



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Education, Children and Young People Committee

Wednesday 19 January 2022

Session 6



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EDUCATION, CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE COMMITTEE
2nd Meeting 2022, 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:

Simon Cameron (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities)

Greg Dempster (Association of Headteachers and Deputies in Scotland)

Douglas Hutchison (Association of Directors of Education in Scotland)

Margaret Wilson (National Parent Forum of Scotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Stephen Herbert

LOCATION

The Sir Alexander Fleming Room (CR3)

Scottish Parliament

Education, Children and Young People Committee

Wednesday 19 January 2022

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:32]

Subordinate Legislation

Education (Miscellaneous Amendments) (Coronavirus) (Scotland) (No 2) Regulations 2021 (SSI 2021/462)

The Convener (Stephen Kerr): Good morning, and welcome to the second meeting of the Education, Children and Young People Committee in 2022. This is a virtual meeting.

Agenda item 1 is consideration of a piece of subordinate legislation. The regulations are being considered under the negative procedure. Do members have any comments on the instrument?

As there are no comments, I invite the committee to agree that it does not wish to make any recommendations in relation to the instrument.

Members *indicated agreement.*

Covid-19 and Schools

09:33

The Convener: Item 2 is an evidence session on how schools are coping with the start of term in the context of the high numbers of Covid cases as a result of the omicron variant.

I warmly welcome Douglas Hutchison, director of the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland and executive director of education at Glasgow City Council; Greg Dempster the general secretary of the Association of Headteachers and Deputies in Scotland; Simon Cameron, chief officer of the employers team at the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities; and Margaret Wilson, the chair of the National Parent Forum of Scotland. I thank all of you for giving up your time to help us with this session.

I will start off with a question for COSLA, in particular, but others may comment if they wish.

Simon Cameron, COSLA's written submission for today's meeting talks about how the budget has been baselined for additional teachers and how

"individuals will be employed on permanent or temporary contracts as appropriate to the role and identified needs of services."

Could you talk me through how your members will make decisions about whether a contract should be permanent or temporary?

Simon, are you there?

Simon Cameron (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities): Yes. Can you hear me now?

The Convener: Yes, and I can see you now, too. Did you catch the drift of my question?

Simon Cameron: Yes. It was about how people will work through decisions about whether a post will be temporary or permanent. The— [Inaudible.]—but also in terms of the numbers of young people in a school. Obviously, individual councils have a large number of active permanent posts across the country. One of the challenges that we face in that regard is that, particularly in rural areas, we do not get the necessary number of applications for those roles.

The productive process that will be gone through in order to understand what will be a temporary contract and what will be a permanent contract will be based on all the local factors, including the school roll and the requirements of the children and young people at the school, which could involve an additional support need requirement, a teaching requirement or a sport assistant requirement, for example. It will also involve issues around the current members of

staff, the staff members who might be retiring, the natural wastage that you would find in any organisation, which can involve people moving on to other roles, and the progression of individuals.

Essentially, the decision will involve a broad range of factors—all the factors that would be involved in such decisions about employment in any large organisation in any field that needs to consider what is the most appropriate contract for an individual to be on.

Clearly, we cannot offer people permanent contracts where permanence is not required. That is where the decision needs to be made about whether to offer a short-term or long-term temporary contract. Of course, a permanent contract will be offered if there is a requirement for one.

A broad range of factors would need to be considered in order to determine what is appropriate for each individual establishment. There would also be a consideration of the type of process that the council had in place. Some have different set-ups that involve what we might call area cover, whereby there are pools of staff who can be deployed. Again, that will bring in issues such as intake, natural wastage, succession and others that would be involved in any process.

The Convener: The reason why I want to get to the bottom of this is that, obviously, the morale of teachers is an important issue for all of us—inspirational teachers are exactly what we need in all our classrooms across Scotland, at all levels of education.

When the announcement was made about the baseline money being made permanent, there seemed to be a suggestion that there was an agreement between the Scottish Government and COSLA that that money would be used to recruit teachers or cement teachers on permanent contracts? Is that right? Was there such an agreement?

Simon Cameron: There was an agreement that the money would be used to ensure that there were appropriate levels of staff in the appropriate places across the country. In terms of the money being baselined, any organisation would go through the process that I have described to work out what its requirements are and how to get the right people and put them in the correct place.

The Convener: But was it understood by COSLA that the Scottish Government was giving that money to the local authorities for those contracts to be made permanent? Was that implicit in the discussions between the Scottish Government and COSLA?

Simon Cameron: It was understood that we would be given the money so that we could put in

place the appropriate employment contracts for individuals across the country. That would include permanent, but also temporary, contracts. The process has to be worked through properly so that people are on the right types of contracts in terms of things such as employment law.

The Convener: Has COSLA, or have its members, been asked to provide any kind of report on the way that the money is being used to make teachers' contracts permanent? Is there a reporting mechanism?

Simon Cameron: Absolutely—there are reporting mechanisms. That happens as a matter of course, but, during the Covid experience, we have been asked to provide reports on the money that the Scottish Government has provided for that. That is actively happening. Part of the process is the money coming through into the system so that we can ensure that we put people on appropriate contracts. The money is now there and people are working through the process. They are doing—*[Inaudible.]*—need to do a recruitment process. We need to make sure that the person who is being appointed is fit and proper for the role and has the skills and experience that are required in that area, whether that be subject matter at secondary or the appropriate level at primary schools.

The Convener: Has COSLA issued guidance to its members that the money should be used for that purpose and not simply folded into the budget? In other words, is it being used to compensate for reductions that might occur in other aspects of budgeting?

Simon Cameron: No. It is very clear. The agreement about the money going out to councils and the process that we go through makes it very clear that the money is for employment purposes only, so that is what people will be using the money for.

The Convener: Have you been personally involved in any discussions with the Scottish Government about reducing the number of temporary teacher contracts? Last summer, one in eight of our teachers was on a temporary contract. Have you or any of your members been involved in discussions with the Scottish Government about reducing that number?

Simon Cameron: We are involved all the time. We have engaged with the Scottish Government in looking at the recruitment that is required across Scotland and we are actively seeking to ensure that we have the appropriate numbers of teachers in the appropriate places across Scotland. Before the pandemic hit, we had issues around where teachers were applying for posts. Throughout the pandemic, not only in teaching but in other areas, we have needed to get people to apply and fulfil

the roles in all parts of Scotland. That is an active part of what we continuously do with the Scottish Government.

The Convener: As I said, the level of temporary contracts in Scotland last summer was one in eight, which is pretty much double what it was a decade before.

Simon Cameron: That was on the basis that the money that we received last summer was temporary. We could not employ somebody in any field unless the money was baselined. The money is now baselined, so we are actively working through and have changed the—[*Inaudible.*]—using that money to take people into the appropriate employment contract. However, we need to go through a fit-and-proper-person process for employment, as we would in any field. Anyone in our community would expect that we had done so and that we have the right—

The Convener: There are teachers at work today in classrooms across Scotland who have been on temporary contracts. The Scottish Government's intention was that the baseline money would translate those temporary contracts—where it is appropriate; I grant you that proviso—into permanent ones. Our committee is very interested in making sure that taxpayers' money is being used for the purposes that we would all like to see it used for. We are talking about the wellbeing of teachers.

Let me ask you another question relating to teachers' wellbeing, which you mentioned in your paper, for which I thank you. Do you recognise the issue that was raised a couple of weeks ago in the *Glasgow Evening Times* in relation to the number of days lost to mental health issues among teachers? It said that, since 2017, the figure would amount to 1,500 years of lost teacher days due to mental health issues. What factors do you attribute to that issue?

Simon Cameron: A great many factors would be attributable to that situation at this time. I do not know the specific article that you are referring to. I have not read it in detail, so I cannot comment on it directly. There are pressures in the system across the piece, but there have been pressures in our system for a long time because of the levels of funding that we have been receiving and so on. That has undoubtedly led to people in all fields having increased workloads. We are actively looking at what we can do to reduce teacher workloads with our trade union colleagues through the Scottish negotiating committee for teachers and with our colleagues at the Scottish Government.

09:45

We all know what the impact of the pandemic has been. There are a great many different factors, work related and personal, because of what people have experienced. There has been an undoubted increase in mental health issues because of that. We are naturally all concerned about what might happen should we contract Covid.

Throughout the pandemic, we have made sure that support is available for colleagues in all roles. We have done that proactively at national and local levels. Local authorities have done a lot of work to ensure that there is support in place for individuals, whether that is through counselling or by other means, so that they look after themselves and are able to do their jobs to the best of their ability.

The Convener: I would like to hear what Greg Dempster has to say about what you have just said about the response to the contract situation, which is, in itself, a stress that teachers probably do not need now, of all times, and the issue of the mental health and general wellbeing of Scotland's teachers.

Greg Dempster (Association of Headteachers and Deputies in Scotland): You were pursuing a point about recruitment to temporary or permanent contracts. Members have not been coming to me about that. It has not been discussed within the association, so I cannot comment on that. If that had been an issue of particular concern for my membership, I would have expected to hear about it. I know that a lot of the concerns that you have heard have come from class teacher unions, rather than from ones representing school leaders.

