OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Education, Children and Young People Committee

Wednesday 17 November 2021

Session 6

The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Wednesday 17 November 2021

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EDUCATION, CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE COMMITTEE

9th Meeting 2021, Session 6

CONVENER

*Stephen Kerr (Central Scotland) (Con)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)
*Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
*James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)
*Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)
*Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green)
*Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
*Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Bruce Adamson (Children and Young People’s Commissioner Scotland)
Laurie Black (Educational Institute of Scotland)
Sally Cavers (Children in Scotland)
Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con) (Committee Substitute)
Ramon Hutchingson (Autism Resources Co-ordination Hub)
Stephen McGhee (Scottish Children’s Services Coalition)
Linda O’Neill (Centre for Excellence for Children’s Care and Protection (CELCIS))

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Stephen Herbert

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Education, Children and Young People Committee

Wednesday 17 November 2021

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:30]

Declaration of Interests

The Convener (Stephen Kerr): Good morning, and welcome to the ninth meeting in 2021 of the Education, Children and Young People Committee. We have apologies from Oliver Mundell so I welcome Meghan Gallacher MSP, who joins us for the first time today as a substitute member. I thank Meghan and invite her to declare any interests that are relevant to the remit of the committee.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con) (Committee Substitute): I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests. I am a serving councillor in North Lanarkshire. Thank you for having me here today.

Additional Support Needs and Care Experienced Young People (Impact of Covid-19)

09:30

The Convener: In our main item of business, the committee will take evidence from two panels of witnesses on the impact of Covid-19 on children and young people with additional support needs and care experienced young people.

I am delighted to welcome our first panel of witnesses: Bruce Adamson, the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland, who joins us in the room; Stephen McGhee, the managing director of Spark of Genius, is representing the Scottish Children's Services Coalition and joins us virtually; and Linda O'Neill, education lead at the Centre for Excellence for Children's Care and Protection, is also here virtually. We welcome all three witnesses and thank them for the time that they will spend with us. We hope to make good use of the next hour. I turn immediately to Bob Doris to lead us in the first set of questions.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): I welcome the witnesses who are joining us online and Mr Adamson who is here with the committee.

A wide range of questions will be asked this morning. I will focus on the lockdowns, which unfortunately is a plural term, and particularly on the impact of school closures. Learning and wellbeing hubs were set up for the children of key workers and children with additional support needs. About 6 to 8 per cent of children in Scotland attended those hubs in some fashion. That is clearly not a satisfactory way of dealing with education, but it was a form of support.

To what extent do the witnesses think that the hubs provided meaningful support for young people, particularly those with additional support needs? What worked well? Did we use the right criteria to identify those with additional support needs? I am sure the resource was rationed, due to the pressures at the time.

Mr Adamson, by default because you are sitting here, do you want to go first?

The Convener: I did warn Bruce that that would happen.

Bruce Adamson (Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland): Those hubs were really important in ensuring the right to education and the broader rights that school attendance fulfils. We know that schools are more than just places of education. For many children, they are places of the additional support and socialisation that are so important for children with additional support needs.

Our concern is that, although many families who have children with additional support needs were told that places were available, the specialist support and the relationships that had existed before Covid were not in place. Access to the individualised support that many children, particularly those with complex needs, require was not particularly good in those hubs.

The hubs were incredibly effective for the children who were there. The evidence that we have from discussions with children and young people and their families is that they worked effectively. The model is useful, but the hubs struggled to meet the needs of some children who have complex needs and rely on specialist, relationship-based support.

Bob Doris: That is helpful. Stephen McGhee, would you like to add anything?

Stephen McGhee (Scottish Children's Services Coalition): Thank you for the opportunity to speak to the committee. The perception of Spark of Genius and the Scottish Children's Services Coalition was very similar. Out of all children in Scotland, 32 per cent have an additional support need and 68 per cent of those children had access to hubs.

The hubs were a vital resource for young people who needed that type of service, but there was a lack of clarity universally about who was able to access those hubs and how the access was administered by the staff teams who could attend. During the worst parts of the pandemic, some of the staff had Covid, which caused staffing issues. A group of young people with a greater level of need was juxtaposed with a diminished staff team. The feedback that we got from our members and associated agencies was that that was a stumbling block, although they understood that the hubs were a well-intentioned attempt to meet the needs of some of the most vulnerable young people in society.

Bob Doris: I will not explore that further because of time constraints, but it is important that you have put that on the record. Linda O'Neill, do you want to add anything?

Linda O'Neill (Centre for Excellence for Children's Care and Protection (CELCIS)): I just want to let the committee know that I will be using the term "care experienced" whenever possible. Although "looked-after child" and "looked after" have specific legislative meanings, care experienced children and young people have told us that that is the term that they prefer us to use to describe their circumstances.

As Bruce Adamson and Stephen McGhee said, the hubs were well intentioned but we know that not all children who would have benefited from that support managed to get access to them. Our networks have told us that there was inconsistency in how local authorities assessed the term "vulnerability". That initially caused quite a lot of rigidity in access to services for children and families.

We also know that only 0.5 per cent of the children who did attend school hubs were children with multi-agency plans who already have input and support from more than one service. That indicated to us that the number of children who needed support and attended hubs was not as high as it could have been.

Under the additional support for learning legislation, children who have care experience are presumed to have additional support for learning needs unless they are assessed otherwise. That assessment goes wider than any physical or learning needs that they might have; it takes into account their possible social, emotional and relational needs. If those children did not have access to hub support, they did not have access to the social, emotional and wellbeing support that they needed during the pandemic when access to other support services was also diminished because of the public health response.

Bob Doris: That is helpful. I have a specific question for Linda O'Neill before we move on to the next area of questioning. All three witnesses have agreed that Scotland's local authorities faced challenges in consistently identifying which young people were vulnerable. You mentioned care experienced young people. Were care experienced young people seen as being, by definition, more vulnerable? Were they offered places at hubs as a matter of course, or was that cover patchy? It would be helpful for the committee to know that.

Linda O'Neill: We work with a range of networks and services, including foster care networks, residential workers, headteachers and education forums. Our networks have told us that provision was not applied consistently across Scotland. Local authorities took different approaches to assessing vulnerability and allocating places in hubs.

It is also important to recognise that, although some young people were offered places in hubs, complex circumstances meant that they were not always able to access them. For example, for young people who lived with kinship carers, who tend to be older family members who might have health issues, there was a concern that attendance at hubs might impact on health at home if the young people were exposed to Covid. Those living circumstances presented barriers and complexities for that group of children. That was an additional consideration for many care experienced children and their families.

Bob Doris: Thank you.

Convener, I defer to you. I have an overall interest in the topic and a number of lines of questioning. Do you want to continue?

The Convener: Ask your next question, then I would like to come in. Stephanie Callaghan also wants to come in.

Bob Doris: I am conscious of the time.

The witnesses have said that the hubs were well intentioned and they performed very well at times, but there were self-evident challenges that all three witnesses have put on the record. What was support like across local authorities and education services for young people who could not attend hubs—for example, if they had additional support needs but did not fit the criteria or if they had other barriers to accessing them? I am sure that there are examples of good practice and of not-so-good practice. It would be good to get on the record a sense of where things went well.

We were listening earlier to Linda O'Neill. Perhaps she would kick off on that, followed by the other two witnesses. We can then pass on to colleagues.

Linda O'Neill: As you have said, there are really good examples of the support that services were able to provide to children and families. Although it was initially very difficult to understand what children in those circumstances needed, services made an effort to understand children's voice as we progressed through the lockdowns and the pandemic. There was a rapid response among services in social work, health, education, the third sector and voluntary organisations to go beyond the more traditional ways of collecting children's voice—through surveys and things like that—and make a move to more digital and participative ways of understanding what children needed.

There are some really lovely examples of local authority services going out to families' doorsteps to do sessions in music, art and creativity, or going for socially distanced walks because they recognised the need for people to continue their crucial relationships with the trusted adults in their lives and support wellbeing during the pandemic. In addition, the hub provision became more bespoke and, as I said earlier, less rigid in the criteria that were applied in allowing children to access it.

From practitioners and leaders across the system, we have heard that the removal of processes that can be viewed, at times, particularly in the context of local authorities, as overly bureaucratic, was particularly helpful. It allowed workers and practitioners to respond in a much more attuned and relational way to children and families. For example, cash payments were made directly into people's bank accounts, reducing stigma and allowing families to use money in ways that they knew they needed, rather than through, for example, providing vouchers or supervising the spending of money, which can sometimes be stigmatising.

We are keen that the positive lessons that have been learned from the pandemic, and from what children and families have told us, are built in to Covid recovery and into practice.

Bob Doris: That is very helpful.

Bruce Adamson: I strongly agree with what Linda O'Neill said. Her important point about hubs in the context of care experienced young people also applies to lots of other groups—for example, if a family member has a vulnerability.

Communication is a key learning point. We need to communicate directly with families and children who have additional support needs, to make sure that they know what services are available. One of the challenges in the early stage of the pandemic was that there was great inconsistency across the country in what was available, and it proved difficult to get information to families so that they could make choices about accessing services.

In April 2020, at the beginning of the pandemic, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child called on states to take a rights-based approach to the situation. It recognised that, although there was a global health pandemic, the appropriate response would have been to take a rights-based approach and to look at all the different rights that were affected.

One of the concerns is that, because we were so focused on the health risks, we took our eye off the ball on the broader rights impact. Education is key in that, but so are health, particularly mental health, and family life. The disproportionate impact on those whose rights were already most at risk was really apparent.

09:45

Children and young people have told us that they felt that there was a real lack of participation in decision making. No one asked them what they or their families needed. There were particular concerns about poverty, getting money to families and the direct impact that that had on digital access, which was absolutely key for children who were not in hubs. It was a huge problem early on. There were also concerns about ensuring that mental health support was available. The evidence is clear that the experience in the early lockdown, as opposed to the second lockdown, was different, so we struggled a lot more early on.

There are positives that we can look to for children who were not in the hubs. Some children who were not engaged in school previously benefited from some of the digital support and engagement. We have had discussions with a number of children who were not in school previously but who were able to access some of the home-based learning and support and re-engage with education, which is really useful. Lots of positive things happened in communities as well. Children and young people have said clearly that they do not want to be seen as objects of pity or be talking about catch-up. They want to focus on the positives that they are able to build up even when they are outside school.

