

COSLA Appendix for submission to the Education Children and Young People Committee

The impact of the pandemic upon children and young people with additional support needs, care-experienced young people and those from background of socio-economic disadvantaged backgrounds

Education and Childcare Hubs

1. Following the closure of schools in March 2020, councils moved quickly to establish hubs to support the children of key workers, and those identified as vulnerable. It is worth reflecting that Local Government faced a great deal of pressure from stakeholders, particularly key workers, to provide as many spaces as possible through childcare hubs. There was a continued challenge to meet the public health advice and guidance to limit interactions as far as possible.
2. COSLA worked with Scottish Government and professional advisors within Local Government to agree a shared definition of “vulnerable”. This definition noted that crucially, vulnerability is not an exclusive concept, but should take account of a number of factors that mean that a child and family may need additional support. It stated that the judgement of the children’s sector professionals – critically those working most closely with the family – would be paramount in assessing vulnerability. Children who were considered to be vulnerable prior to the pandemic should have been known by services and are likely to have had a child’s plan. Where a child requires support from more than one agency, this is likely to suggest greater vulnerability. Though this was not an exclusive list, the definition noted that this may include a range of children and young people:
 - at risk of significant harm, with a child protection plan
 - looked after at home, or away from home
 - ‘on the edge of care’, where families would benefit from additional support
 - with additional support needs, where there are one or more factors which require significant or co-ordinated support
 - affected by disability
 - where they and/or their parents are experiencing poor physical or mental health
 - experiencing adversities, including problem alcohol or drug use amongst family members, domestic abuse or bereavement
 - requiring support at times of key transitions.

3. Further, the definition stated that children and families may also be experiencing adversity because of the impact of poverty and disadvantage, and many may face this because of the necessary measures to respond to the pandemic. This included families with loss of income, experiencing social isolation, or who were otherwise struggling because of the lockdown. It noted that local authorities and health boards, working with partners including Police Scotland and third sector organisations, will either know or be able to identify the children and families within their areas who are potentially at risk and therefore may need additional support. As the need for additional support can be identified prior to birth, this also included help for those who were pregnant.
4. The Coronavirus (COVID-19): strategic framework for reopening schools, early learning and childcare provision stated:

“Mindful of the impact of lockdown on many of our most vulnerable children, local authorities will work with partners to increase the numbers of children attending critical childcare provision including hubs.”
5. Hub provision looked different across Scotland, this reflected the difference experience of the pandemic and it impacts across the country, including the impact on staffing, the availability of volunteers, the location and transport links to hubs and the needs of the range of children and young people attending the hubs.
6. It is important to recognise that local authorities and schools worked creatively to support children and young people both in hubs and remotely, through phone calls, dropping off learning materials or distanced visits. In other areas there was the establishment of helplines for children and young people, or the use of mobile libraries to distribute books and materials to children and young people. The Improvement Service published [a collection of case studies which detailed some of the approaches undertaken](#), which the committee may wish to consider. These showcased the work of Local Government, but perhaps more importantly, facilitated the sharing, spreading and building on good practice.

Additional Resources

7. Local authorities have welcomed additional funding to aid them in providing support throughout the pandemic. Due to the nature of the pandemic, funding has been provided through a number “pots”. This funding has been ringfenced for very specific funding for purposes such as:
 - To support the implementation of public health mitigations within schools – including transport, cleaning, CO2 monitors etc
 - The delivery of free school meals during closures and school holidays
 - Investment in devices and connectivity solutions to tackle digital exclusions
 - Additional teaching and classroom support staff
8. All funding provided during the pandemic was initially provided on a one-off basis. Subsequently the funding for additional teachers and classroom support staff has been made permanent.
9. These pots of money have often come with significant reporting requirements, with local authorities providing information to the Scottish Government on the use of this funding. These existing report arrangements are suitable for national-level oversight, though any

further analysis of spend may become overly burdensome, particularly as schools and local authorities continue to face significant pressures due to COVID-19.