You asked about mental health and wellbeing and quoted a figure from the *Glasgow Evening Times*. I have no frame of reference for whether the figure is high, low or medium when compared to other periods. It sounds like a big number. I am concerned about the pressure and strain that school leaders across the country—my members—have been under both before the pandemic and, particularly, in the past couple of years.

I can give an example of one recognition of the pressure that school leaders are under. The inspectorate was planning to recommence inspections on this side of Christmas. Before Christmas, inspectors went out to schools for the first time in a long time to do some follow-up inspection activity. The inspectorate has now stepped back from restarting school inspections. That says a lot. It is a strong message about the pressure that schools and school leaders are

under. We need to be very careful about any additional pressures.

Simon Cameron talked about support for wellbeing. Education Scotland has done a lot of work on that, along with the General Teaching Council for Scotland. My own organisation and others provide opportunities for members to support their own mental wellbeing. Sessions that we have run on those themes have had a very high uptake among members. It is definitely an area of concern. We need to be careful about what the system asks of school leaders in the near future when we are still feeling the effects of the pandemic. We all want the system to be in a better position than it is and we all want children to achieve to their fullest potential, but we must recognise the constraints on the system and we must not try to get blood from a stone.

The Convener: I am a little surprised to hear that headteachers and deposes in Scotland have not considered the contract status of teaching staff. I am sure you would appreciate the difference that having a permanent contract makes to someone's life planning and wellbeing. Am I making a fair point about contract status?

Greg Dempster: It is an absolutely fair point. My members have not come to me or to our association about that. The people who are directly affected by it would be going to their class teacher associations about that. In the past, it has come up in connection with pupil equity funding. Schools have wanted to recruit staff—or have recruited staff—and have had to do so under a temporary contract because the funding is time bounded. In that context, our members have raised concerns, because they would like to be able to offer people permanence—for the reasons that you have described, convener.

The Convener: You talked about the stress that the whole education system is under. I refer to that article in the *Glasgow Evening Times*. From the point of view of the Association of Headteachers and Deposes in Scotland, are you generally satisfied with the supports that are in place for the mental health and general wellbeing of teachers?

Greg Dempster: A lot of supports are in place for those who need to take up that sort of support, but, in a sense, that may be the wrong end of the lens. It is important that that support is there, but we need to be careful not to be pushing people into a position of needing to access that sort of support.

The Convener: Are you saying that we have to look at the root cause?

Greg Dempster: Yes.

The Convener: Okay. Bob Doris has a brief supplementary question on contracts. He will

direct his comments to whomever he wishes to give a response.

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): Thank you, convener. I think that Simon Cameron will be best placed to answer the question. The exchange between you and Mr Cameron was fascinating.

The Scottish Government has been pretty clear that permanent contracts should be secured with the additional baseline funding. Mr Cameron, do you anticipate that there will be many more permanent contracts as a result of that funding?

I imagine that there may be two reasons for not flipping a temporary contract into a permanent contract, but we need clarity. First, a local authority may wish to redeploy that resource to a different post in a school, doing a different task, in which case, that contract should surely be permanent. Secondly, the local authority may have to do some form of external recruitment to make sure that it is abiding by the law on recruitment and employment.

I just want clarity. The expectation is that there will be permanent contracts. Whether the configuration of staff is as it currently looks is one thing, but we are expecting permanent contracts. Will Simon Cameron give us more clarity on that?

Simon Cameron: Yes, absolutely. Greg Dempster picked up on an important point. When forms of funding, such as PEF, have a temporary nature, that very much puts us into a situation in which we have to offer a temporary contract, because we cannot give somebody permanency without the guarantee of the funding to go with it. The fact that the money that we now have from the Scottish Government is baselined—that it will be there permanently in the system—means that we can put in place permanent contracts. However, for all the factors that you have acknowledged, and which I outlined previously, there is a fair and open process that people have to go through, so that we can make sure that the appropriate people are in the right places in the system.

Clearly, as I have said, before we even went into Covid, we were carrying permanent vacancies in different parts of the country. We need to look at how we attract people to parts of the country in which there is great need. When it comes to recruitment, there has been a requirement to continuously readvertise posts, because we cannot attract people to certain areas. We are proactively working on that with colleagues, including those in our universities, to make sure that individuals who are coming through the system are being trained in the appropriate subject matter, particularly at secondary level, and that we get people to the right places. When that happens,

and where it is appropriate, we expect there to be a great many more permanent contracts in the system.

The Convener: Stephanie Callaghan will continue on the theme of the pressures that are on our teachers.

Stephanie Callaghan (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): What has been the impact on learning of omicron—on teachers and staff absences? I put that question to Douglas Hutchison.

Douglas Hutchison (Glasgow City Council): Sorry, but I am not 100 per cent clear on what the question is. Are you asking about the impact on learning and the impact on staff absence as two separate issues?

Stephanie Callaghan: Yes, I want to know about the impact of omicron on teaching and on staff absences.

Douglas Hutchison: Clearly, omicron has had an impact on staff absence. At the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland meeting last Thursday morning—we have an 8 o'clock meeting once a fortnight that most directors attend—the impact on staffing was discussed. Obviously, not only teachers have been affected; support staff at all levels have been affected, as have facilities management staff, which has a knock-on impact on transport staff getting children to school.

There has been an increase in teacher absences, but the general view is that schools are coping. That is down to the good efforts of staff on the ground, senior leadership teams, local authority teams and teachers. There has been a clear increase in staff absences, but schools are continuing to run.

Your question alluded to the impact on learning. This is not just a case of teachers being absent, because that has a knock-on effect. For example, if a French teacher was absent, that would have a knock-on effect on the whole department, with the other staff in that department having to get classes ready, which would detract from the work that they would have been doing otherwise.

It is not just a case of that one teacher being off and of their class needing to be covered; there is the added pressure that that puts on others to get work ready for that class. Therefore, the quality of learning and teaching is impacted, regardless of the total number of staff absent, because of the knock-on effect across the school. Other people must pick up the work. There have been a higher number of what we call “please takes” at secondary level, with classes potentially being distributed to other teachers at various levels in the system.

Generally speaking, yes, there has been an impact. At one point, I understand that 5 per cent of teachers were absent due to Covid. As I have said, the issue is the knock-on effect on the quality of learning and teaching across the system. When the whole system is under pressure, every teacher is put under pressure because they need to do additional work to keep the whole system going. To their huge credit, teachers have done that. However, as Greg Dempster alluded, that comes at a cost. That level of additional work as a result of staff absence has a cumulative effect.

We have kept going because it is vital that schools keep going, that children and young people get that regular experience of going to school, that they keep that habit, that learning keeps going and that teaching keeps going. However, there is an acceptance that there has been a knock-on effect on the quality of what schools have been able to offer.

Stephanie Callaghan: That is great. That is really helpful, Douglas.

Are you finding quite a bit of variation across the country? Are there different pressures in different places at different times? Are people stepping in to offer additional support outside their own areas? How is that fitting together? How is that working?

Douglas Hutchison: Yes, there is variation. I have been a director in Glasgow City Council for all of three days, so I cannot speak about the situation in Glasgow. However, even in South Ayrshire, where I have just come from, there was variation. For example, in Girvan in North Carrick, there was a really high incidence of cases at one point, so the schools in that area would have been be under particular pressure for a variety of reasons. The situation then seemed to calm down and moved to the Ayr, Prestwick and Troon area. There were also situations in which there would be a significant outbreak in a few classes in one school, and those classes would have to go home.

If that is happening in a small authority such as South Ayrshire, it is happening across Scotland. We can see that in the case numbers. At one point, they are high in a local authority, then eventually it comes down the league table. There is variation.

You mentioned people stepping in. In that context, I am aware—for example, from the discussions at the ADES meeting last week—that local authority staff are going back in to cover absences and teachers in schools are covering for each other. As, I am sure, Greg Dempster will allude to, senior leadership teams in schools are covering classes. Teachers are spending a lot of time covering classes, so they do not get a chance to do the normal development and improvement work that they would like to do. People are being

flexible in order to provide resilience in schools and across the system. Again, that probably comes at a longer-term cost, which is around development and improvement and a general sense of weariness in the system.

10:00

Stephanie Callaghan: Are you now at a point where you are able to do some planning, based on how the pandemic is impacting pupils' learning, or are you not really at that stage yet, because you are still at the firefighting stage?

Douglas Hutchison: At this stage, we are on the downward slope, we hope. Case numbers are still very high, so, to some extent, it is a case of just getting through one day at a time. Clearly, people still have an eye on longer-term improvement and recovery. Schools are very good at that. I have been hugely impressed, throughout the past two years, with the way in which schools have dealt with the issues and have continued to focus on improvement and how they can do things better.

Let us look at the difference between the first major lockdown and the second, this time last year, when schools were closed. People had learned from the first lockdown, so when we came to the second, the quality of remote learning had improved immeasurably. That is because we are part of a learning system. We are educators. We are good at learning lessons as we go along.