Bob Doris: Mr McGhee, if you chime with what we have heard, I think that the convener is keen to move on and bring in other MSPs. I apologise for not bringing you in, but I can tell that my convener is minded that that might be inappropriate.

The Convener: I am sure that we will bring Stephen McGhee in shortly.

One thing that jumped off the page of the CELCIS submission for me was the 0.5 per cent of children with multi-agency child plans who accessed the hubs. I found that an alarming statistic. Will Linda O’Neill explain why a child might end up with a multi-agency plan? That is an important context that we should bring out.

Linda O’Neill: Children with particular needs that cannot be met by universal services under the getting it right for every child principle—services that would support all children in every circumstance—would need what we refer to as more targeted support, which would require to be provided by specialist agencies or a number of agencies. I refer to young people who have complex or difficult home lives, such as those whose parents suffer from mental health issues or domestic abuse at home, which might impact on their wider health, wellbeing and ability to engage in education. Children might need support with their own needs in areas such as physical learning, educational attainment or health.

The aim of the multi-agency plan is to use a GIRFEC approach to bring the right people around the table to produce a robust and proportionate plan that is based on what is in the best interests of the child concerned at that point, and to ensure that all professionals who are working alongside children and families are listening to the needs and rights of children and families, advocating for them and ensuring that the plan for them supports their progress in whatever area they might require additional support.

The Convener: Forgive me if this seems too obvious a question, but I feel that I need to ask it: if only 0.5 per cent of those children access the hub, where are the other 99.5 per cent?

Linda O’Neill: To clarify, convener, that is 0.5 per cent of the children who attended the hubs and had a plan. The figure is not the percentage of children with multi-agency plans who attended hubs but the percentage of children who attended the hubs. We know that only 0.5 per cent of them had multi-agency plans. Nonetheless, your point is valid more widely in that, if more children with multi-agency plans had attended hubs, their representation would have been higher.

The Convener: That is an important clarification. I am grateful that you clarified that for me, because that thought has haunted me since I read that paper last week. However, if they were not at the hub, where were the children with the multi-agency plans?

Linda O’Neill: They would have been at home with their parents or carers in the care arrangements in which they live. Some children might have been at home with their parents, and some might have been in residential houses or with their foster or kinship carers. We know that the issues faced by the group of children who require multi-agency support are often more complex and difficult than those faced by all other children, so the support that they require needs to be more complex and robust. There were therefore additional vulnerabilities for those children if they were not accessing hubs.

The Convener: Those very vulnerable children were therefore in extremely vulnerable situations and were not getting the help that they needed. Is that correct?

Linda O’Neill: Many of them might have been. We know that services, particularly social work, prioritised face-to-face visits for children who were on home supervision orders and that those who were in residential and foster care continued to receive support from the teams and staff around them. However, those children would not have had the usual protective factors that school or hub support would have provided. We also know that, because of the public health response, many of the third sector, voluntary and community services that children and families would ordinarily have had access to and that would have supported them were simply not available during the pandemic.

The Convener: Are we beginning to see ramifications and issues that have arisen because of that situation? How do you describe the consequences of that?

Linda O’Neill: Initially during lockdowns, we saw an increase in the number of child protection concerns being reported, although that did not translate into higher numbers of child protection referrals. However, that showed that, without the protective factors and wider support available through school, there were higher numbers of concerns about children's vulnerability, because that support from school was not there.

We know from a range of data sources from throughout the pandemic that children have reported higher levels of anxiety and more problems with sleeping and concentration, and that parents have also reported that about their children. I also note that the Educational Institute of Scotland response said that school staff were reporting that children at school, particularly younger children, were presenting more distressed behaviours.

Our concern is that more children and families will have moved from the universal level of support into the middle part of the triangle, which requires more targeted support and intervention, not only from education but from other support services, at a time when there is even more demand and squeeze on resources and capacity for staff. A higher number of children and families will require support, which will continue as the recovery from the pandemic progresses, at a time when there is less access and capacity within the workforce and the wider system to provide that support.

Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): I am just writing down little important points that Linda O'Neill made, or they will go out of my head—including targeted support for children in the area that she mentioned. I declare that I am a councillor on South Lanarkshire Council. I am also a parent to autistics.

This might be in the committee papers, so I apologise if I have missed it. What proportion of the children who went to hubs were vulnerable? The hubs also provided childcare for the children of emergency workers and key workers, such as our national health service workers, because they and their partners were not at home to look after their children. What are the statistics on that? I am not sure which witness might know the answer to that.

The Convener: We should let Stephen answer, because he has not spoken for a while.

Stephen McGhee: I do not have a detailed breakdown of that, unfortunately, but I can say that the vast majority of young people who accessed the specialist services that the SCSC offered through hubs had a profile that we would call vulnerable.

That, to a degree, harks back to the original part of the discussion, on what "vulnerable" encapsulates and who meets the criteria of need for the services. Some of the cohort of young people who access our services live at home and others are in kinship care or are in foster or residential care placements. There were protective factors around the latter group of young people because they live in those types of resources, but there was also concern about young people who live at home who might be vulnerable and have issues of neglect, or other issues. There was concern about meeting their needs in terms of safety and in terms of access to digital, including computers, to allow them to continue their learning. Those were the young people whom we were most concerned about, because it was unclear whether their needs were being met as well as the needs of young people who do not live at home were being met. I apologise—that is not a direct answer to your question, but I feel that it links usefully to the discussion.

Stephanie Callaghan: Thank you. That was really helpful.

I am also interested in the balance of risks, because crisis is often very much a part of life for the children we are talking about. Existing distressed behaviours and anxieties have been exacerbated by the situation. We have had to balance risks to children's mental health and wellbeing against the threat to life and to their physical health from spreading infection. Did we strike the balance somewhere in the middle or was it way off?

I am thinking about the positive things that were mentioned—some young people being able to engage better, red tape being cut for those who perhaps struggle with mainstream school, digital access being provided for non-attenders, and the opening of doors to creativity. Linda O'Neill talked about the doorstep arts sessions. Balanced against that is the idea that it was a bit of a lottery, depending on where people live, but cutting red tape opened the door to opportunities. I am interested to hear about any other positive things.

What do you see as being the priorities going forward, with regard to learning from experience and incorporating that in policy? That is quite a big question that goes first to Linda O'Neill.

Linda O'Neill: As Bruce Adamson said, children and carers have told us about children's experience of learning at home. We know that some children felt more engaged in learning and felt that they were able to make progress; they enjoyed learning in a new and very different way to what happened when they were attending school. That is a really important thing for us to hold on to as we go into Covid recovery; we need to understand why that was the case. Young people have told us that it was because they did not have to switch between classes during the day, because they found it easier to learn with one adult or fewer adults, and because they were in the same small group during the day. Some managed much better because they did not have to commute or travel to school.

We are, as we go into the Covid recovery phase, at a pivotal moment with the education reform that is being consulted on and our having to think about what the curriculum looks like. As we know, the Morgan review of additional support for learning has recommended that we think much more broadly—not only about what the curriculum looks like, but about what attainment and achievement look like, and how they can be made visible to and recognised by children and families. We can learn real lessons if we listen to what children and families are telling us, so we should consider how we can embed that in the curriculum.

10:00

We must also recognise that recovery will be different for every child and family, depending on their experience of the pandemic. Although the pandemic has touched all of us over the past couple of years, we have all experienced it very differently and have had to deal with difficulties and vulnerabilities at different times. The same is true for care-experienced children and young people with additional support needs, so we must ensure that recovery takes account of long-term planning and spending, that we build in support as we move forward and that there is no end state, in that respect. After all, we do not know for how long children and young people might need that support.

We need to think about the good-practice examples in how services, organisations and practitioners have responded. We also need to think about what practitioners have told us has been helpful in enabling them to provide good-quality support for children and families. We must build all that into our Covid recovery plans and consider how we will make that systemic across Scotland in order to ensure that we do not have the lottery that Stephanie Callaghan talked about and that every child and young person gets the support that they need, when they need it, based on what they have told us works for them.

Bruce Adamson: I strongly agree with everything that Linda O’Neill has just said. It is important that we take a human-rights-based approach. Obviously, protection of life and public health is a key concern, but that has to be set in the context of the impacts on other rights, such as the right to education, which is about developing children to their fullest potential. It also has to be set in the context of other issues to do with safety and impacts on mental and physical health.

We know that many children—especially care-experienced young people, disabled young people, young carers and those who experience poverty—had a really poor experience in relation to those things. In that respect, the focus on poverty and on getting money to families as quickly as possible has been really important and has made a huge difference. The current discussions on the Scottish child payment and other ways of directly supporting families are therefore important. Families noticed that the money is so important in giving them flexibility to make decisions and ensure that children can access the services that they need.

The participation element is really interesting. We know that the more children and young people are involved in designing their education and the more flexibility is built in, the more they connect with education. Many young people found the flexibility of online learning to be very positive—even the flexibility about the time of day when they work and take classes. Building that kind of flexibility into education is of huge benefit.

Linda O’Neill mentioned travel. For many young people, particularly those in rural communities, not having to travel to school was another huge benefit, although that was offset by their not being able to socialise and by the mental health impacts of not seeing others.

There are many things that we can keep from the experience—for example, the focus on individualised learning and provision of support, particularly financial support, to families, and the focus on increasing digital access. However, we really need to focus our attention on taking a rights-based approach and on involving children, young people and their families in the decisions about what is needed for them. Such relationships are absolutely important.

On the plans that Linda O’Neill mentioned, there is a low number of co-ordinated support plans, which are the statutory plans that come with mechanisms for access to remedy. For a lot of children and young people, it is very difficult to have a remedy if they are not receiving services. That is really important.

That is why incorporation of the United Nations convention on the rights of the child, which was agreed by Parliament earlier this year and will, I hope, come back very quickly for reconsideration, is key. Accountability is where there is one of the big gaps. If children and young people are not getting services, how can parents, carers and children resolve that?

Stephanie Callaghan: Convener, do you want me to mention the Morgan report while we are discussing this topic, or do you want to pick that up later on?

The Convener: We will come back to that report, because we are nearly halfway through our time but not halfway through questions. That was predictable, but there we go. I will move on to Kaukab Stewart, because the digital divide was mentioned, which is a nice lead-in to her question.