Digital

10. The closure of schools in March 2020 required extraordinary efforts by local authorities, school staff, learners, and families to move to remote learning in a very short space of time.
11. The move towards greater use of digital devices in schools had been pioneered by a number of local authorities across Scotland prior to the pandemic, with some having already deployed a range of devices and support depending on local and individual needs, and digital learning strategies.
12. While local authorities entered the first period of remote learning from different starting points, in terms of digital devices, programmes and approaches, all councils worked quickly to provide devices to as many children as possible who were at risk of digital exclusion. Estimates from May 2020 highlighted that 50,000 devices had been issued to children across Scotland by councils, with a further 20,000 devices loaned out from schools when they had closed.
13. COSLA and Scottish Government worked closely over summer 2020 to agree an approach to distribute £25m of devices and connectivity solutions to children and young people. Funding was made available to local authorities to allow devices to be bought, in line with local digital learning strategies, and to ensure they could be added to the council's IT estate, in order to ensure the availability of ongoing support including security and protective software.
14. Despite global supply issues, councils made very good progress in ensuring additional devices were distributed to children and families. As a result of this funding there have been over 72,000 additional devices provided to children and young people identified by their schools as being at risk of digital exclusion, additionally over 14,000 connectivity solutions have been provided. The additional devices meant the experience of the second period of remote learning, from January 2021, was improved for many children and young people. However, we note that our remote, island and rural communities continue to face challenges with broadband and connectivity issues, which can be a barrier.
15. We would also note that schools and education staff showed their creativity and innovation in adapting both to remote learning, when there was not the time or opportunity for digital learning, and to support children and young people without devices.
16. COSLA has agreed to work with the Scottish Government on their commitment to provide a device for every school-aged child, we look forward to using further investment to ensure all children and young people can benefit from digital education.

Poverty and Inequality

17. Following the closure of schools, local authorities took a range of steps to ensure that children and young people eligible for free school meals would continue to receive either food packages, vouchers or a cash payment.
18. In many cases the need to put in place alternative methods at speed drove the options that local authorities adopted, with food parcels and/or vouchers able to be distributed at pace. Following engagement with children, young people, families and the third sector, the vast majority of local authorities had moved to cash payments for free school meal alternatives by January 2021.
19. Local authorities were also provided with flexible funding to address financial insecurity during 2020-21. This supported a range of measures depending on local need which will have frequently been targeted at families with low incomes.
20. COSLA worked with Scottish Government in order that councils could also deliver cash payments in winter 2020 and spring 2021 to children and young people eligible for free school meals, in recognition of the additional costs of the pandemic. Subsequently it has been agreed with Scottish Government to provide 'bridging payments' over the next year until the Scottish Child Payment is fully online.
21. Local authorities have also been administering the £500 Self Isolation Support Grants, the eligibility of which has been extended a number of times to enable parents in low income households to self-isolate without financial penalty, including when they are unable to work due to having to remain at home with a child that needs to self-isolate.
22. COSLA is working with Scottish Government to support the development of the next version of the national Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan. Lessons from the COVID response, and work with partners across organisations have identified the following key points to be considered in tackling poverty:
 - The need for continued flexibility to support families and meet their needs by reducing bureaucracy and barriers to working in partnership
 - The need to ensure that support and funding in place during the pandemic is not withdrawn without alternative support in place
 - The importance of local flexibility to ensure person centred approaches aligned to GIRFEC
 - Ensuring the improvements to partnership working and collaboration continues to grow
 - A continued focus on those at most risk of experiencing poverty and its impacts
 - Holistic approaches to support
23. Local Government is working with partners in relation to the best use locally of the Winter Support Fund for 21/22 to support low-income households.

Looked after and care-experienced children and young people

24. Local Government is committed to Keeping Scotland's Promise that children will grow up loved, safe and respected. Local authority Promise leads have been established and

they meet regularly to ensure policy development and progress is cohesive and collaborative. COSLA also works closely with partners including Scottish Government, Scotland Excel, The Promise Scotland, the Improvement Service, professional associations and third sector partners to further support a collaborative approach.

25. To understand and mitigate impacts of the pandemic on children and families, the Covid-19 Collective Leadership Group was established. It is jointly chaired by Scottish and Local Government. The Collective Leadership has a wide, cross-sector membership whose key focus is mitigating the impacts of the pandemic on children and families, particularly on care leavers, early years and under-fives and those who may be in need of respite care, amongst others. The work of this group is underpinned by the work and principles of GIRFEC, The Promise, UNCRC Incorporation and is supported by the Children's Services Planning Partnerships Strategic Leads Network.
26. The Collective Leadership Group receives and reviews a dataset bringing together intelligence from the 32 Chief Officer Groups and national agencies and delivery partners including the third sector, Police Scotland the Health Service. The dataset includes key data on what is happening across children's services partnerships to support children and young people on the child protection register, those looked after and on the edge of care. The Collective Leadership Group also receives a data set on adult public protection issues including homelessness and domestic abuse. At the height of the pandemic, this dataset was received and reviewed weekly.
27. The active and purposeful use of such data and evidence at a local level allowed councils and their child protection partners to proactively consider the needs of children and young people who may be vulnerable to abuse, harm and exploitation. As measures to mitigate the transmission of the virus meant that children and young people had less access to external routes for support and help, this proactive approach was critical in considering ways of providing effective support to families.
28. There were increases in child protection referrals and Inter-agency Referral Discussions during the pandemic resulting in councils and partners undertaking increased assessments of risk and need, with increased focus on plans in place for children. As part of the dataset, children's contact with a professional was carefully monitored and this included all children with a multi-agency plan in place, all children with a child protection plan, and all young people eligible for aftercare support.