At the moment, to a great extent, we are still in the thick of it, but people constantly have an eye to how they can learn from this experience, and how they can do things better and ensure that they do not just go back to business as usual, as it was pre-pandemic. I have been impressed with the way in which we have learned up to this point, which gives me confidence that I am part of a learning system and that that learning system will learn the lessons and still have an eye on improvement. At the moment, though, the experience of a lot of schools will be, "Let's just get through today."

Stephanie Callaghan: That is really helpful.

Finally, what impact is pupil and teacher absence having on prelim examinations? Are you feeling quite confident that, should there be further issues with Covid that result in further absences or school closures as we approach the exams, the process will be much better this year? Are you confident that it will be a satisfactory process, with satisfactory outcomes for our young people?

Douglas Hutchison: It is difficult to say. The concept of prelims has changed over time. I think that we no longer exist in an educational world where the prelim has huge prominence. It is one

piece of assessment in a range of assessments or evidence gathering over the course of a school year. The prelims have a place, but they do not have the significance that they once had. Schools are aware of what could have happened over this year. They will have taken that into account and planned accordingly. They will be clear about what assessment evidence they need in the event that they have to make a teacher judgment.

However, the central planning assumption remains that there will be an exam diet. The question then is how we take account of the disruption that has taken place—because there has been disruption. Back in September, case numbers were high just when we came back to school, and there were high staff and pupil absences. For the first time in that situation, we did not have a closure; we continued to operate through the high case levels and high staff and pupil absences, as we have done now. That has an effect on the quality of learning and teaching.

Schools are taking account of that effect. We just need to be clear on what the adjustments will be, and we probably need to know that sooner rather than later.

Stephanie Callaghan: Just for clarity, the standard continuous assessment material—*[Inaudible.]*—the year seems to be absolutely fine. It seems to be there and is solid. Is that correct?

Douglas Hutchison: Schools have learned from the past two years and will have been gathering assessment evidence as part of the normal process of learning and teaching. It will not be a one-off high-stakes prelim exam that will determine what will happen if, for example, anything happened to the exams diet. As I said, the central assumption is that the exams will go ahead, but schools have been gathering a range of assessment evidence throughout the year, in case a young person is not able to sit their exam because they test positive or whatever.

A prelim assesses only the work that somebody has done up to that point. If you do it just before or after Christmas, you still have a significant amount of learning to do.

All that I am saying is that prelims are no longer the one-off high-stakes assessment evidence that determine a young person's future, as they might once have been in the days when appeals were based on prelim results. As part of the process of learning and teaching, teachers are gathering a range of assessment evidence throughout the year. That is all that I am saying, really.

Stephanie Callaghan: That is great. Thank you.

The Convener: I will bring in Margaret Wilson of the National Parent Forum of Scotland to

comment on the impact that parents are feeling from the disruption of teacher and pupil absences in the delivery of education in general. What are parents telling you about their experience?

Margaret Wilson (National Parent Forum of Scotland): We are hearing a broad range of views. To be honest, we are probably hearing more from the parents of senior phase pupils. They seem to be concerned about the disruption to learning and teaching, for the reasons that have just been given to do with the prelims, assessments and the exam diet still going ahead.

It is not just the senior phase pupils who have had their learning and teaching disrupted, however; it is everyone. There are concerns that the focus is again on the senior phase pupils, because that is what happened last year. It cannot happen again. We need to focus on all years. Just now, there are primary 7 pupils who will soon be transitioning to secondary school, there are children in nursery who will be moving up to primary 1, and there will be subject choice events going on.

A huge number of young people have had their learning and teaching disrupted. Parents are really concerned about the numbers. We hope that we are turning a corner, but the situation is concerning. As we have said, we want teachers to feel safe in our schools and we want our schools to remain open when that is safe—that is obviously the priority. However, the significant disruption to learning and teaching concerns everyone.

The Convener: Willie Rennie wants to come in with a brief supplementary on the exam diet. Margaret Wilson has just said that there is a lot of concern among parents of pupils who will be sitting exams.

Willie Rennie (North East Fife) (LD): Scenario 2 of the Scottish Qualifications Authority's plan indicates that

"revision support, for example guidance on topics, will be provided to help learners maximise their exam performance and reduce exam stress."

Do we know yet what the content of the revision support will be? I ask that Greg Dempster and then Douglas Hutchison answer that.

Greg Dempster: I am not the best person to answer that. My association covers nursery, primary and special schools; I cannot offer you any secondary education input.

Douglas Hutchison: No, we do not know yet. The decision to move to scenario 2 has not yet been taken, I think. If we were to move formally to scenario 2, specific guidance about the content of revision support would come out after that.

At this point, we do not know, because I am not sure that we have formally moved to scenario 2 yet. The first stage would be a formal move to scenario 2. The next stage would be that information would come out about specific changes—that is, there would be guidance on which topics would or would not be included in an exam. We are not there yet; we do not have that information.

Willie Rennie: Should we not be moving to scenario 2 already? There has been significant disruption to education caused not only by the staff absences that you have talked about but by pupil absences. A lot of pupils are on study leave and are sitting prelim exams now. If we do not know what the revision support advice will be, how can we prepare pupils for those exams? Should we not be moving to scenario 2 now, so that we can crack on with that?

Douglas Hutchison: The national qualifications 2022—NQ22—group is discussing that issue. I presume that the formal decision will be made by the Scottish Qualifications Authority. In my view, the more information that we have, and the earlier, the better.

The more information that young people have, and the sooner they have it, the more that will reduce the stress and pressure on them. It will also reduce pressure on the teaching staff in secondary schools who are preparing young people for SQA exams. It is my opinion that, the sooner any move comes, the better.

Willie Rennie: I do not want to put words in your mouth, but that is a pretty clear message. You are smiling, which indicates that we should be moving towards scenario 2 so that we can crack on with that.

The Convener: Are there no set trigger dates for those decisions, Douglas Hutchison? The timeline towards the exams is clear and is known. Are there are no set dates by which decisions have to be made? Are there no D-days?

Douglas Hutchison: I am not part of the NQ22 group. There is an ADES representative on the group. I understand that there will be a decision by the end of January.

The Convener: If I understand what you said to Willie Rennie—this is what I am hearing—that is later than you would like it to be.

Douglas Hutchison: All that I am saying is, the sooner we know, the better. That will reduce pressure on the system. I understand why the SQA would want to take a measured approach and look at all the evidence.

The Convener: Margaret Wilson, what do parents think about that?

Margaret Wilson: I sit on the NQ22 group and have been able to feed in parents' concerns. The National Parent Forum of Scotland is represented on the national qualifications working group, the steering group, the communications group and every sub-group of the NQ22 group. Parents are represented; we have fed back our concerns.

The Convener: Are there D-days? Are there decision days for those things? Are there trigger moments?

Margaret Wilson: There are triggers, but I do not think that they have been published. They are not targets, if that makes sense. You would not want them to become targets. There are trigger points and they are looked at.

The Convener: Is Douglas Hutchison right to think that the trigger date for making a decision is the end of January?

Margaret Wilson: I think that it will be soon, certainly. I represent parents, and we have said that we would really like a decision. I am not saying that "soon" is not good enough, but we need to relieve the anxiety and we need a decision as soon as possible. The plan is in place so that there is no more disruption.

10:15

The Convener: So, you are saying in the groups that, the sooner the decision is made, the better, for the reasons that Douglas Hutchison has just mentioned.

Margaret Wilson: Absolutely. I also stress that we have asked for clear and concise communications. When any information is released, it should be for three targeted groups. Information should go to practitioners, to tell them what they need to do. There should also be reassuring messages to young people and parents. The language needs to be right for parents—sometimes we do not understand the language that is used, as we are not practitioners. We have also called for good, clear and concise communications when any decisions are made. We have been asked to be on the sub-groups to help with that if and where possible.

The Convener: The politicians do not understand the language either, Margaret, so the parents and the politicians are good travel companions in this exercise. You and Douglas Hutchison are saying that decisions need to be made pretty quickly, for the reasons that Willie Rennie described.

I will now turn to Ross Greer.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): I will start off on a different topic, although the one that I

turn to next might touch on some of the issues that have just been raised.

I have a couple of questions on ventilation. I am interested in hearing the perspective of Douglas Hutchison, and perhaps of Simon Cameron, if this comes within his purview. Are you clear about how you can access the £5 million of additional funding for ventilation improvements that the Scottish Government announced last week?

Douglas Hutchison: We are in the process—*[Interruption.]* Sorry—somebody came to the door. We are in the process of working through that, and discussions with the Scottish Government and COSLA are on-going in relation to how the money will be accessed and allocated. From what I have seen, the process for accessing it is fairly advanced.

Simon Cameron might be able to give a clearer answer, but, based on what I have seen and on the conversations that I have been part of, we are at a fairly advanced stage of being clear about what the allocation is and how we access it.

Simon Cameron: I can confirm that, through the settlement and distribution group, we have been proactively working with the Scottish Government on how the money for ventilation will go out to councils. Indeed, we took back information to it in the past week or so. I believe that the group meets today, so we will communicate shortly with all councils to let them know the allocations that they will be provided with and the fact that the money is coming.

The approach that we have been taking is to ensure that people know that there will be funding for them, so that they can continue purchasing the appropriate equipment or putting in place the appropriate remedial works that they require. We have been trying to ensure that there is no delay to any of that as a result of the process.