Stephanie Callaghan: That is fine. Important points have been made about poverty and its impacts.

The Convener: Absolutely. Lots of good stuff is coming out of this evidence session.

Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): I am interested in digital provision. I was a teacher before I got this job. I taught during lockdown, so I am aware of what happened in mainstream education. Schools—certainly upper schools—had digital devices, and councils redeployed devices. It is clear, however, that access to devices was wanting, shall we say. There were not enough digital devices, and I exposed that.

The Scottish Government has committed substantial amounts of money for hardware and software. I am interested in what lessons can be learned and what we could tell the Scottish Government about how best to spend the money to support digital learning, whether that is for online academies or access to syllabuses. I am mindful that there is, however, no replacement for socialisation, especially for children with additional support needs and vulnerable children.

I will go to Bruce Adamson first, then to Linda O’Neill, then to Stephen McGhee, if there is anything that he wants to add. Could you illustrate a couple of areas where access to hardware and software could have been better and more appropriately matched to children with additional support needs? I know that that is a big umbrella and that different things are suited to different children.

Bruce Adamson: That is a huge and important question. Even pre-pandemic, we were very focused on digital engagement and inclusion. The UN’s Committee on the Rights of the Child has issued a new general comment on rights in the digital context; the pandemic massively accelerated that.

Among the positive things were that significant funds were eventually made available, although it took a bit of time. Third sector partners were used in schools to make sure that people were able to access devices. Many of the children I spoke to were feeling happy, particularly later in lockdown, that devices were working well.

However, there were real limitations for disabled children and children who cannot use the same technology as others; there are gaps in specialist technology that suits the needs of some children. There were issues around wi-fi connection, which I know members have also experienced.

As we have all experienced over the past couple of years, it is not enough to get a device and a connection; devices need to be maintained and software needs to be updated. It is an on-going commitment and devices have a shelf life. We need to think about what on-going support is needed; some children whom we spoke to said that their devices had worked well early on but broke down after six months or a year, and there was no on-going support, which is key.

There are also questions about transition; if a device is provided through a school or if a child is moving between services, does the device travel with them?

The positives include recognition of the need for substantial investment and of the challenge in upskilling us all—in particular, teachers in schools. That challenge was incredibly well met. During the second lockdown, the experience of children and young people—and of teachers—was very different. That was down to the incredible skill and dedication of teachers; school communities greatly increased their skill levels.

Kaukab Stewart: I recall the differences between the first and second lockdowns. To begin with, we had to turn on a sixpence, and everybody was adapting to a quite shocking set of circumstances. Thank you for acknowledging that.

Linda O’Neill: I strongly agree with Bruce Adamson’s comments, particularly in relation to the response in getting kit out to people. As we have said, by the time we got to the second lockdown, the picture was very different, which I know was welcome.

Through our networks, and from our contact with children and young people, we have been aware that the issue is not just access to hardware, software and broadband; there is also an issue about digital literacy skills. We know that children and young people spend a lot of time on mobile phones and iPads—I do, too. However, when working on personal computers, various programs are used, including Word, Excel and PowerPoint, and many of us are not as proficient at using those as we are at using apps on a smartphone.

We also heard from children and young people that they would have liked more support in using software for writing and turning in assignments. Parents and carers were also asking about how to support their children in that regard. Not everyone is familiar with such things.

In addition, the rapidity with which we had to switch to working in that way caused difficulties for some people. We heard from teachers that they had to develop a completely new set of skills to enable them to use new applications such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams, but they also had to support children and families in using the applications. There was a huge push on helping people to learn how to do that. Schools and children's services more widely were creative in their efforts to do that well.

If that way of working is to become embedded in the curriculum, and if we are to think about how we do things more flexibly, we need to bear it in mind that it will take time, resources and capacity to do that well. It cannot become something that is simply absorbed into workloads. People need time and space to do it well, so that we can ensure that the new responsibilities can be fulfilled and that we get the right support to children and families to enable them to use technology well.

Kaukab Stewart: I would like Stephen McGhee to come in. I want to focus on support for families. Let us say that a digital device is provided to a household for educational purposes and to improve digital literacy, which Linda O'Neill mentioned. The family has to get involved in order to achieve that, does it not? How can we best support the entire family—in supporting the child—and improve their digital literacy skills in order to gain maximum benefit from digital devices?

The Convener: I would appreciate everyone being very succinct when asking and answering questions, please, because we are very quickly running out of time.

Stephen McGhee: Of course. Many points have already been made, so I can cut out part of my answer.

The infrastructure for information technology support needs to go beyond just handing over a computer to a child, young person or teacher and saying, "Off you go. Start to learn." The commonsense move would be to have a community approach in which families are involved in digital literacy in their own right. The stumbling block is often that parents or grandparents are asked to set up computers that are given to children.

I want briefly to take cognisance of the point that we need to be careful not to move towards a completely digital style of education. Young people with additional support needs often present with needs that require socialisation. They might require a physical element of education, such as can be had through the Duke of Edinburgh's award. The pandemic in a positive sense caused a more personalised approach to be taken in education, especially for those with ASN. It is important to remember that, as part of the gamut of the discussion about digital accessibility and literacy.

10:15

Kaukab Stewart: That is a fair point. I would not dismiss any of that. I acknowledge the importance of considering the whole child and taking a holistic approach, notwithstanding the fact that my line of questioning focused on digital provision.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): I find parts of the written evidence that we received deeply concerning. For example, we read:

> "the post-lockdown effects might be reasonably predicted as profound."

Another comment is:

> "Feedback from our members points to the fact that the Covid-19 pandemic has had an incredibly damaging impact ... widening the educational attainment gap."

However, a lot of it feels quite anecdotal to me. It refers to verbal discussions. Are you aware of any substantive research to determine the actual effects of the pandemic that will enable us, as politicians and policy makers, to assess the scale of the challenge and what response is required?

Bruce Adamson: That is a real challenge. The papers that you have in front of you for this evidence session are really powerful and the Scottish Parliament information centre briefing is useful, as it captures the evidence. One problem is that we do not know what the impacts will be. It is difficult to research something when we cannot map out the effects. We know what has happened—we have really good evidence on that—but it is hard to measure its impact, particularly on mental health, long-term physical health and educational attainment, because we do not have the frameworks in place.

It is important that we take a holistic view and consider the broad issue of education and developing children to their fullest potential. There are some really important underlying issues, such as poverty and how that has played out during the pandemic. Going back to the point about digital provision, we should note that, in a crowded house where there are concerns about paying for power, people may have to share devices. The experience of children in poverty has been very different from the experience of others.

More research is needed, but it will probably have to be longitudinal research on how that plays out. We must also recognise the experience of children in particular difficulties, such as children in Polmont or secure units. That is a really important group that we have not touched on yet.

Michael Marra: I hear that. Linda, are you aware of any substantive work that is going on in this area?

Linda O'Neill: As Bruce Adamson said, work is going on to understand what happened during the pandemic. To my knowledge, however, we do not have any data that we could use to look at the positions before, during and after it. Where there are gaps in our data, we have known about them for a long time. The Promise highlighted really strongly the need for better data systems that will not only include empirical data but enable us to understand how children are experiencing education in their wider lives and how we as adults can plan services to support them. As well as collecting data, we need to examine how we can triangulate and use it for improvement.

There are lessons to be learned about where the data gaps are and what we might want to do to make the data much more robust so that we better understand children's journeys.

Michael Marra: Stephen, are you in the same position as Bruce Adamson and Linda O'Neill, with no awareness of any substantive work to assess the overall impact?

Stephen McGhee: Yes. My answer will be broadly similar. On the overall impact, a piece of work will be required to bring elements of education, mental health, ASN and co-ordinated support plans together into one place. Figures are emerging from Public Health Scotland on young people accessing child and adolescent mental health services. Between June 2020 and June 2021, the number of children and young people waiting for more than a year to access CAMHS doubled. However, the information comes independently from different silos. It would be useful if there was a central place where it was brought together to show the pre and post-pandemic positions and the impact.

Michael Marra: That is useful. The lack of a baseline at a Government level is concerning. I find the issue really difficult to assess. I hear deep disappointment about the recovery education plan from stakeholders. There is nothing to address the question, "What is the challenge that we face?"

In your written evidence and in your answers to previous questions, there have been little snippets about positive experiences, particularly for young people with ASN. We are all keen not to lose those, but there is not a lot in your written evidence about what those have been. Mr Adamson, you mentioned that but, rather than go into it in depth now, perhaps you could tell us a little about what those experiences were in further written evidence. I see a very negative picture, but is it fair to say that there are little sparks here and there?

Bruce Adamson: Yes, it is. I am happy to do that. I have the best job in the world, because I talk to children and young people every day. There were some real positives, and one of the strongest messages from children and young people, in particular from children with additional support needs, care-experienced children and disabled children, is that they do not want pity, and they do not want to be seen as objects of charity. They want the incredible achievements that they have made over the past 20 months to be recognised, and they want additional support. They want to be part of the discussions.

We asked to bring along children and young people today, but it was not possible. However, it is essential that all decision makers hear directly from children and young people. I am going to a secure unit this afternoon, and I will be at an outdoor nursery tomorrow, and I know that all of you do visits like that in your constituencies.

As I say, it is key for decision makers to hear directly from children and young people. Many children and young people have talked about greater community cohesion, having more time with family and the opportunity to get more involved in learning new digital skills, but what they feel is really missing is involvement in decision making. Children and young people want decision makers to hear directly from them, not through all of us all the time.

Michael Marra: I make the same appeal to Stephen McGhee and Linda O'Neill. If you have information on individual positive experiences, it would be good if you could provide it to the committee. We are seeing a negative picture here, understandably.

My final question follows on from that. The figures so far on school absences since the pandemic show a large variation from the pre-pandemic figures, with clear changes in behaviours coming through. Issues of self-isolation and so on obviously work into that. Importantly, there is an increase in unexplained persistent absence across Scotland. Do you have an indication, through your work, of whether there is a relationship to ASN or care-experienced pupils in that grouping? Is there anything on that in the research or from the discussions that you have had? On the rise in unexplained absences, the figure looks like one in 100 children in Scotland, which is a significant number of people. Is there any correlation that you can identify?

