learning. Inevitably, and irrespective of how much we attempt to mitigate the impact—Herculean efforts will be made to mitigate it—there will be an impact on young people's ability to learn. Do you agree that, if exams were to be conducted normally at the end of an abnormal year, there would be a corresponding impact on young people's attainment in those exams?

John Swinney: I agonise over that difficult question, because the last thing that I want is for young people in any way to be unable to realise their potential and not to get the benefit of the learning activities that they have undertaken.

We are approaching the school year from the perspective of minimising disruption and maximising the opportunities for assistance and learning. In my answers to Mr Paterson, I explained the innovative work that is going on to ensure that a strong and deep digital learning proposition is available for senior-phase pupils through e-Sgoil and, obviously, through the work that schools undertake.

I do not know whether we all accept it, but we all recognise that the exam diet is pretty much how young people's achievements are realised and certificated annually. Of course, that is not the only way in which young people's learning can be certificated and recognised annually. Although it has aye been like that, it does not aye have to be like that.

We are planning on the basis that the SQA diet will take place in the spring of 2021, but I am not oblivious to the significant issues that Mr Greer has raised. We must consider and judge those issues, and the system needs to have clarity on them before young people return to formal schooling in August.

Jamie Greene: Last week, we had a good session with EIS on this interesting subject. It was adamant that, rather than the SQA simply moderating grades, dumping them into the system

on 4 August and creating a headache for teachers during a critical week when they should be preparing for schools going back, the SQA, if it is downgrading a large proportion of the results, should instead go back to schools and teachers and say, "Hold on, we're actually going to be revising these grades." That way, the issue could be dealt with now. The alternative would be to push the problem into the appeals process, which would simply overload the process at a time when we should be focusing on getting people back to school. Should the SQA be having that conversation now, rather than kicking the can down the road, as seems to be the case?

John Swinney: That is an operational matter for the SQA. It is also a matter that relates entirely to the nature and the substance of the process that the SQA must go through. That is not something on which I am sighted—nor should I be, because it is the role of the independent examination authority to undertake that activity.

I am pretty certain that the SQA and the chief examining officer will have heard Jim Thewliss's and Larry Flanagan's comments last week. I am certainly happy to draw to the chief examining officer's attention Mr Greene's point, so that the SQA can consider the issue as it undertakes the moderation process that it must undertake.

The Convener: Thank you very much for your attendance, cabinet secretary. It has been another long meeting, and we appreciate the time that you have given to the committee.

12:11

Meeting continued in private until 12:38.

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