Children and young people with additional support needs

29. From the outset, schools and local authorities recognised that the disruption caused by school closures and the wider public health protection measures taken in response to the pandemic were likely to more significantly impact on children and young people who have additional support needs. Given the wide range of additional support needs individual learners have, the expertise and judgement of the school staff and children's sector professionals working mostly closely with them was key in understanding how to provide that support with schools and other face to face services closed. The education and children's services workforce demonstrated creativity, sensitivity, and a real understanding of and commitment to GIRFEC in their endeavours to provide support and learning opportunities.

30. In March 2021 [Education Scotland published a report](#) focused on approaches taken by local authorities and schools to provide learning for children and young people with complex learning needs during the period of remote learning. As well as highlighting examples of practice illustrating what worked well in schools, it noted that local authority support, professional learning and ongoing reflection resulted in improved approaches to meeting the needs of learners with complex needs. It also noted that schools have taken positive steps to increase engagement with and support for parents of children and young people with complex learning needs. There was recognition that local authorities and schools can learn from the experiences of remote learning to identify what has worked successfully that could be continued post-pandemic to support learners with complex needs.
31. It is worth noting that anecdotally, local authorities have shared that for some children, including those with Autism and Learning Disabilities, remote learning is reported as being preferable to face to face learning and some have found it easier to engage in their learning. However, officers have also heard that for some, the lack of routine and the differentiation about what home is and what school is has led to disengagement. Home learning has placed additional demands on parents and carers. The Scottish Commission for Learning Disability (SCLD) and Profound and Multiple Learning Disabilities (PAMIS) are participating in research on the impact of the pandemic on people of all ages with Learning Disabilities which will be published shortly.
32. [The Morgan Review](#) called for a culture change so that the achievements of children and young people with additional support needs are recognised and valued, and a report was recently [published on progress taking forward the recommendations](#). The Additional Support for Learning Implementation Group (ASLIG), plan to carry out further engagement with children and young people who have additional support needs to consider the impact the pandemic has had on them.

Mental Health and Wellbeing

33. Children and young people's mental health and wellbeing was consistently identified as at risk of being negatively impacted by school closures and the wider impacts of the pandemic and public health measures. Children and young people reported concerns about the impact of the virus on family members, finances, relationships with friends, impact on learning, qualifications and future opportunities. For some learners, the arrangements for return to school create understandable anxiety. Local Government continues to work with partners to support children and young people's mental health and wellbeing and over the past 20 months, particularly focused on responding to the negative impacts of the pandemic. A range of approaches and provisions were and continue to be in place and are dependent on local needs, including but not limited to art-based therapies targeting those not engaged in school and/or finding it hard to leave home, a hybrid online/offline youth work based approach, and digital services.
34. Local authorities, working with community planning partners, continued to develop and enhance mental health and wellbeing supports and services which are community based. Through the joint COSLA and Scottish Government Children and Young People's Mental Health and Wellbeing Joint Delivery Board, a framework for new and enhanced community-based services for 5–24-year-olds and their families and carers was developed, focused on distress and supporting positive mental health and

wellbeing. Examples of these approaches include closer partnership working with CAMHS, art and music-based therapies in primary school and additional support for young carers.

35. Schools have sought to maintain a relational approach to supporting children and young people, despite closures, using digital and phone-based support. Local Government and Scottish Government have worked together to provide those working in schools with the advice, information and support that they need in order to signpost and link into sources of advice and support for children, young people and their families, aligned to the Getting it Right for Every Child approach. Ongoing focus has been placed on delivery of counselling support through schools, and a whole-school approach to wellbeing, and professional learning for school staff to enhance their ability and confidence in supporting children and young people.
36. Across councils, a wide range of strategies and approaches were used, such as telephone helplines, seasons for growth (bereavement programme) educational psychology support, bespoke support packages and resources, virtual and telephone counselling, advice lines, regular contacts and relationship maintenance, family support, links to CAMHS, youth work to draw in pupils who would not regularly attend school due to anxiety, and utilisation of guidance and support staff. Approaches to resilience, nurture and trauma-informed approaches, Scottish Mental Health First Aid, LIAM and ASSIST are also frequently and frequently used.
37. Local authorities have prioritised support for children and young people who are considered most vulnerable and put arrangements to ensure contact is maintained.