Bruce Adamson: We can only do so anecdotally, but that is a consistent pattern across the UK and Europe. I work closely with commissioners in other countries and with the World Health Organization, particularly on schooling. The pattern is consistent. Anecdotally, there are still high levels of anxiety around school. A significant number of pupils are off at the moment with Covid-related issues. That is all mixed in. There is still confusion about whether people are supposed to be isolating, and some people take a very cautious approach. The way in which things are recorded is important.

The key thing is relationships with families, getting support in, addressing concerns and ensuring that there is re-engagement.

Michael Marra: Do you have any insight on that, Stephen?

Stephen McGhee: Again, it is probably more anecdotal. My perception is that there is a cohort of young people with additional support needs who require a lot of support to get to the point of learning, which requires them to be ready to get into the physical construct of the school or to get the supports that allow them to do that.

I know that you will hear about this from the later witnesses, but I will give an example of a young person with autism. It is not a matter of opening the doors on a Monday and saying, “In you come.” There can be significant barriers to allowing young people with such needs to access services. It may have taken months or years to get them to the point of accessing education in the way that they did previously. That is a wider discussion, but Covid has had an impact on the reintroduction into learning of young people with ASN, in particular.

Linda O’Neill: Unfortunately, at the moment, because of the situation with the national data, much of what we discuss in relation to attendance is anecdotal. However, anecdotal information can still be extremely helpful in understanding the experience of children and families.

Nationally, the attendance and exclusion data for looked-after children is published only every second year, which makes it difficult to understand trends. Because of the timescales involved, the information is often very out of date by the time it is released, which means that it is difficult to use it to understand what the picture looks like for care-experienced children and young people.

At the moment, therefore, we are very reliant on our networks of leaders and professions for feedback on how children and young people’s attendance is being impacted. Bruce Adamson and Stephen McGhee have touched on some of the reasons for that, particularly when it comes to care-experienced children and young people.

It would be helpful if, nationally, we had a better understanding of attendance over the short and the long term when it comes to care-experienced children and children with additional support needs through the provision of more timely and more robust data. That would help us to think about the experiences of those children in that regard and what we need to do, as services, to improve the situation for them. We know that, for care-experienced children, attendance is, on average, much lower than it is for all children.

Michael Marra: I thank all the respondents for their useful answers.

I find the discussion about hubs and looking back useful in some respects, but we are talking about the situation right now. Many of the young people in question are absent from our schools and our systems, and, as a set of institutions, we must have a commensurate response to that. I really worry about the use that has been made throughout the discussion of the word “anecdotal”, which means that our understanding is based on some conversations that we have had with people. We simply do not have a proper understanding of the impact.

The Convener: The fact that we do not have the data has come across strongly.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): I have another line of questioning, but I would first like to stick with the issue of attendance.

Bruce, at the start, you mentioned the group of young people who had been disengaged from school before the pandemic but who found remote learning quite beneficial, as it provided them with a route back in. We know that, overwhelmingly, the pandemic has thrown up barriers rather than taking them down, but in that case, it has done the opposite.

Have you had any discussions with young people in that situation recently—in other words, since August, when schools moved back to the default of in-person learning? Has the progress that was made with that specific cohort been undone by what has happened as we have returned to normality, or has some of that progress been maintained?

Bruce Adamson: Unfortunately, we have lost some of that. The research that A Place in Childhood did was really useful. A 17-year-old said:

> “We’ve been back to school like for a week and I feel totally overwhelmed.”

That was how a young person who had coped extremely well and engaged with online learning felt when they got back to the busy school environment.

Particularly for neurodiverse children, including autistic children, there is a real challenge in going back to such a busy environment. There are huge levels of uncertainty, especially around exams. There are also issues around going from learning digitally to then suddenly having to use a pen and paper to sit assessments. Children’s level of anxiety really shot up on returning to school.

For most children, schools are generally very safe and supportive places, but the transition back raised a lot of issues. We need to make sure that we provide individualised support, including hybrid opportunities, to allow for socialisation and to allow children who benefited from the online provision to be able to concentrate on that, too.

Ross Greer: It seems daft that a group of young people who were, by definition, some of the hardest to reach and engage with had—in an entirely unplanned way—finally been engaged with. It would be more than frustrating for us to lose that progress.

My main line of questioning, which is on children's rights, is directed primarily at Bruce Adamson, but I would definitely be interested to hear the thoughts of Stephen McGhee and Linda O'Neill as well. Recently, there were issues with the Scottish Qualifications Authority's relative lack of familiarity with equality impact assessments, children and young people's rights and wellbeing impact assessments, et cetera. That largely predated the pandemic. During the pandemic, thanks to interventions from your office and the Equality and Human Rights Commission, the SQA has made a lot of progress.

I am interested in your reflections on local authorities as we went into the pandemic, right at the start, as things had to change rapidly. Did they demonstrate that they had a pre-existing level of familiarity with equality impact assessment and children and young people's rights impact assessment processes, or was it the opposite? Was there consistency across the country? Did some local authorities demonstrate that that was already embedded in their practice?

10:30

Bruce Adamson: Unfortunately, it really showed up that we are not quite there yet. My office did a comprehensive children's rights impact assessment early in the pandemic—in the summer—which was in response to an absence of a rights-based approach to decision making at Scottish Government and local authority level. We published that in support and to show good practice. There was an absence of children's rights impact assessments and of rights-based budgeting, and there was a particular absence of participatory decision making—children and young people were not involved.

That absence shows the importance of the fantastic work that the Parliament has done in passing the bill to incorporate the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Six weeks after the Supreme Court told us that we need to do more work on that, I am concerned that it is not back before the Parliament, because we need work to commence in order to deliver culture change.

The absence of statutory obligations in relation to some of these things means that, generally, they are not done or not done well. There are some good practices and there is strong willingness, but the legal underpinning is really important. That also flows through things such as co-ordinated support plans: it is only when there is statutory underpinning that people are able to concentrate resources and energy. We have huge commitments and huge positivity, but we need to convert that into changes in practice that lead to changes in results for children and young people.

Ross Greer: Before Stephen McGhee or Linda O'Neill comes in, if they wish to, I note that I take on board Michael Marra's point that looking back is useful but looking forward is more important. Some local authorities have made significant improvements, partly because of the additional scrutiny of their practices that the pandemic provided. From what you have seen so far, have local authorities taken the approach of permanently embedding those processes into what they do or are we in danger of it being a one-off experience—that Covid required an additional level of impact assessment and we will go back to the way in which we did things before? Have we normalised that approach or does the culture in local authorities mean that it is all seen as pandemic related and so not required to continue in normal work?

Bruce Adamson: There is certainly a risk of that. There are a lot of good intentions and positivity but, based on experience in other countries, I am strongly of the view that statutory underpinning is needed to normalise it. We need to get the incorporation legislation through because, without that obligation, other pressures come in. There has been good practice and there is huge willingness, but we need to ensure that it becomes the norm.

The participation elements, in particular, are lacking. There are some fantastic examples but, generally, the experience of children and young people across Scotland is pretty poor when it comes to their involvement in decision making and the understanding of the importance of things such as impact assessments, proper rights-based plans and rights-based budgeting.

Ross Greer: Stephen or Linda, do you have any thoughts on the normalisation of impact assessment and the culture of children's rights in local authorities?

Linda O'Neill: As Bruce Adamson said, the legal underpinning is absolutely crucial, but legislation and policy on their own will not change practice. As he also said, the participation of children and young people is crucial alongside the legislative instruments. Practitioners need to know what good practice looks like and they need support to put it in place in order for it to be felt by children and young people. Undertaking equality impact assessments to understand the impact on children is central to what we are doing but, to implement it robustly, we must also provide the right support to the right people.

To give a quick example, members of our virtual school head teacher network worked together at around the time that the SQA updated its guidance on the alternative certification model because, on looking at the guidance, they felt that the needs and rights of care-experienced children and young people needed to be amplified, through additional consideration of their requirements, to ensure equity in the process. Through that work, we published practice guidance for SQA school co-ordinators and designated managers, which gave good examples of additional supports and practices that might need to be taken into account for care-experienced children and young people during the application of the alternative certification model. That is a really nice example of how legislative instruments alongside the provision of robust support for practice can make a difference in how children experience difficult and complex situations.

Stephen McGhee: To move away slightly from schools, a lot of what underpins the Promise concerns the voice of children and young people. In our sector, the voice of care-experienced children and young people has probably not been heard often enough. The underpinning elements of the independent care review—particularly the section on voice—focus on things such as access to digital tools and children's rights. It is about embedding what Linda O'Neill and Bruce Adamson have talked about.

A legal framework would make it easier to embed those things across all the different services around Scotland. At the moment, the care review does not have a legislative underpinning—it is about sectoral reform, if you want to call it that. That is appropriate and correct, but it would strengthen the viewpoint of practitioners in the field if it was understood, in particular, that children's rights are no longer an expendable element of that offer.

The Convener: As I suspected, we will probably not get through all my colleagues' questions, but I promise those who are not called that they will be the first to be called in the next evidence session.

For what I think will be the last question, I call Meghan Gallacher.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): I want to touch on the pandemic recovery and local authorities' approach to ASN. My first question relates to a time before the pandemic. In 2019, councils—one of which was North Lanarkshire Council, on which I am a serving councillor—undertook a review of ASN provision. The ASN estate had been inherited from the former regional councils—as were many types of estate throughout Scotland—and many policies and practices were out of date. One of the main concerns that came out of that review was about a requirement to update the policies and practices. Can local authorities learn from the experiences of the pandemic and use it as an opportunity to update ASN provision to ensure that it meets the needs of ASN children and young people and to make sure that the provision is strengthened?

Bruce Adamson: To be succinct, it is a strong yes from me. We have touched on the Morgan review. It was a short piece of work, but it was very powerful in setting out the way forward. It is absolutely important that we use this time to change things. Many of the issues existed before the pandemic but have been exacerbated by it. The present window is absolutely the time to change practice, as things are a bit more fluid, thus allowing us to turn a real challenge into an opportunity.

I strongly agree that reviewing, updating and taking forward the recommendations of the Morgan review and linking that to the Promise and other work are essential at a local authority level.

Linda O'Neill: I strongly agree with Bruce Adamson. We have significant opportunities to take the lessons that have been learned and to think about what they mean for the current educational context, the proposed reform of education, the recommendations in the additional support for learning action plan and the Promise.