The money has been announced, we know that it is there and we are working through the final process in the distribution group.

Ross Greer: I would like clarification on the distribution aspect. It is not the case, then, that local authorities must come to you, or go directly to the Scottish Government, with a worked-up bid before they are able to access the money. Are you aiming to provide certainty that a minimum amount of money will be available to each local authority, and will you then work with authorities to develop a case for exactly how the money is deployed? That way, the money will be distributed quickly and councils will not have to prepare a bid and wait for a response before they know whether to proceed with it.

Simon Cameron: That is absolutely right. We are ensuring that they know that money is coming

and that they are getting an appropriate proportion of it to invest as required. There is guidance outwith authorities that already enables them to continue with the process. It is not a case of having to put together a lengthy bid, which would clearly delay processes.

There will have to be in place appropriate auditing—we must have in place the appropriate audit trail—but the money will be distributed to authorities.

Ross Greer: That is grand. Thank you. I believe that colleagues want to ask further questions on ventilation, so I will move to my other area of questioning.

I want to get a sense of how local authorities and schools are quantifying the social and developmental impact of the disruption on young people not just of the omicron wave but since the beginning of the pandemic. To some extent, we can quantify the impact on educational attainment through the testing regime, national qualifications, exam results and so on. Trying to quantify the wider social and developmental impact is much harder.

I presume that, at the individual classroom level, teachers are able to identify what additional challenges their young people are facing as a result of the pandemic. I hope that teachers are able to direct them towards and ensure that they can access school counsellors or educational psychologists. However, there is an implication for schools and local authorities' workforce planning if you are to have a clear idea of what the level of demand will be for the additional pastoral support services that you will be providing over the coming period.

Some national survey work has been done on the impact of mental health—for example, by YouthLink Scotland and Young Scot. What work are local authorities undertaking to quantify the additional social need that will have to be met through schools?

Douglas Hutchison: I suppose that the question implies that we should perhaps be gathering that information either at local authority level or at national level. The reality, however, is that those issues will be dealt with at school level. One of the minor irritations throughout the pandemic has been the obsessive gathering of data and information so as to feed a machine, which has sometimes come at the cost of people doing their front-line job. I have slight anxiety that the question implies that we should somehow be gathering that data.

To go back to the essence of the question, I am out and about in schools and I regularly meet headteachers—that has been more in South Ayrshire, rather than here in Glasgow, where it is

day 3 in the job for me. However, I note from regularly talking to teachers and headteachers, and from being in schools, that there is a clear impact. Teachers are noticing that a primary 3 class this year is probably further behind socially and behaviourally compared with a primary 3 class last year, because the pupils have spent such a lot of time at home, not interacting with their peers or being in a normal class environment.

There is an impact on social skills, behaviour, development and so on, but that will be dealt with at school level. It is probably only at school level that skilled teachers and skilled practitioners will deal with those issues, and the same is true of early years learning, with early years practitioners noticing the effects on children's social skills and interaction, as they have not been interacting to the same extent. That will be dealt with by the very same skilled practitioners. It is probably only where there are chronic or long-lasting issues that they would escalate things through the local authority's normal staged intervention process so that they can be dealt with at the specialist level through educational psychology, child and adolescent mental health services and other supports that are available.

There has been a significant investment by the Scottish Government in mental health, which has been at a community level. That has allowed local authorities and health and social care partnerships to put in place and make available a range of commissioned services from third sector organisations to meet people's needs.

The South Ayrshire youth forum does a mental health survey every two years—the "Say it out loud" survey—to get a sense of what the issues are. It is good at getting boots on the ground, meeting face to face and chasing up young people, so it gets a really good response. Because the survey was carried out by the youth forum, young people were probably more honest than if it had been done by adults or through a school-based survey.

That work has helped to direct services. For example, the level of self-harm that was reported in the youth forum survey was probably higher than that in a similar survey that the psychological service did. Therefore, in using the money from the Scottish Government, we were able to commission services to specifically target self-harm in Ayrshire.

That is getting to the chronic or clinical end of the spectrum. For the vast majority of children and young people who have lost ground or not had the normal social interaction that they would get by being at school with their peers, issues can be dealt with by skilled teachers, practitioners and support staff at school level. It is probably only when it gets to the chronic level that young

people's needs will be dealt with through a school-staged intervention process and assessed and met through the normal processes. I do not know whether that answers the question.

Ross Greer: That is really useful. I have one brief follow-up question. I accept what you are saying about how the obsession with gathering data often results in taking folk away from delivering the service that they need to and about it being schools that will resolve the issues. However, for a school to have the right skilled professionals to resolve the issues and support young people with the challenges that they are facing, there is a wider workforce planning issue for local authorities and Government, surely. For example, we need to know whether there will be a significant increase in demand at national level for educational psychologists or speech and language therapists. There are long-term workforce implications.

We knew a couple of years ago that we were short of educational psychologists, so the bursary was brought back to get more folk going to university to study for that profession. However, we do not know whether the demand in early primary, for example, will now be for speech and language therapists instead. If so, do we have folk who are qualified to go into that workforce to meet the increased demand? Is there not a wider workforce planning issue? That cannot be resolved at the level of individual schools because they can resolve the issue only if there are skilled professionals and there is money to hire them.

Douglas Hutchison: The short answer is yes. Again, that issue would probably be dealt with at community planning partnership level. It would probably be for the partnership to look at the issues and ask where the resources are needed, whether that be in child and adolescent mental health services or at the pre-CAMHS level—the community-based mental health supports and services that are often provided very well by third sector organisations.

What if the need is for speech and language therapy, as Ross Greer suggests? If young people have not been socialising to the same extent, they will not have been exposed to the level of language that they would have been if they had been attending nursery, for example. Those discussions probably need to take place at community planning level, and that could move up to a national level from there.

Kaukab Stewart (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): I want to take us back to ventilation, which Ross Greer touched on, in order to drill down and get underneath the headlines that there have been. First, I put on record that, as an ex-teacher, I am really grateful to my colleagues in the profession and to all staff, parents and pupils who had to turn

on a sixpence. The amount of work that has been done is amazing. That applies to councils across Scotland, as well.

I want to ask about the assessments that have been done with regard to ventilation. The COSLA report says that 100 per cent of the learning and teaching spaces were assessed by November 2021, yet we have been hearing evidence from voices both within and outwith the profession that there are inadequacies. I would like some more information about that assessment of all the learning and teaching places. What mitigations were made, how were any issues rectified and where are we in that process? How much more is there to be done? I direct my question to Simon Cameron from COSLA initially.

10:30

Simon Cameron: Work has been undertaken to a strict timeline that was set out when we initially did the work on ventilation for October last year. Over 52,000 identified learning and teaching play spaces were audited—which, as you would imagine, was a huge exercise—and there was great variation across all those spaces. Unfortunately, not all our children learn or gather in similar spaces, so it is not easy to roll out a one-size-fits-all approach. However, the remedial work is on-going and money that has been provided to authorities has been used to improve ventilation where that is required. A great range of CO₂ monitors have been provided across the country, with people—yet again—using a process that is fit for purpose for their local needs and area. That work continues.

With the additional £5 million, we are looking closely at what further work will be required, and the process of assessing all those spaces on a weekly basis is starting to be undertaken to ensure that the environment is as safe and healthy as possible. Improving ventilation in general can have long-term benefits not only in teaching and learning spaces, and the work will probably follow through into other workplaces so that everyone can benefit. That work is continuing at pace and I am making sure that it is happening.

With our trade union colleagues, we have listened to the concerns of individuals who feel that they are not clear on the guidance or who do not know where to access it. Just before Christmas, along with all the trade unions, we produced a quick guide for all education staff and we sent it out to the system. It was shared across social media platforms and by other means to ensure that people know the simple steps that they can take on ventilation and that, when they have concerns, they know how to access national guidance. Most importantly, they will know what local support is available and will have access to

the expertise that can tell them, if they get such and such a reading, what is the best way to deal with it—what mitigations and steps they may take. We tried to outline that in a one-page document so that people could find that information quickly, which we hope will reduce some of the stress associated with the concerns about ventilation. However, that work continues.

COSLA's workforce issues group has, with the Scottish Government, proactively written to all trade union partners to advise them that, if any local matters are still coming up that they are concerned about, they should contact us directly. As we would in any other circumstance—we do so for a great many reasons, particularly through the employers team in COSLA—we will work closely with local colleagues to address the concerns that individuals might have. That might simply be about sharing good practice and letting people know the steps that they should take, or it might be about clarifying matters related to funding and so forth. Whatever the concerns might be, we stand ready to work proactively with colleagues to address them.

Kaukab Stewart: It is important to get a strong message out to staff, pupils, parents and all stakeholders that, if they have concerns about ventilation in their environments, there is a clear and available route that they can pursue to get those issues addressed, that those channels are open and that there should be no fear of judgment or repercussions.

Simon Cameron: Absolutely. I could not agree more. Our quick guide was at the heart of that. Throughout the pandemic and across a range of matters for Scottish local government employees, we have always been clear about the routes that are available to individuals.