Workforce

38. Throughout the pandemic COSLA has worked closely with Scottish Government, Education Scotland, Trade Unions and individual local authorities to ensure a range of supports have been available to the education workforce to enable them to look after both the own health and wellbeing, that of those they work with and of the children and young people that they teach and support. The work nationally has complemented the suite of supports that have been made available locally by councils and work continues to ensure that the national offer connects meaningfully with this.
39. Part of the national offer includes one to one coaching for key sectors of the education workforce over the session 2020/21 with professional coaches to identified groups of the education workforce to support their wellbeing as they manage the COVID-19 crisis in their context (schools, CLD, ELC) and support the children and young people in their care.
40. In addition, The Scottish Association of Minority Ethnic Educators (SAMEE) has supported educators from minority ethnic backgrounds through coaching and mentoring by providing additional support for coaching and mentoring, support and guidance to ensure that all offers are inclusive and accessible to BAME educators (e.g. ensuring that Coaching and Mentoring Matters is culturally-responsive), and reverse-mentoring opportunities for whereby BAME educators mentor white Scottish school leaders to help create inclusive workplaces that promote the health and wellbeing of educators from minority ethnic backgrounds.

41. Staff wellbeing communities of practice have been developed to ensure the workforce feel supported in managing their own mental health and wellbeing and have the capacity to support the mental health and wellbeing of learners. This followed on from the successful development of spaces for wellbeing across different sectors of the education workforce over the session 2020/21. These were evaluated positively, for example, key impact themes were highlighted around empowerment, trust and permission, focussing on their own mental health and wellbeing, connections across the education system and innovation and experimentation. They also aid in providing a common language and shared understanding of the mental health and wellbeing needs of children and young people, as well as supporting the workforce to recognise the impact trauma can have on their own, and learners, actions and behaviours.
42. The Stepping Stones programme was set up in partnership with Education Scotland and General Teaching Council for Scotland to support teachers in the first four years of their teaching career post-probation. Currently the programme comprises online workshops, reflection into action sessions and a coaching programme which provides 1:1 support to all participants. This continued to be a focus during the pandemic response to meet the development needs of this group.
43. Further, there have been a series of events and webinars that align with existing work of national mental health and schools working group to support the workforce to support learners.
44. COSLA continues to work with Trade Unions and partners to develop campaigns such as “Don’t stay on mute” to ensure staff are aware of the supports that are available both nationally and locally.

Recovery

45. With the disruption of the past 20 months, the health and wellbeing of children and young people is our priority in education recovery. In line with the Scottish Government’s guidance on [‘Curriculum for Excellence in the Recovery Phase’](#), local authorities and schools have continued their clear focus on the physical, emotional and mental wellbeing of children and young people.
46. COSLA have agreed to work with the Scottish Government to oversee the delivery of the [COVID Recovery Strategy: For a Fairer Future](#), to ensure a shared vision across local and national government as we move through the pandemic. The Wellbeing of Children and Young People is one of the strategy’s three key outcomes. We will continue to work to further strengthen support for children, young people and their family support.
47. This year’s Get into Summer programme has been an important investment in the recovery of children and young people. Local authorities delivered a £15m programme of opportunities, tailored to the needs of their communities, to allow children and young people opportunities to socialise and reconnect with peers the summer. Local programmes were designed with and for children and young people from low-income households, those who are care experienced or with disability or additional support

need. A full evaluation is currently being finalised but feedback we have heard to date has been very positive.

48. The Children and Young People Public Health Group will shortly be publishing an evidence paper entitled 'Ensuring our Children's Future – Mitigating the impact of COVID-19 on children and young people' which aims to capture the wide range of evidence, intelligence and learning identified as a result of the pandemic and efforts to mitigate its impact. It is anticipated that this will be published by Public Health Scotland by the end of the year and may aid the Committee in their scrutiny.
49. There are many other pieces of research for the Committee to consider, in particular the joint Scottish Youth Parliament, YouthLink Scotland and Young Scot "[Lockdown Lowdown](#)" provide snapshots of children and young people's experiences during different phases of the pandemic. This has been an invaluable resource for COSLA and local authorities in considering priorities in emerging from COVID-19, acknowledging the importance of ensuring children and young people's voices are heard.