It is helpful that the international council of education advisers talks about the concept of universal design, which comes from architecture and relates to when we think about designing buildings. It is about making buildings as accessible as possible for the maximum number of users possible right from the planning stage, so that later adaptations are not needed. That is the approach that we should take to policy. We should make it as inclusive as possible for all groups of children and young people, and ensure that the voices of children and young people are at the centre of policy decisions and the policy that we develop. There are opportunities around that as we go forward.

Stephen McGhee: My perspective is exactly the same as that of Bruce and Linda. The underpinning principle in the Morgan review is probably more pertinent today than it was at the time of its publication. The number of young people with additional support needs has continued to balloon, but their access to specialist teaching or resources continues either to stay at the same level or simply to drop. There therefore has to be a real focus on that specific element of the review.

It is worth thinking about the physical construct of mainstream schools and mainstreaming and how those meet the needs of our young people with ASN. We strongly support the concept of mainstreaming, but there has to be consideration of the fact that the profile of the way in which those with ASN are taught or access education changed as a result of the pandemic. As we have touched on, it is key that we pick out some of the positives that have come out of that and—I hope—feed those into some of the ways in which we will reform education for children and young people, specifically those with ASN.

Meghan Gallacher: I will leave the Morgan review and the requirements for strengthening ASN provision and move on to Covid guidance for pupils with ASN. I recently read an article by the EIS ASN network, which suggested that Covid guidance is “totally inadequate” for pupils with ASN. One concern that was raised is that, due to the wearing of face masks, ASN children cannot see their teacher’s face, which impacts on their ability to communicate in the way that they usually would. What is the commissioner’s view on the wearing of face masks in schools, particularly across the ASN estate? Does he believe that it has an impact on the ability of ASN children to communicate effectively with their teachers and peers?

Bruce Adamson: Face masks undoubtedly impact on our ability to communicate, which has a disproportionate effect on some children. With all Covid mitigation measures, there is a balance to be struck. We have been clear with Government that any interference to protect public health—such as the wearing of face masks—needs to be proportionate, time limited and reviewed. It is for Government to assess that balance. However, if there is a general view that face masks are necessary and proportionate, there have to be exceptions, particularly around communication. The proportionality is different for children who have additional communication needs or for neurodiverse children, for whom wearing a mask is particularly challenging for communication.

The benefit of not wearing a face mask for those children has to be taken into account. It is not proportionate to ask them to wear masks, given the overall public benefits. The broader decision on where the balance lies is really important, but we have to realise that each individual child needs that assessment of proportionality. I am very concerned if children are being forced to wear masks and that is a disproportionate interference. It is not proportionate in terms of public safety to require children with communication needs, neurodiversity and other health needs to wear a mask.

Meghan Gallacher: Linda or Stephen, do you have anything to add?

Stephen McGhee: Bruce covered most of the points.

The Convener: I apologise to colleagues who have not yet had their turn; that will come at the beginning of the next session. I want to be fair to everybody.

I thank Bruce Adamson, Stephen McGhee and Linda O’Neill for their evidence, which has been useful, interesting and informative. I thank you all for your time.

I suspend the meeting to allow for a changeover of witnesses.

10:45

Meeting suspended.

10:54

On resuming—

The Convener: Welcome back. We continue our evidence taking on the impact of Covid-19 on children and young people with additional support needs and care-experienced young people.

I am delighted to welcome our second panel of witnesses. Laurie Black, who is the convener of the ASN committee for the Educational Institute of Scotland—the EIS—joins us virtually. Ramon Hutchingson, who is the co-ordinator for the autism resources co-ordination hub—ARCH—in South Lanarkshire is also with us virtually. We are also delighted to have with us in person Sally Cavers, who is head of inclusion for Children in Scotland. We really appreciate you giving us an hour of your time to give evidence and share your experience and findings.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): I thank the witnesses for coming.

The situation seems pretty stark. The demand from young people is up, as we heard from the previous witnesses and as we can see in the written evidence. Waits for diagnosis for mental health problems, autism or other conditions are longer. The numbers of co-ordinated support plans have gone down in the past eight years. The numbers of additional support teachers are down, too, as are funding for ASN and referrals to social work.

The system was already under strain before the pandemic and demand has gone up since it began. What chance do young people have of getting the support that they need under those circumstances?

The Convener: Who is that question directed at, Willie?

Willie Rennie: Anybody who wishes to answer. I think that the EIS has a particularly strong view on the issue, so Laurie Black might wish to start.

The Convener: I say to the other witnesses that if, when they have heard what Laurie has to say, they have something to add, they should feel free to contribute. If they feel that everything has been said that they would have said, it is fine to say nothing.

Laurie Black (Educational Institute of Scotland): Thank you for having me. I agree whole-heartedly with what Willie Rennie said. Covid has certainly exacerbated additional support needs across the board, but we already faced acute needs in ASN prior to Covid. There was chronic underfunding, underresourcing and understaffing. We are now seeing a change in additional support needs. Pupils who previously perhaps did not have additional—[*Inaudible*.]—from EIS members that a number of children are displaying violent or really distressed behaviour, which is impacting their learning and that of their peers.

Sally Cavers (Children in Scotland): Willie Rennie asked what chance we have. The committee has already heard about the level of challenge. We owe it to children and young people to consider their needs, to involve them in the planning for transformation and to ensure that we take evidence about what has worked and what we need. We need to consider what we needed before the pandemic, what came out of the additional support for learning review and what is in the additional support for learning action plan. We also must accelerate the pace of progress against those actions.

That work needs to be led by children and young people. We are in the fortunate position of having many for a and opportunities to take a rights-based approach to listening to children and young people and making them the drivers for the change that is required. We know the scale of the challenge. There is a lot of evidence about where resource, support and capacity are required. We have that evidence, so we now need to make progress on making the change.

Ramon Hutchingson (Autism Resources Co-ordination Hub): Thank you for inviting me. I will say two things. First, the committee asked about research as opposed to anecdotal evidence. I refer members to the centre for children and young people's participation, which is based at the University of Central Lancashire. It produced a fantastic paper entitled "COVID-19: Children's Participation in Shaping Responses", which was an international analysis of the responses from children throughout Europe. I can show you the paper, if that is any good. I am quite visual in my own learning.

The Convener: We cannae read it.

Ramon Hutchingson: Sorry. You can access that paper. There is a lot of valid information in it that substantiates some of the anecdotal evidence that has already been provided.

Secondly, and more importantly, I agree completely with the point that a systemic and structural approach is required. I whole-heartedly endorse the earlier witnesses' statements that we obviously require duties that are mandated through legislation, as opposed to the current discretionary powers. When those discretionary powers sit within a whole list of other priorities that local authorities face, they lose their priority.

11:00

The Convener: Willie, do you want to come back in?

Willie Rennie: No, thank you, convener. I have finished.

James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP): I suspect this session might be a wee bit shorter than the last one, then.

I have a couple of questions about the issue of how much of the responsibility for recovery from the pandemic in schools should be devolved to the school and local authority level. If they have a substantial amount of responsibility, how will they be held accountable for progress?

Laurie Black: Schools and local authorities are already accountable for their progress. However, again, we need to address some systemic issues in order to help schools and local authorities to move forward. Until those issues are addressed, we might find ourselves going round in circles. It is absolutely essential that we fix chronic underfunding and chronic understaffing in order to support schools and local authorities to meet the needs of the children and young people in question.

James Dornan: I convened the Education and Skills Committee for three years, and I have never been at an education committee meeting with the EIS at which it has not asked for more money, but that cannot be the only solution for everything. We are in the middle of a pandemic and we have had very difficult times. I accept that there were systemic problems in provision beforehand—I am not trying to hide from that—but we must look at the reality and see what will work best, instead of always asking for more money.

Laurie Black: It should be acknowledged that local authorities are rising to the challenge and implementing specialist roles for Covid recovery, which they are using to address the specific needs of their geographical areas. That is taking place above and beyond what was happening prior to Covid. Those things are happening, but within the budget and resources that local authorities have.

Ramon Hutchingson: I would like to offer a couple of thoughts, if that is okay. I understand completely James Dornan's point—people make schools, not money. There is a skills deficit, and as far as I am concerned, in relation to neurodiverse accommodation and adjusted services, there is a general need for greater workforce development on creating adjusted services within existing provision, as opposed to just creating more services or plugging more money in. There is a lack of autism-informed and additional support-informed practice.

Alongside legislation, workforce development would go a long way towards contributing to some of the things that you mentioned. It is not just a case of saying, "Let's get some extra staff in." For example, earlier witnesses said that pupils with additional support needs account for a third of Scotland's school population. Between 2014 and 2018, there was an increase of 101 per cent in the number of autistic children in that population. Therefore, we are facing a skills deficit as much as a resource deficit.

Sally Cavers: I think that Angela Morgan made recommendations about accountability that were accepted. However, over the past 20 months, we have found that the youth work and childcare sectors have such a significant role to play in supporting schools, not only during the school day but outside school hours and during holidays.

All the empowered schools guidance and the work that has been done to ensure that partnerships are as effective as they can be are really critical now. We have to look at the community around the school and the expertise in the youth work sector in working with and supporting children with additional support needs and care-experienced young people. We have to make sure that they are part of the recovery plan and really embedded in it so that some of the issues to do with sustainability for the sector are addressed swiftly.

The innovation and creativity that Linda O'Neill described earlier are key positive things. We need to ensure that schools have partnerships and that the range of incredible services are available to them so that we can properly support children and young people with additional support needs.

James Dornan: What support is needed for schools and teachers to be able to identify ways to support the wellbeing of children with additional support needs and deal with any lost learning for them?

Sally Cavers: In written responses and in our engagement work with children and young people, their focus on the impact on their wellbeing has been absolutely paramount. The relational support and collaboration that is required to address the wellbeing needs requires time. We know that school staff sometimes struggle to find time to engage properly and effectively with pupils and their families. We therefore need to look at the system and at the advice from the international council of education advisers and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development report and think about how we ensure that the team around the child has the time and the connections to be able to develop wellbeing support for pupils.

James Dornan: That leads to a number of other questions, but I will see whether any of the other witnesses wishes to come in at this stage.