First, they would always go to their line manager to seek assistance and help. When that route does not work for them—I appreciate that it does not work for every individual—we have health and safety and human resources teams that can provide support and guidance locally. In addition, they can go to their trade union representative. I reiterate that we work closely with our trade union colleagues at all times—in particular, in the workforce issues group space.

We ran a “Don't stay on mute” campaign—it comes back to haunt me every time I cannot come off mute on my device—which was about individuals' mental health and wellbeing. We said that, if someone has a concern or fear, or if they are simply not certain about something, they should remember that there are people out there who are willing to help and listen, who can support them to do their best in their role. Nobody should be in any doubt about the fact that the support and help is there.

In speaking about all of that, I would reflect on the fact that we no longer live in a world of four television channels and we have far too many outlets for communication. That is why we need to reinforce the point about working together, through any means, with our colleagues not only in councils but in trade unions. I highlight that COSLA has a weekly briefing for elected members—all the information that I have mentioned has gone out through that so that all councils in Scotland can support their constituents and ensure that they know where to access information. It is critical that we use all and any means to put those messages across.

Kaukab Stewart: Thank you, Simon.

I welcome Douglas Hutchison to his new post in Glasgow. It is day 3, and you are in front of the Education, Children and Young People Committee. I thank you for your contributions so far.

Can you indicate any concerns that ADES has heard across Scotland regarding ventilation? I am referring to not only the use of HEPA—high-efficiency particulate air—filters and CO₂ monitors but the ability to open windows and doors for natural ventilation. What is ADES's view on that?

Douglas Hutchison: The advice is fairly clear: good ventilation is a key mitigation in preventing the virus from circulating. The funding that was made available to address the issue of putting in CO₂ monitors, which is a proxy indicator of wider potential issues, was welcome. We have gone through that process, and local authorities and schools now have a good supply of CO₂ monitors.

I was made aware that a small number of rooms and teaching spaces were problematic. Addressing that will be an on-going job until we get to a point at which ventilation is good and people can open windows and doors without freezing. It is accepted and acknowledged that good ventilation is a key mitigation and that we should therefore get on with it. With CO₂ monitors, we have at least some of the tools available.

I am not picking up any major issues other than that.

Kaukab Stewart: As you will know, I worked as a teacher for many years, so I know that buildings vary. We have everything from Victorian buildings with huge windows to more modern buildings that have internal ventilation systems. I am aware that the issue is complex, and it is clear that catering for all those different needs requires local flexibility across authorities. I wondered whether any areas of the country had raised more concerns than others, but I think that you have addressed that.

I ask Margaret Wilson for a view from parents. We have heard a few voices regarding children

freezing in classrooms and the fact that opening a window is not a simple solution, especially given the Scottish weather, as it can get very cold. Have you been hearing any major concerns about the effects of temperature on children from a parent's point of view? I am also thinking about people having to wear outdoor clothing inside.

Margaret Wilson: When we were approaching the colder weather, there were a few concerns that, if windows were open, children would be cold, and children cannot learn if they are sitting there chattering away. However, we have to remember that windows do not need to be open all the time. Under the guidance, they might just be open for a few minutes to let the air flow through.

The school guidance was updated at the same time, to allow schools to be more flexible with their uniforms so that children could wear more layers. However, we got feedback that some schools were not being as relaxed about that. I fed back, through the Covid-19 education recovery group, the fact that, at times, we were hearing that the guidance on relaxing rules on uniforms and allowing children to wear outdoor clothing was not reaching every school. I have not heard anything this side of Christmas about any major concerns.

The only other concerns were from some more rural areas, such as the Highlands and Islands, where the wind tends to be stronger. The concerns were about the wind in relation to doors and windows being open. However, again, I have not really heard much about that this side of Christmas. There was a little bit of noise when there was a bit about it in the media, but I think that that was addressed pretty quickly with the extra funding. As parents, we are looking to see how that plays out and how that is invested in schools, where our children should be safe.

Kaukab Stewart: Thank you, Margaret. It is important to hear those views.

I have a question for Greg Dempster. The school estate is huge, but it is important for us to remember that it then drills down into small workplaces. In that sense, it is quite a fragmented estate. I think that it is important to acknowledge the additional stresses and strains on school leaders. Can Greg give us any insight from a headteacher and depute point of view? Has he heard from his members any concerns about ventilation or whether the communication between them and their support services is effective? Have any concerns that they have raised been dealt with? If not, is there anything that we can do better in that area?

Greg Dempster: Thank you for your recognition of the efforts of school staff around the country, which they will appreciate.

In relation to the CO₂ monitoring and, as Douglas Hutchison described it, using them as a proxy indicator for air quality, there has been variable practice and variable experience around the country, just as there has been variable experience in terms of staff absence, which was talked about earlier. I do not have the exact figures—I think that around 5,200 staff members were off last week but a quarter of primary schools did not have any staff absences.

The implementation of these protections by implementing the CO₂ monitoring has proceeded at a different pace in different places. We are in a much better position this winter than last winter. The guidance last winter was to throw open all the windows and to keep them open. This year, people have been able to take a much more nuanced approach, because they have had access to the CO₂ monitors. However, experiences have varied. At one end of the spectrum, every classroom in every school in a local authority has a CO₂ monitor at all times and the teachers have become very comfortable about recognising how long they need to have windows open before the monitor returns from red to green. I have also heard about situations in which teachers have said, "We don't need this any more. We don't need the monitors to tell us—we understand how often we need to purge the rooms." At the other end of the spectrum, some local authorities are still gearing up with numbers of monitors, such that there is not a monitor available for every classroom every day, so they are being cycled around classrooms.

10:45

On the weekly monitoring of every space, the issue is the impact on school leadership teams. They get concerned if there flows from that a requirement to collate and report all that information on a weekly basis. What you want is a response on whether there is a problem. You do not want to create busy work of collating and reporting on all of that. That is where my members would have a concern, and on the balance between ventilation and warmth.

However, in most cases that I have heard about, teachers become comfortable about how often and to what degree they need to open windows. Then a lot of the anxiety disappears.

Kaukab Stewart: Thanks for that, Greg. The message that I am getting is that the guidance and the responses of staff, including leaders, are becoming more sophisticated. I have to say that those leaders have done an awesome job. Headteachers are promoted to be heads of teaching, and now they are having to deal with scientific evidence, health and safety and all the

rest of it. So, hats off to all school leaders at every level.

I am getting that the advice is coming through and it is more responsive, but there needs to be more consistency across all authorities in Scotland. Is that correct?

Greg Dempster: I think that we are in a much better position, as I have said. That position has progressed, there is more consistency coming in and I am hearing much less from my members about the ventilation, if I can use that as a proxy.

Kaukab Stewart: Thank you.

The Convener: I will ask a couple of colleagues to ask quick—and I do mean quick—supplementary questions, and then we will move to Michael Marra and his line of questioning. Time is now against us. We luxuriated during the first hour of our meeting in questions and answers, but now we are up against the clock.

Bob Doris: I would like to direct my question to Douglas Hutchison. In doing so, I declare an interest with regard to the Educational Institute of Scotland, to which I still give my union dues. I declare that before I mention the EIS survey. I also welcome Douglas Hutchison to his post in Glasgow. He has been in it only three days, and I expect that his post bag is quite voluminous already. Thank you for taking on that task.

The EIS survey found that 65.9 per cent of teachers thought that rooms were well ventilated but 29.2 per cent did not. We are short on time, but I will give one other statistic: 62.8 per cent of teachers knew that the ventilation in their rooms had been checked but 11 per cent did not. I want to ask Douglas whether he is aware of whether education leaders at a local authority level had gone back to the EIS with that survey detail and drilled down, for example, on the 29 per cent who did not think that classrooms were well ventilated or on the 11 per cent who did not know that the ventilation had been checked. That is very important data on a bit of a disconnect between some of the teachers at the coalface, who are EIS members, and some of the good practice that we have heard about from Simon Cameron. Does Douglas have a view on how that data could be used and what discussion there could be with the EIS on doing something positive in relation to that?

The Convener: A short response, please, Douglas.

Douglas Hutchison: The short answer is that I do not have that data. I will say, however, that it was 65.9 per cent of respondents, not 65.9 per cent of teachers.

My expectation would be that the issue would be brought up and discussed at the local

negotiating committee for teachers. I think that it would be reasonable for the survey to be discussed at that level, so it is clear where the issues are and how a local authority is addressing them. I am not aware of how local authorities across the country are using the survey data, but, for me, the obvious place to deal with it would be the LNCT.

Bob Doris: Thank you.

Michael Marra (North East Scotland) (Lab): Bob Doris has covered part of my question. Following on from that, however, I wish to ask Simon Cameron of COSLA whether any discussions have begun with the Scottish Government or with local authorities to ensure that we do not have a third year of this situation. We have gone through two years, and we have heard some anecdotal evidence that things have perhaps got a little bit better in different places, and the response has evolved in some instances, but what can we do over the next year? Will the work continue, or are we looking at another set of panic measures next winter?