Laurie Black: I add that it has already been acknowledged that we need better infrastructure for additional support needs and pupil support as a career pathway for teachers. If that was strengthened, that would obviously have a knock-on effect—[*Inaudible*.]—if that also needs—[*Inaudible*.]

James Dornan: I am sorry, but you cut out there. I do not know whether other members could hear you.

The Convener: Laurie, can you repeat that last sentence? We did not hear it.

Laurie Black: I was just saying that more focus on improving the pathways for additional support needs and pupil support teachers would have a direct impact on the wellbeing of children and young people with additional support needs.

Ramon Hutchingson: We should throw open the doors of schools and get other professionals in there. We should begin to have the kind of interagency collaboration that was promoted by the Christie commission 11 years ago. Let us move out of the silos and begin to cross-pollinate. Let us get the expertise and experience of youth workers, social workers and other allied health professionals in schools, working collaboratively alongside teachers. It is not about expecting teachers to be everything for everybody; that is unrealistic. It is about working collaboratively together with the agencies. Schools should no longer be seen purely as education repositories. They should be about education in its broadest sense, as opposed to education in its narrowest sense.

James Dornan: That is very helpful. I have been advocating things like that for the past 15 years, so thank you for that.

I will leave it there, convener.

The Convener: The evidence that we have been presented with includes the statistic that the number of ASN teachers in publicly funded schools fell by 578 in the period from 2012 to 2020, which was a 15.6 per cent reduction. Surely that must have some impact on the nature of the support that is offered.

Laurie Black: It certainly does. I reiterate that schools already work collaboratively with a range of agencies; they work with the active schools network, educational psychologists and health practitioners. Multi-agency support is already being provided—schools are no longer an isolate.

However, I agree that there is an issue in that the number of teachers who specialise in pupil support has decreased dramatically. Now, in a time of exacerbated need, we are finding that that issue is even more acute.

The Convener: With regard to what you have just said, do you make any distinction between support at primary school and support at secondary school?

Laurie Black: Yes—we have recently seen an issue in primary education in particular. As I touched on previously, there has been an increase in violent incidents and distressed behaviours. We are now seeing that more at primary level, in particular in primary 1 and 2, whereas previously the issue was not so pronounced. We are also seeing an increase in mental health issues at primary level.

Although there is a lot of great provision in secondary schools—[*Inaudible*.]

The Convener: Oh dear.

Laurie Black: —in the secondary estate, we are finding issues in that primary schools do not have the same access to counselling and mental health resources.

The Convener: We are experiencing the limitations of a hybrid meeting this morning, because you are coming in and out of contact, but I think that we got the gist of what you said.

If I am not mistaken, James Dornan would like to come back in. We will then go to Michael Marra.

James Dornan: Is it the case that the numbers of specialist teachers dropped as mainstreaming took a central place in education? I accept that there may be an issue just now, but that was the reason why things happened in the way that they did.

Laurie Black: When the EIS did a survey in 2018, 78.2 per cent of respondents said that they disagreed or strongly disagreed that ASN provision for children and young people was adequate. That was prior to Covid—

James Dornan: I am not arguing that point.

The Convener: I think that James Dornan says that he is not arguing that point.

James Dornan: No—I am arguing that the numbers of specialist teachers dropped at the same time that mainstreaming was becoming the way forward in education.

The Convener: Yes, I appreciate that. I will bring in Michael Marra.

Michael Marra: Mr Dornan’s criticism of the EIS for advocating for education resource is pretty ill founded—particularly in the area that we are discussing. The statistics that the convener laid out, and the evidence that we have seen and the testimony that we have heard, show that there has been a marked decrease in resource in respect of teachers who are facing children who have additional support needs. The Morgan review specifically excluded a resource assessment, but my understanding is that its recommendations have been accepted by all political parties.

We are coming out of the pandemic, but last week someone from the EIS told me that they still feel that we are in a crisis situation rather than in recovery. Will delivering on the Morgan review recommendations be more challenging post-pandemic than it previously was?

Sally Cavers: Yes, it will, given the scale and number of recommendations and agreed actions. We need to prioritise some of those actions. The participation of children and young people is a core principle—the committee heard strong views on that from Bruce Adamson earlier this morning, and Children in Scotland believes that it is a key principle that must underpin all the additional support for learning improvement work.

Progress has been made against the action plan, but that progress needs to be accelerated for children and young people. There has been some work on the national measurement framework, which will provide evidence of the impact that support interventions have on children and young people. We need to make sure that that is progressed swiftly. There are other areas, such as co-ordinated support plans, in which there are long-standing concerns about the understanding and implementation of co-ordination and planning. That also needs to be addressed swiftly. The things in the action plan were long-standing concerns. The committee’s predecessor committee heard from Angela Morgan.

11:15

It will be a challenge. Obviously, the capacity to support improvement and change in schools is reduced because of the response to the presenting needs. I go back to the point about who is available to us to support improvement and change. The pieces of the jigsaw are all there, but the challenge that we face is in getting it to come together and ensuring that the infrastructure and the practitioners are there. That is absolutely key.

Ramon Hutchingson: Basically, my thinking about the statements and findings in the Morgan review is about the attitudinal basis. Far too many professionals in education had the view that additional support needs were not their job. That needs to be addressed. The attitudes in not only the education profession but every profession need to be addressed. Fiona Duncan referred to what happens as "othering". It is about othering children and young people with additional support needs. The mainstream assumption is for neurotypical children and young people; it is not for neurodivergent children and young people, children with additional support or learning needs, or children with intellectual disabilities.

There is a huge unmet need for advocacy. We can give a platform to what Fiona Duncan referred to as "quieter voices". Our autistic children, young people and adults are among the group with the quieter voice, and they need advocacy services to ensure that co-ordinated support plans, additional support plans, education support plans and the team around the child incorporate somebody to give volume to the quieter voice.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): I thank the witnesses very much for their evidence thus far.

For us all, our lives revolve around our children to some extent. In 22 years as a constituency MSP, I have been struck by the fact that the lives of parents with children with profound additional special needs are completely dominated by their children. It has very often seemed to me that they fight a constant daily uphill struggle and battle to obtain sufficient and appropriate provision for their children. I know that the witnesses will be acutely aware of that. What, in particular, should we, as a country, strive to do to ensure that children with the most profound needs have access to the services that they and their families deserve?

Sally Cavers: I absolutely agree with the point that has been made. Support for children in the early years has possibly been missing from the discussion so far. That support is absolutely key for children with complex additional support needs and their families.

What can we do to improve that support? The challenge is very well documented. Earlier this year, a Family Fund survey reported on the impact on the wellbeing of families with children with disabilities and complex needs. It found that 86 per cent of families reported a negative impact on their wellbeing.

Support pathways are important at the early years stage. It is about getting the connection between health and education and the transition point into services, and ensuring that there is effective communication.

At the school stage—moving through primary and secondary and into transition planning—we need to use the long-standing GIRFEC principles, which are well embedded and support children's services, to ensure that the child's plan is in place and that there is a mechanism that ensures that everybody in the team around the child and family is available to provide the necessary support.

Critically, as you heard in the previous evidence session, we must start by involving the child and their family in the discussions about that planning and support. That involves ensuring that there is a trusted and respectful relationship with key professionals, so that the family feels listened to. That is the experience of some children and their families, but not of them all. Getting consistent practice in that regard is key.

The Convener: Laurie Black is now with us on audio only, because of the intermittency of the connection that we had with her. I invite her to contribute on this question.

Laurie Black: I agree that GIRFEC is now well embedded in schools and that it is an effective tool for supporting families, children and young people. Certainly, there is an insufficiency of resources, because it takes time and resources to put in place a GIRFEC plan. We have seen that, particularly in certain geographical locations, it is difficult to get other agencies to support pupils, and we recognise that, as was mentioned earlier, there is a lack of respite care for parents of children with profound and complex needs.

Ramon Hutchingson: What is needed is the provision of mandated duties underpinned by robust legislation and, dare I say it, even a commissioner for neurodiversity and learning and intellectual disability.

The default position should be that advocacy services are readily available for every child as an automatic right—it is about rights, not requests. Further, those services should be accessible. One of the big findings in the international research that was carried out by the University of Central Lancashire, which I referred to earlier, was that accessibility is a massive challenge for our community. Visual information is important in that regard. You heard from previous witnesses about the absence of good visual information for children and young people with additional support needs.

We need accessible services to be created, and advocacy to be made the default position, underpinned by legislation and the formation of a commissioner’s office that can ensure that that happens.

Fergus Ewing: I am grateful for those answers. I do not wish to inadvertently paint an overly negative picture, because there are many positives. Some 95 per cent of children with additional support needs were educated in mainstream classes, for example, and teacher numbers have risen from 52,247 in 2019 to 53,400 now.

Even more important than that, perhaps, is the fact that the achievements of children with particular needs have been extraordinary, as a result of their efforts and the efforts of their teachers, support assistants and families. I can see that pupils with additional support needs continue to achieve, with 89.6 per cent of school leavers with additional support needs having a positive initial destination, nearly three quarters of children with additional support needs leaving school with one pass or more at level 5 or better and a staggering 91 per cent of children with additional support needs having one or more qualification at level 4. I want to read those facts into the record because there is a danger that we might be painting a negative picture.

That said, we all want to achieve more, and my focus is on those children with particularly severe needs. I hope that we will come back to that issue.

I absolutely agree with what has been said about the need for respite care and bespoke services. I recognise the excellent work that is done in many schools in my constituency in this regard, which I have witnessed over the past couple of decades. I am grateful to the witnesses for their contributions this morning.

Stephanie Callaghan: Thank you all for coming along today. I want to ask you about advocacy services, which Ramon Hutchingson brought up. Fergus Ewing talked about the struggles that parents can have, and, as a parent myself, I have seen the parent-carer stuff coming through. The Morgan report backs that up as well, identifying that everything can be an on-going battle. Sometimes, parents can be seen as aggressive or demanding when they are actually at the end of their tether and are just trying to get something to happen for their child. Also, some parents suffer some of the anxiety and communication issues that their children have, but they are undiagnosed.

The Morgan report said that, quite often, the children with the most disruptive behaviours get the attention at school and the other children get ignored. There is often a situation in which the strengths of children with complex needs are not recognised but there are difficulties with the struggles and challenges of children who are very high functioning being recognised as well. They are quite often minimised.

For those reasons, advocacy seems to be an important factor. Ramon, do you have any evidence of that happening locally? I also wonder whether the other panel members support advocacy and agree that it should play a big part.

The Convener: Who is your question directed to?

Stephanie Callaghan: I ask the other witnesses to say whether they support advocacy, and I ask Ramon whether there is evidence of it happening on the ground, either locally or more widely, including internationally.

Ramon Hutchingson: First, I would like to mention what constitutes advocacy. We talked earlier about definitions of or eligibility criteria for vulnerable people. I would ask: what is distressed behaviour? Distressed behaviour for many autistic children—children on the spectrum—particularly females, is about flying under the radar. It is about masking. It is about children not expressing themselves in an overt fashion.

I strongly believe that language creates realities, and we should use the terminology of distressed behaviour, because that can be challenging behaviour, but it can also be frozen behaviour. It can be autistic shutdowns as well as autistic meltdowns. It can be behavioural meltdowns, but it can also be behavioural shutdowns. The four Fs response—fight, freeze, flight or fawn—is very pertinent to this. It is about weaving in trauma-informed practice. That is my first point.

The term “the squeaky wheel gets the most oil” comes to mind, because those who present the most obvious, tangible issues are the ones who get most of the resources. That can happen in families as well. Many parent carers that we support say that they feel guilty about the fact that they devote huge amounts of time, effort and energy to their child with additional support needs and autism and their neurotypical siblings do not get anything by comparison. That is an issue.

On advocacy, I have been a member of the Autism Network Scotland advocacy round-table forum for the past two years, and one of the members of that forum is Dr Tom Kirkwood, who was director of the international advocacy practitioners association until a few months ago. Both internationally and locally, the provision of accessible advocacy services is important.

It is important to distinguish between independent, professional advocacy services—

they are essential and they are overseen by the Scottish Independent Advocacy Alliance as a regulatory, overseeing body—and the need on the ground for more accessible, locally based advocacy services, including peer advocacy, self-advocacy and group advocacy. In South Lanarkshire, we have actively encouraged and facilitated that, because we know that that is what our users and carers are looking for. In a survey that we did in January 2020, just before lockdown, 92 per cent of respondents said that they would not even know where to look for advocacy services or what autism-informed advocacy services look like. There is a huge deficit—a huge unmet need—that, as a country, we could address.

11:30

Stephanie Callaghan: Do the other panel members agree that advocacy should play a big part in that regard?

Sally Cavers: Yes—absolutely. Children in Scotland currently delivers two parts of the my rights, my say support service: the children's views service, which is used to independently gather children's views for formal processes in relation to additional support for learning, and advocacy for children who wish to exercise their rights. That support service is embedded in legislation. The advocacy element, which is delivered by Partners in Advocacy, is very well used. Children report that it has had a significant impact on their confidence and their ability to be, and to feel, heard.

In relation to parents and carers, I agree with the points that have been made. Although a number of independent advocacy services are available to parents and carers across Scotland, such services are not available to every parent and carer of a child with additional support needs. The power of quality advocacy is very significant, but good-quality information and support are also important. That has been well evidenced in the response from parents and carers. Children in Scotland manages Enquire, a Scottish Government-funded advice and information service, and one of the most impactful responses that we have received from parents is about the importance of quality information and bespoke advice in giving them the confidence to ask questions and to be engaged in the planning and delivery of their child's learning support. It is crucial that parents receive good-quality information and support, and that that is made accessible to everybody.

It is particularly important that support is available for families in the early years. We administer the early learning and childcare inclusion fund on behalf of the Scottish Government. Over the past two years, settings have reported that, because they have missed out on regular informal contact with parents and carers, worries, concerns and anxieties are being raised because parents are missing that family support element, which is crucial, not only in the early years but throughout childhood. Although some children's services are doing really well in that regard, youth work, childcare and family support services can ensure that it is provided more consistently if they are round the table and brought into the planning process.

The Convener: Michael Marra has a supplementary question.

Michael Marra: Mention has been made of the importance of the role of respite services in allowing people to continue to access educational experiences. I have constituents who are concerned about the lack of remobilisation of respite services in Dundee, for which Covid continues to be used as a justification. You will understand the frustration that they feel when they see people in nightclubs and pubs. Is that experience shared across the country or is it specific to my constituents?

Sally Cavers: Parents have certainly reported that when they have contacted Enquire. Not having access to respite is an issue that has been raised through services that are supported through the access to childcare fund. Some of those funded services are providing respite, but we are hearing that the gap in provision has been profound.

Bob Doris: This is a really interesting session. I have been trying to join the dots between different bits of evidence. I was struck by the convener's comments about the cuts in the numbers of ASN teachers and assistants in specialist settings and by what James Dornan said about the increased presumption of mainstreaming, which is the trend for young people to be in mainstream settings. I do not want to get into a debate about the sufficiency of funding—I hope that we will look at that during our budget scrutiny—but perhaps we could look at the baseline that Michael Marra talked about and at how funding is used.

Our committee papers say that, over two financial years, £450 million was earmarked for education recovery—not for ASN, but for education recovery in general—and that £240 million of that has been used to support staffing. Again, that is not specifically for ASN staffing, but for staffing more generally. More significantly, because non-recurring funds are welcome but they do not necessarily sustain the improvements that we want, I note that £145 million for staffing will be put into local government funds and baselined from April 2022. That is my understanding.

I am sorry for giving you those numbers but, going back to the baseline that Michael Marra talked about, do we have any idea yet how that money has been used across the 32 local authorities? How can we follow how the money is used? When investment is placed in mainstream education, how can we ensure that there is a commitment to additional support assistants? I see that the number of support assistants has gone up by a couple of thousand in the past few years. How can we ensure that they have the correct qualifications, that they are there for the long term and that they are committed to supporting mainstreaming, rather than again being in the specialist sector?

I am sorry for the length of the question, convener, but it is important that, as politicians, we do not just exchange numbers but drill down to see what they represent.

The Convener: As I understand it, you are asking where the accountability is for the spend.

Bob Doris: It is not about accountability; it is about understanding the spend. In April 2022, there will be an initial £145 million to allow local authorities to give teachers permanent contracts for the longer term, rather than their having non-recurring funding for additional support. That is fantastic—we all want that—but we want to ensure that young people who live with additional support needs get a fair and ample slice of the additional funding, be that in a mainstream or non-mainstream setting.

The Convener: That is very clear. Do you want to hear from Sally Cavers?

Bob Doris: Yes.

Sally Cavers: It is critical that there is equity of funding for children with additional support needs and care-experienced children and young people. At the moment, there are gaps in our ability to track the impact of funding on children and young people with additional support needs.

I return to my point about the national measurement framework that is being taken forward from the additional support for learning action plan. We need to know what the impacts of interventions are on children and young people with additional support needs. Currently, we do not know that. In order for us to understand the level of investment that is required and its impact, swift implementation of the national measurement framework is key. That does not necessarily address your question about the available funding, but I agree that it must be equitable and of benefit to the children we are talking about.

Bob Doris: Rather than my asserting my view, convener, it is for the witnesses to say that we need to be clear about the money that is in the system and how it has been spent, and we need to be accountable for how it is spent and the political choices that are made.

The Convener: I think that you hit the jackpot with Sally Cavers, because that is what she just said. Do you want to hear from the other witnesses?

Bob Doris: That is at your discretion, convener, given the time constraints.

The Convener: That is fine. Laurie, do you want to comment? Let us see whether we can get your internet connection to hold up.

Laurie Black: You could consider the model for how pupil equity funding was rolled out to local authorities and schools. PEF was conditional on the measuring of efficacy—[*Inaudible*.]—so schools and local authorities are already rather au fait with doing that. That is entirely possible and reasonable, and it would ensure that it was equitable.

The Convener: That is consistent with what Audit Scotland told us when it gave evidence on the budget cycle. We need to focus far more on outcomes—on what actually happens and what benefit is accrued.

Ramon Hutchingson: On the issue of funding, I note the publication of two recent reports: the evaluation report by Blake Stevenson on the 10-year-long Scottish strategy for autism and “The accountability gap” by the cross-party group on autism. Both identify the issue of stop-start investment, which needs to stop. If there is to be a sustained improvement in support and services, there need to be committed budgets in order to ensure that that happens.

One of the main issues that I have in relation to this committee’s remit is the fact that the Scottish strategy for autism did not include education. There were a couple of references to it, but in the strategy, education was almost a separate issue. In the evaluation report and the “Towards Transformation” document for the next two years that has been produced by the Scottish Government, education is referenced at about eight or nine points. However, as one of the other witnesses mentioned, the integration of education and early years is crucial if we are to address the systemic inequalities that are faced by children, young people and adults in the autism community and those with additional support needs generally.

The Convener: Kaukab Stewart has a question that fits in with that.

Kaukab Stewart: It is connected. I note the rise in the number of children and young people who are identified as having additional support needs. About a third of our pupils have been identified as such, and we know that there has been a disproportionate effect on them in the context of Covid. I want to drill down into that and ask about the continued underdiagnosis of black and minority ethnic cultural background children and families, which has been brought to my attention through my inbox as a constituency MSP, as well as when I was a teacher.

Can you provide any examples of engagement, support or evidence gathering to get the perspectives of children, families and young people from black and minority ethnic heritage and cultural backgrounds?

Sally Cavers: That is a real gap. It is an area where attention is required. I cannot cite any direct evidence that might be helpful to the discussion. Recently, Children in Scotland has been working with Intercultural Youth Scotland around diversity in teaching. However, there is a real gap, and we need to support families and work with community organisations to understand the barriers and why there might be a difference in diagnosis. It is key that the family support element takes place as early as possible and that we consider where the gaps are and prioritise them.

Kaukab Stewart: There appears to still be a lot of stigma attached to seeking help and support. We were all isolated in the Covid context, but certain families and children from the backgrounds that I mentioned were even more isolated. Can any of the other panellists give examples of any outreach or other work that was done around that?

Ramon Hutchingson: The most recent piece of research by the autism research centre at the University of Cambridge, which is headed up by Professor Simon Baron-Cohen, was produced in February and it concluded that there is a significant disproportionate impact of autism on black and minority ethnic communities. Recent research and the autism statistics have shown that there is a greater prevalence there.