Simon Cameron: We are continuing to work closely not only with Scottish Government colleagues but with other partners, including organisations such as the Scottish Futures Trust. As I alluded earlier, we have not just recognised those things that are of benefit during Covid times; we need to consider them in the longer term, too. The work that is being done now will continue in the longer term, as it involves a general improvement of the teaching and learning spaces that are available to children and young people. As we become more and more aware of the benefits in that environment, we will continue with that. I would say very much so. That is where we need to get into an understanding for colleagues on the ground, ensuring that they are comfortable and that they understand what the best practice could be for them.

Michael Marra: That is great. I am sure that the committee would appreciate hearing about some of that work in writing in the coming months, as it develops, perhaps along with the programme of discussions that you might be having on that with the Scottish Government and colleagues. It would be good for the committee to receive that.

Given the time, I will now move on to my substantive line of questioning. The committee has repeatedly heard about a lack of overall analysis of the impact of the pandemic, particularly the differential impact—an analysis of who has suffered the most and who requires the most intervention. Following the return to school in the current period, do the witnesses have any reflections on that differential impact—on who has suffered the most?

Greg Dempster: I have heard a very clear message that the impact has been greater in areas of deprivation than elsewhere. That goes back to the periods of lockdown, when the opportunities to engage in remote learning were not available to the same degree to families or communities in those areas. That is where it stems from.

There have not been revelations about how to go about education differently since the advent of the pandemic. The system and pupils need time and continuity of learning opportunities, both of which require staff. We could see from reports last year that progress was starting to be made on closing the poverty-related attainment gap. Omicron has come along and got in the way of efforts to identify and address the issues that you are asking about. As Douglas Hutchison was saying earlier, the mechanisms for addressing areas or individual pupils who need additional support are already in place within schools, and it is time and continuity of learning opportunity that we require.

Michael Marra: I ask Margaret Wilson to comment about representations that she might have been having about different groups who have been affected disproportionately.

Margaret Wilson: That is quite a hard question, as I only hear from very switched-on parents—those who are engaged. That is usually to do with the same areas of deprivation that you are talking about, and it is therefore a difficult question for me to answer.

However, as a parent group, we have worked in the past with the Child Poverty Action Group, and we are now in talks with the Scottish Government regarding the Scottish attainment challenge. We will see whether there is anything that the National Parent Forum can do to help families. We have recently done workshops with CPAG. We have provided help by working with CPAG. In particular, we will be updating the parent council toolkit—you will all know what a parent council is—to recognise the cost of the school day. We are starting to reach out.

We are very aware that, as the National Parent Forum, we mainly hear from parents who are already engaged with their children and their learning, and that is where we are trying to reach out and help. As I say, we are doing that through partnership with CPAG, and we are meeting Scottish attainment challenge colleagues in Government to see if there is anything that we can do to support them.

Michael Marra: Thank you, Margaret.

Greg Dempster and Margaret Wilson have both mentioned issues of deprivation. Is that experience shared by you and your members,

Douglas Hutchison, and have any other groups been disproportionately impacted?

Douglas Hutchison: It is largely as has already been said. We are talking about people with existing vulnerabilities, and deprivation is a vulnerability. So, too, is age. From the very quick analysis that I did of curriculum for excellence levels, it seemed to me, from looking at the data, that the youngest and most deprived children had suffered most.

There are other groups. Children and young people with complex additional support needs struggled, and some of their families probably struggled when schools were closed, as schools were such a significant part of those young people's lives and their families' lives. Generally, the picture is that, where there were existing vulnerabilities—the biggest one being deprivation, but there are also age-related and additional support needs—people have been impacted significantly.

Michael Marra: Simon, do you believe that there has been a larger impact in the most deprived communities—in those areas where there is concentrated, multiple deprivation?

Simon Cameron: I am sure that there have been impacts in those areas. One of the key things that we need to think about is that a whole-system approach is required. There is an awful lot that it will not be possible to tackle within the school. There is an awful lot about bringing in other professionals and services and ensuring that the whole system is funded to support individuals in living the fullest life that they possibly can and in overcoming the barriers and challenges that they and their families face on a daily basis.

If we consider the COSLA “Live well locally” campaign and the submissions that have previously been made to the committee, which Douglas Hutchison has alluded to, a huge support network is required to go around people living in poverty and children with additional support for learning needs. While teachers play a critical role in terms of attainment, all the staff and services that individuals will come into contact with in their local communities are essential—not only those that are delivered by councils but those that are provided by our partners in the third and voluntary sectors and beyond. We need to take a serious look at how we ensure that all of that is funded appropriately, using that money in a way that will change the life outcomes and life expectancies of those in most need in our communities.

Michael Marra: That is really useful, Simon. A lot of those interventions and the work with outside agencies have been funded in different places through the Scottish attainment challenge. I have a couple of questions about the reforms that have

been undertaken. Many of the local authorities with the highest levels of multiple deprivation are losing up to 60 per cent of their Scottish attainment challenge funding. Dundee is losing 80 per cent of its Scottish attainment challenge funding. What do you believe the rationale to be behind that policy change?

11:00

Simon Cameron: As I said, I cannot answer that directly, but we can come back to you on what it might be. We need to work closely on that, and we need to consider at a local level what the impacts will be. I come back to my point about advocating for a whole-system approach. The funding that we get for local authorities cuts across all the services that we deliver, and we support and work with our partners to ensure that we put in place the right processes for individuals at a local level.

Michael Marra: I will push you a little on that. There has been a headline change to how the policy is delivered across Scotland. In Dundee, money from the Scottish attainment challenge currently supports 120 staff, and I believe that 25 of those staff are to be cut this year as a result of the cut. Over this parliamentary session, 80 per cent of the funding will be lost, which will affect about 100 members of staff who are working directly with the most deprived members of our community. Areas such as speech and language therapy, which we heard about earlier, are suffering immediate cuts. Did the Scottish Government suggest that approach to COSLA and did COSLA then agree to it on that basis? I do not understand the rationale for the shift. What is COSLA's perspective?

Simon Cameron: From COSLA's perspective, we are in constant negotiations with the Scottish Government. We are trying to ensure that we can work towards all the outcomes that we share nationally and locally, and we continue to engage on that. We will always do so in a manner that seeks the best financial outcome for local authorities so that we can deliver services in the best way possible. Obviously, we want to tackle the attainment gap and to bring in services beyond the school gates. We need to continue to work in that vein.

It comes back to my point about having a whole-system approach and everyone in the system working together. We continue to have proactive discussions about that. I suppose—[*Inaudible.*]—and the requirement to look at the whole system.

Michael Marra: I do not feel that we are getting anywhere with that issue, but I am sure that we will come back to it on another occasion.

I want to ask about another issue, which relates reasonably closely to my previous questions. On 17 November, I raised the issue of missing pupils or learners. Our first analysis of the figures showed that about one in 100 young people—about 6,900 kids across Scotland—are not attending school any more. Yesterday, I heard that the Children's Commissioner for England is launching an inquiry into children who are not attending school post-pandemic. What are the witnesses' experiences of that issue? How closely are you looking at it? Do you have any evidence on it? Should we be concerned about it, as I am?

Douglas Hutchison: This is only anecdotal evidence, but I hear that there are young people who have heightened anxiety about coming back to school as a result of Covid. There are young people who are predisposed to a degree of anxiety, and that anxiety has been exacerbated. Schools, education support workers and educational psychologists are working with those young people and their families. I am not, for a second, saying that those young people account for the 6,900 figure that you referenced, but I get a sense that there is a group of children and young people with increased anxiety about returning to school. It is a case of working with them, in the same way as we worked with young people before Covid, to build up their confidence, address their fears and anxieties and enable them to return to school, part time initially and full time eventually.

Anecdotally, I am aware that there is a group of young people for whom the return to school—to primary school as well as to secondary school—has been problematic. Schools, local authority staff and educational psychologists are working with those young people to try to address those issues.

Michael Marra: Thank you. Does Greg Dempster have any insight?

Greg Dempster: Not on that, but on your previous point about the changes to the attainment challenge. I am a little concerned about another element of that, which relates to the language about "accelerating progress" that has been associated with it as this new evolution of the attainment challenge has been unveiled. It sounds as though there is a desire to start not from where we are but from where we might like to be. That is unhelpful in the current situation, where there is a huge amount of pressure on school leaders and school teams because of the pandemic. They know what needs to be done and all the parts of the system were working hard on it before the pandemic, so "accelerating progress" is perhaps an unhelpful way to present it.

Michael Marra: I think that we would take that on board, Greg. Margaret, can I come to you now?

The Convener: Very briefly, Michael—we need to move on.

Michael Marra: Thank you, convener. I appreciate that. I just want to give Margaret Wilson the chance to comment on that. Douglas Hutchison was talking about what I hope is a fairly comprehensive approach to making sure that young people can return. Has the issue of anxiety among young people and what we can do to address that been feeding through your networks?

Margaret Wilson: It was probably more of an issue after the first lockdown, when we heard more about it. Quite a few queries came in to us then about withdrawing from school and doing home schooling and so on. It has not been something that we have heard about for a while, but there is support out there, as Douglas Hutchison says, for pupils with heightened anxiety to support them to get back to school.

The Convener: Again, I appeal for brevity in the questions and answers because of the time limitations that we are living with.

Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): First, I wish to express my thanks for the excellent work done by teachers and others in our schools.

My question relates to the use of digital technology. The Scottish Government has provided £25 million to assist with the provision of a digital device to children and young people, particularly to those who have been identified as being at risk of digital exclusion. I know that a lot of good work has been done by local government on distributing those devices. I have the stats but, in the interest of brevity, I will not read them out.

One would not hand out a violin or a trumpet to a child without arranging for that child to get tuition in how to play the instrument. However, it seems as though we are taking for granted that, if we just hand out a digital device, that in itself will suffice, whereas the essential skill, I would submit, in the use of these devices is the facility to touch type. That allows the brain to concentrate on what one wants to say rather than on finding the keys on the keyboard—to concentrate on what rather than how.

In this digital age, touch typing will be an essential skill for people in many walks of life and it is not a skill that is naturally acquired. I understand that it takes between 15 to 20 hours of the correct repetition exercises for the brain to acquire the facility to identify the keys automatically without thinking, which then allows one to apply one's brain with full, 100 per cent, effort.

Now that I have set out that thesis, do Mr Dempster and Mr Hutchison agree with my analysis? Can they explain to what extent proper

courses on touch typing, including monitoring and tuition can be provided? As I say, 15 to 20 hours is what is required. If such courses cannot be provided, should there not be a facility for every school to be able to get an expert to train teachers in how to teach touch typing and would that be something that would provide a tremendous additional skill for our children in Scotland?

Greg Dempster: I will perhaps leave your question about the extent of touch typing training to Douglas Hutchison. In answer to your question about whether we agree with the premise that touch typing is an important feature of handing out devices, I agree that it is important to an extent, but devices are used in a lot of different ways to support remote learning. For the younger age groups, they might be used to provide resources that are then printed off at home. The pupils might read the resources and interact with them on screen, so typing is only one element. Voice input is a more and more usable and useful way to put together documents. You and I might sit at a keyboard to do that, but that is not how everybody would approach that these days. That is my only observation.

Douglas Hutchison: The question for me would be about the return on that investment, which Greg Dempster alluded to. For such a significant investment, would you get the return that you wanted? With regard to devices, obviously, I am only on day 3 here, but I am aware that Glasgow has invested significantly in iPads, for example. You can use a keyboard with an iPad but, generally speaking, people do not do that, because hand-held devices tend not to lend themselves to keyboards. As Greg said, we will get much better at voice input.

Moreover, a lot of the interaction is not entirely text based. A lot of the interaction with digital devices might be around maths games, which do not require input. For me, there is a question mark, because I am not 100 per cent sure that the significant investment in touch typing would give a return that merited that level of investment. I would need to see the evidence that suggested that it would be a worthwhile investment that would get a significant return, given the way in which devices are used for learning.

Sometimes, young people do not just consume content or do essays on a device but create content for publication online or for others to interact with. Devices lend themselves to a far wider range of learning methods than simply using a keyboard to reproduce or input notes or to write essays. There is a question mark around that for me, and the short answer is that I do not know.

Fergus Ewing: I hear what was said in response, but the point that I am making is that the ability to express oneself through touch typing,

rather than the two-finger approach—where the brain is focusing on identifying a particular letter or number on the keyboard—is of tremendous advantage in life for the huge range of occupations where one needs to express oneself. It is difficult to think of many areas of work, other than some manual labour, where one does not require to express oneself.

The evidence shows that somebody who can touch type is 300 per cent more productive than somebody who cannot. I believe that it shows that children with dyslexia can gain from having that skill and that those who come to Scotland from other countries—with other languages—vastly increase their literacy skills by being able to touch type quickly. The evidence shows that some children with special needs will benefit and that all children who are able to touch type develop greater confidence in their abilities. Some people find handwriting difficult; I am a left-handed person, and we tend to smudge the ink as it hits the page, so we find typing a less physically arduous thing to do, particularly in the examination context.

The evidence is there for everybody to see. I must say, convener, that I am pretty disappointed with the replies. This is an area where the education establishment needs to think carefully about whether we are letting down children in Scotland.

11:15

In other countries, touch typing is a mandatory part of the curriculum—I can provide more evidence on that. I hope that we can come back to the matter. It would be sad if children in Scotland are missing out on a skill that in other countries is properly regarded as central to functioning in the modern digital age, because the proper use of a QWERTY keyboard cannot be acquired naturally.

Willie Rennie: I am keen to understand whether we know that we are addressing additional support needs. The only measurement that I can see is the one that has been identified by the Scottish Children's Services Coalition this week, which highlighted a sharp decline, of around 59 per cent, in the number of legally binding education support plans. That is a significant reduction, and only a tiny number of those who have been identified with additional support needs get such a plan. I want to understand whether we are addressing the need and how we know whether we are addressing it.

That is for Greg Dempster first, and then for Douglas Hutchison.

Greg Dempster: I will be very brief, in the interests of time. I frequently hear from members that identifying the need is clearly the first step, but that within schools there is only so much that they

can do in that regard, because external support is sometimes required to formally identify additional needs.

The hurdle after that is accessing the required support. In all the time that I have been in my role, which is something like 19 years, I have never heard members say that all the supports that they require are there. It is often at the other end of the spectrum, with members saying that they are having great difficulty accessing the supports that they require for their pupils, whether that be pupil support assistants in the school with adequate time to support individuals appropriately, or external additional supports such as educational psychology or speech and language services.

We know that there is a large amount of additional needs out there for which schools would like to see additional support

Willie Rennie: That is helpful. We are talking about a third of all pupils now being in this category, and the mainstreaming approach is quite a radical change. I get constant complaints from teachers, pupils and parents that there is just not adequate support. You say that there has never been a time when it has been adequate. Has it got worse or better?

Greg Dempster: I imagine that the answer to that is different depending on where you sit in each individual school. Sometimes, posts are formed and rest in a school for a while even after a child moves on. The support that is experienced in different places is very different. As a shorthand answer, it is my impression from the responses that I get from members that, over the piece, the position is becoming worse, because more needs are being identified.

Willie Rennie: That is helpful. Douglas, would you like to comment?

Douglas Hutchison: I start by saying that I think that we have made huge progress in Scotland, and we need to recognise that. When I started teaching, the position with additional support needs—or special education, as it was called then—was that a pupil had special educational needs only if they had a record of need legally. It was a tiny number of children and young people whose needs were formally and legally recognised. The Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 and the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2009 were a huge step forward.

In essence, in Scotland, children and young people have additional support needs if they need additional support. That is why 30 per cent of our children and young people have additional support needs of one kind or another. There are obviously a broad range of needs. For instance, a young person can have needs because they are

bereaved, because of some tragedy that has happened in their family. That might be temporary, and they then no longer have additional support needs. There are also young people with very complex additional support needs in specialist schools, who access the curriculum only through sensory means such as eye blink. That covers a broad range of young people.

We have come a long way in Scotland in this regard, but the reality is that the legal duty is to meet the additional support needs. The law says that, as a director, I have a legal duty to meet all the additional support needs, but the reality is that there is a limited resource to do that, and the job becomes managing that resource to ensure that we meet the needs as best we can with the resource available. There is a finite resource and a significant demand, so it becomes a matter of managing that resource and skilling up every teacher in every classroom to meet the broad range of needs.

To go back to the definition, I might have Miss Honey this year as my teacher: she is a great teacher and I do not have any problems. Next year, however, I might have Miss Trunchbull. Suddenly, I have additional support needs, because she is not helping me to access the curriculum. I have not changed; the external environment has changed.

In short, there is a significant demand and a limited resource, so local authorities have systems and processes in place to ensure that we meet those additional support needs as best we can and to ensure that the staff who have daily contact with the young people are well placed and well trained to meet all those additional support needs.

Willie Rennie: Thanks for explaining the process, but I will explain what I really want to understand. I hear from a lot of frustrated parents, teachers and pupils who feel that their needs are not being met. That affects not only the pupils with additional needs but everybody else in the class. I am keen to understand whether the situation has got better from your perspective. If not, what are you saying to Government about changing it? What are you saying to your councillors in your respective authorities about priorities? If it is not getting any better, or if, as Mr Dempster has highlighted, it is getting worse, what are we doing about it?

Douglas Hutchison: I am not clear what the evidence is for the situation getting worse. I have been involved in additional support needs almost all of my career; you will know that I am an educational psychologist. Before that, I taught at a residential school for children and young people with social, emotional and behavioural needs, and I was a behaviour support teacher. I have lived and breathed additional support needs for almost

my entire career. The situation has always been a challenge—I cannot remember any time when it was not a challenge. The legislation that was brought in deliberately introduced a range of remedies that did not exist before for parents who were unhappy with the level of provision. That, in itself, acknowledges and recognises that this is a contested area in which it will always be difficult to meet all the needs.

The issue has always been challenging, but I am not clear that things are any better or worse now than they were 10 or 15 years ago.

Willie Rennie: What does Margaret Wilson think?