11:45

At a micro level, ARCH is supporting several black and minority ethnic families through the Covid crisis. There are issues around accessibility, and we are doing our utmost to make sure that they are flagged up to the local authority. For example, there are issues with getting things translated into minority languages and linking families to support services in Glasgow and elsewhere that can recognise their particular cultural needs.

Kaukab Stewart: I was thinking about the advocacy services that you talked about, and the importance of ensuring that cultural awareness is built into them. That applies to interpretation services, too. Laurie, do you have anything to add?

Laurie Black: Diversity and equality training is well embedded in education, which is a really good thing. However, there is perhaps more to be done before children come to school. More attention could be given to advocacy and to support via health visitors in order to combat issues around early intervention. For example, certain ethnic groups may be hesitant about getting that support. We know that black and ethnic minority communities have sometimes been hesitant.

The Convener: Mainstreaming was mentioned in a recent exchange, and I know that Willie Rennie wants to ask about that. I give him plaudits for being so economical with words at the start of the session.

Willie Rennie: I prefer to be brief, convener.

Mainstreaming is an important area. I am sure that everyone supports the mainstreaming approach, but, as we see in the written evidence, there are consequences for wider learning, for other pupils and for the classroom environment. I am keen to understand more about what that looks like and what we can do to try to address those issues. Perhaps Laurie Black could comment first.

Laurie Black: I will give a couple of examples. A local association reported back to the EIS that, in the space of just a few days, an early primary teacher had suffered a broken jaw and damage to an eye socket from being kicked in the face by a pupil and a staff member in another school not far away had had a tooth knocked out. Both incidents involved children in primaries 1 and 2. How that relates to mainstreaming is that we find that practitioners are spending a lot of their time essentially firefighting and challenging violent and distressed behaviours. That will, of course, have an impact on the ability of other children to learn and on their attainment.

Willie Rennie: Do teachers feel that they get enough support when such incidents happen, to help them to manage the circumstances?

Laurie Black: No. I do not want to sound like a broken record, but it again comes down to people on the ground. When staff members have dealt with a violent incident, they need some respite. They may require medical attention and they might be quite distressed. They also have to record the incident almost immediately so that there is an accurate reflection of what happened, for reasons relating to litigation and for school information. Staff then need to be available to come in and work with the child to get them to a point where they are calm. At the moment, we are not seeing that happening.

Willie Rennie: Would any of the other witnesses like to comment?

Sally Cavers: Will you confirm what the question was, please? You talked about mainstreaming.

Willie Rennie: I am keen to understand the wider impact of mainstreaming on other pupils and on teachers, as well as what we can do to address the consequences that Laurie Black has just set out. I would like to understand how widespread the situation is and whether support mechanisms are in place to deal with the consequences. My question is not against mainstreaming; it is just about how we cope with some of its consequences and side effects.

Sally Cavers: Mainstreaming in education does not work for every child and young person with additional support needs. Children and young people report some environmental factors, such as the size of classes and, particularly in secondary school, the pace of learning. They repeatedly say that, as you have heard, there is a lack of flexibility to respond to their needs. An individualised approach is not taken as much as it needs to be.

However, mainstreaming in education works for the majority of pupils, and the vision for inclusive education is well supported. The guidance on the presumption in favour of mainstreaming is clear about the components that make effective mainstreaming and inclusive provision. There is a vision and a commitment, but it can be challenging to enable staff to meet the range of needs that are presented in mainstream environments.

There are a number of recommendations in the additional support for learning action plan that can contribute to improvement, but children and young people must lead the discussion and the improvement planning on what will make a difference for them. Many schools in Scotland have effective inclusion, diversity and equality groups that can set the scene for improvement and what needs to change.

Ramon Hutchingson: I completely agree that we need to hold the hands of the people who hold the hands of children with additional support needs. That is about supporting the front-line staff. I remind the committee that “Not included, not engaged, not involved: A report on the experiences of autistic children missing school” showed that 70 per cent of cases that were taken to the Additional Support Needs Tribunals for Scotland involved autistic children who had not been given the reasonable adjustments in their education that they and their parents/carers demanded, required or felt that they required. Workforce development is a big aspect of the issue.

We also know that there is an ungainly amount of unlawful exclusions and anxiety-related absences because children with additional support needs do not fit into the mainstream and suffer unduly and disproportionately as a consequence. We face that in ARCH. We hear it every day. We have a weekly online support session, and I do not think that there has been a single session over the past year and a half at which we have not heard parents and carers say that their children have anxiety-related issues, particularly in relation to the lockdown experience.

The mainstreaming assumption works for the majority, but it does not work quite as well for the third of pupils who have additional support needs, particularly for those who are on the autism spectrum.

Laurie Black: One of the issues with presumptive mainstreaming is that we are not meeting the needs of pupils with sensory issues, and that is not only children with autism. The mainstream classroom can be a bright, hectic and loud environment. We do not have alternative provision in school buildings to meet children’s sensory needs, let alone their academic and attainment needs. That point highlights the fact that children’s needs are individualised. They are bespoke.

I stress that inclusion does not mean proximity to peers. Misunderstanding about that continues. We put a child with additional support needs in a mainstream classroom, and that is considered to be inclusive. It is absolutely not inclusive if they are still not having their needs met and they are still socially isolated. That is why we have found that, more than ever, there is a need for nurture provision across schools. Many schools have brilliant nurture groups and nurture provision, but we need more of that.

Ramon Hutchingson: Another nuance is that something like 80 per cent of autistic people—children, young people and adults—do not have an intellectual disability. Where do they go and what support do they get? We come back to the squeaky wheel and the oil. Those people are not presenting with tangible issues such as challenging behaviour and aggressive outbursts, so they do not get the support.

On the sequelae—the consequences for and the life trajectories of our autistic children, young people and adults and children with additional support needs—we know that they feature very disproportionately in the suicide statistics. They are between nine and 26 times more likely to commit suicide, and their life expectancy is 15 years lower than that of the average neurotypical child or young person. We heard a reference to the justice and youth justice system earlier, and they also feature disproportionately there. There are significant problems and consequences outside school and with regard to broader quality-of-life issues. We need to take a holistic, systemic approach, as opposed to focusing purely on schools.

The Convener: We have time for one very quick round of questions from Ross Greer.

Ross Greer: Thank you, convener. I will be as brief as possible. I will return to the point about diagnosis that Kaukab Stewart brought up. We need to do a lot more to look into the discrepancies—the racial and cultural disparity, as well as the gender disparity in particular, given that girls really struggle to get autism diagnoses. I am interested in the witnesses' perspectives on diagnoses across the board and the impact of lockdown on that. Despite the fact that the overall number of diagnosed additional needs has gone up, I am working on the presumption that, in some cases, it would have been hard, if not impossible, to get a diagnosis during lockdown. Does that mean that a backlog has built up between last summer and now? Are there further delays in the system for getting a diagnosis, or is that part of the system still working relatively well and the problem is assigning the relevant support once the diagnosis has been confirmed?

Ramon Hutchingson: I can honestly say that we know for a fact that the pausing of services has had a knock-on effect on diagnostic timescales. In NHS Lanarkshire, we are reliably informed by health colleagues that, at the moment, they are not looking at any referrals that were made after 2019. Therefore, there is a significant two-year gap, and, for many families that we talk to, the gap is significantly longer than that.

The other part of that is pre, mid and post-diagnostic support services, which are down to local authorities and care services to provide. That has been another issue. Another major gap that arose during lockdown is in the provision of respite services, and that continues to be the case. The provision that we have tried to maintain is predominantly online, although we are now holding in-person support groups, which is a real bonus for many of our families. Yes, the issue of getting a diagnosis is huge. When health services say that they are paused and that wider health concerns need to be taken into consideration, families just have to accept that.

Ross Greer: Sally Cavers, is the experience of the families that you work with similar?

Sally Cavers: Yes, absolutely. As, I think, I referred to earlier, many of the settings that are applying to the early learning and childcare inclusion fund are reporting in their applications that they are seeing children in the ante pre-school and pre-school years who have a range of additional support needs and who are waiting for contact with paediatric teams or allied health professionals. Similarly, families are contacting Enquire and reporting that lack of access to health support, in particular. Public Health Scotland, in its research over the past 18 months, has shown that there is a need to look at the long-term developmental progress of some two to four-year-olds. It is absolutely an issue.

12:00

Ross Greer: I have a second question, before I come to Laurie Black. Maybe I will roll them into one, given the time constraints—I hope that you do not mind, Laurie.

A number of points have been made about support staff. The job title varies—school assistants, classroom assistants, pupil support assistants—but the role is, in essence, the same: providing support to children who have been diagnosed with additional needs. Should there be any requirement for qualifications for any member of staff who provides that kind of one-to-one support? Standard practice in most schools is to assign general classroom assistants to that role. I do not wish to denigrate those people but, in most cases, they have no specific qualifications in additional support needs. Should support staff who are assigned to help young people with additional needs be required to have some kind of qualification in ASN?

Laurie Black: Absolutely. We have seen a deficit in that area for a long time. [*Inaudible*.]—some kind of inherent sexism or gender bias within education perhaps leads to the view that people who work as assistants do not need to be qualified.

You are absolutely right to say that qualifications are needed, but there also needs to be an appropriate career pathway for people to progress as an ASN assistant, so that they can be adequately remunerated and can see it as a fulfilling and lifelong career option. That also ties in to the strengthening of the specialisms on pupil support for learning in initial teacher training.

Ross Greer: If Ramon Hutchingson is looking to come in, I will be very happy to hear his thoughts.

Ramon Hutchingson: It is exactly as Laurie Black said. The issue of the career pathway was flagged up in the Morgan review—that those staff who are supporting children with additional support needs are the least recognised. Status is not associated with that function, so why would the system reward them by giving them a career pathway? Of course it needs to do that. That is an obvious gap, which needs to be met.

Ross Greer: Thank you. That is all from me, convener.

The Convener: I thank Sally Cavers, Laurie Black and Ramon Hutchingson for their evidence.

It has been a very useful session for the committee. We appreciate your giving us your time. I also thank colleagues for the way in which they have co-operated, given the time constraints that we were working under.

The public part of the meeting is at an end. I ask members to reconvene on Microsoft Teams to consider our final agenda item in private.

12:03

Meeting continued in private until 12:38.

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