Margaret Wilson: It is a difficult one, as we will hear only from parents of those whose needs are not being met. I guess that, with the pandemic, more children could be deemed to have an additional support need. Anecdotally, we have heard from parents who do not feel that their child's needs are being met. I am like Douglas Hutchison in that respect, however: I do not know whether things are any worse or are staying the same. To be honest, I do not know how we would find that out.

We signpost parents to Enquire, which is a body that can help them. We have parent representatives on many of the Scottish Government's groups for additional support needs, and we gather feedback. If you are asking whether things have got worse, I would probably say yes, anecdotally, but, similarly to what Douglas Hutchison said, I do not know how you could measure that.

Willie Rennie: I will finish there, convener.

The Convener: Bob Doris has made a couple of interventions on subjects that he wanted to cover. Bob, is there anything further that you wish to cover?

Bob Doris: Yes. I have further questions—I hope that they are brief—in relation to absence levels and the stress that they put on schools. I am conscious that today's evidence session is primarily about the pressure that omicron and Covid are still putting on education.

We have heard about teacher absence levels. We heard in the passing, from Greg Dempster, I think, that they are possibly at around 5 per cent. The figures in our briefing are that teacher and all-staff absence levels, including support staff, were 2,134 in November, 3,290 or so in the middle of December and 5,200 last week, so the trajectory is still increasing. The committee is keen to know whether the witnesses believe that it will increase further. What modelling has been done on when that will taper off and start to dip? The more increase there is, the greater strain is put on

schools. We are looking at the impact on education.

I think that it was Greg Dempster who gave the 5 per cent figure, so I will bring him in. I apologise if I have got the wrong person.

Greg Dempster: I did not say 5 per cent, but I said that around 5,200 staff were absent on 12 January—or the data published on 12 January said that. That is 5,200 staff, rather than 5,200 teachers. I think it is about an even split between teachers and those in other roles in schools.

The trajectory of absences in the most recent period was pretty exponential, as we have seen across different walks of life. The next set of data that we get will relate to today, but we will not see that until tomorrow. We have yet to see in hard data whether the trajectory is continuing, plateauing or falling back a little. According to the feedback that I have had from members around the country, it has been very variable. Some places have continued to have 20, 30 or 40 per cent staff absence, while others have little or no staff absence. Some people I keep in touch with regularly say that they have seen reduced levels of staff absence in their areas because of the change to the isolation rules.

Bob Doris: I am interested in what happens if that trajectory continues—I hope that it will not—and regionalised levels are far higher. If we get to a critical mass, will we have to move to the next level, with a step change in relation to exams and the additional support that is put in place, as Mr Rennie asked about?

On 7 January, the absence level for pupils due to Covid was 7.1 per cent. I am sorry that this question is not to a specific witness, convener, but does any of our witnesses know what the latest figures are for pupil absence and whether there is any modelling work showing what it is likely to be?

Simon Cameron: Figures are collated regularly by public health colleagues and are reported to the CERG, so I am sure that we can get some information to the committee on the figure at the moment. As Greg Dempster suggested, on an anecdotal basis, having spoken with all the heads of human resources across Scotland recently, I would say that we are starting to see a decline in absence levels.

There are absences for reasons other than Covid—[*Inaudible.*]*—*but we are starting to see a reduction. That will be different in different parts of the country for individuals in different circumstances. The changed process for self-isolation has had an impact on staffing levels. I understand that there potentially is a dip in the figures for children and young people, but we can come back to the committee with relevant information on that.

11:30

Bob Doris: If the trend is down the way, that is positive and I hope that it endures.

How have schools improved at managing pupil absence? My son is at primary school and has Covid, so he is self-isolating. Within 24 hours, a core literacy and numeracy package was provided by the school along with some bespoke work that the class is doing. I suspect that, at the start of the first wave of Covid, schools were scrambling to do the best that they could, but I hope that there is a lot more finesse and capacity in the system now. Perhaps Greg Dempster is best placed to answer my question.

Staff have to be present to issue work to pupils who are self-isolating. If staff are absent and other staff are filling in doing “please takes” and everything else, there is a staff management issue in getting good-quality core resources out to pupils who are self-isolating to keep the continuity of learning. Can you say a little more about where we are now and what the constraints are in relation to making sure that we get good-quality teaching and learning packages out to young people who are self-isolating?

Greg Dempster: On your previous point, the absence rate for pupils was down to 4.1 per cent on 11 January, so it dropped.

The practice around supporting pupils who are at home through self-isolation has evolved and improved. Clearly, it is very difficult to support classes and pupils at home. You talked about the different roles that staff might play in trying to do that. Different staff groups have different potential solutions, too. Some staff who are off with Covid are unwell and unable to work and some are self-isolating or have Covid but are not unwell and are able to set remote learning. Some staff are in school trying to maintain in-school learning and provide a degree of remote learning for those who are absent and isolating. Schools are much better geared-up for responding with learning resources than they were at the start of the pandemic, because of those previous periods of remote learning.

There has been a clear evolution of practice, but the situation is still hugely challenging, because high levels of staff absence make everything else start to creak. School leaders might be able to pick up that sort of thing normally and cover classes, but the ability to provide resources to pupils who are isolating depends on the degree of staff absence that individual schools face.

Bob Doris: That was helpful. Convener, I have no further questions, but I see that Margaret Wilson has requested to speak.

Margaret Wilson: I have a point in response to Bob Doris's question. You spoke about investment in devices for pupils. The National Parent Forum has a representative in every local authority, so we get information quickly and have a good picture of the issue across Scotland. We hear that some schools do not let the devices come home with pupils—for example, they let only primary 6 and 7 pupils take their devices home—so, if a pupil is off with Covid and is self-isolating, or if they are off for another reason, they might not have access to the device. That has come up a few times in our group.

I agree with Greg Dempster that it is difficult for a teacher in class to support the pupils who are at home. However, again, the situation differs across Scotland. Some pupils who are off school are getting work to do at home, but some are getting absolutely nothing, so it is not a level playing field. It also comes down to whether the parents are at home and can help their child with the learning or whether they are working. It is all about the balance.

Bob Doris: Thank you, Margaret. I appreciate that.

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): Before I move to my main line of questioning, I will come back to the topic of information technology devices, which has already been covered, although I do not want to return to the issue of touch typing, which we have covered at length. Before the election, John Swinney promised that every young person in Scotland would have a device that would be connected to the internet, and I am more concerned about whether that is the witnesses' experience of what has happened. I am not clear that that has been the case in my constituency. Figures suggest that only one in five young people has access to a device.

The Convener: Who is that directed to?

Oliver Mundell: I am happy to hear from anybody about whether the promise that every young person would have access to an electronic device and the associated internet connection has been fulfilled.

The Convener: Who would like to take on the question about free devices and free connections?

Simon Cameron: I am happy to come in, convener. We know it to be the case that more than 123,000 digital devices have been distributed to children and young people, and that includes 72,000 devices that have been provided to children and young people who have been identified by their schools as being at risk of digital exclusion. That has been supported by £25 million of funding to ensure that more than 14,000 connectivity solutions have been provided.

Work continues at pace across local authorities. Obviously, it is not a straightforward process of rolling out the programme in one fell swoop, so a great deal of local effort continues on the roll-out and in making sure that we get connected as many as possible of the children who are at risk of digital exclusion.

Oliver Mundell: Therefore, would it be fair to say that that is yet another example of the gap between the Scottish Government's rhetoric and the complexity of the task that it asks local authorities to deliver on the ground?

Simon Cameron: Clearly, it is a complex task. Although there is not yet a set timetable, we have agreed on joint governance with the Scottish Government to oversee the roll-out of the devices, so that, as I said, we get them to children and young people—particularly those who are in greatest need—as quickly as possible and address the connectivity challenges.

Oliver Mundell: I think that many parents, young people and teachers get frustrated at promises being made, before an election, that things will be free and at the suggestion that things will happen quickly, but they then—despite what I am sure are best efforts—take a long time. However, I will not push you on the political point again.

My main question is about the use of face masks in schools. Do you and the organisations that you represent support the indefinite use of face masks, or are we at a point in the response to Covid-19 at which we should look to remove them as quickly as possible?

Simon Cameron: Is that question directed towards me?

Oliver Mundell: I am happy for anyone to come in.

Simon Cameron: I will reflect on that quickly. Obviously, we and all our member councils are happy to follow the guidance that best fits the moment that we are in. We want to make sure that people feel safe in their environment and that children and young people in that environment get the best educational experience.

We will always be guided, as we have been, by clinical advice. As that changes and we are able to remove certain mitigations, we will seek to do so. We would never want to put someone in a situation in which they did not feel safe in accessing their learning experience in that place. We will continue to work closely with colleagues to ensure that we update the guidance and that people are supported in the best way possible.

Margaret Wilson: We do not support the continued use of face masks. We want that policy to be regularly reviewed. There is no clear

consensus among parents about the use of face masks. Some parents do not want any mitigations in schools; some want every mitigation. We represent a wide range of views, but we do not support the continued use of masks. We want to hear, and have asked for, evidence of why face masks need to be used. In our feedback to the Covid-19 education recovery group this week, we asked when the policy will be reviewed. All that we can do, as the voice of parents, is ask when and how regularly it will be reviewed.

Oliver Mundell: My concern is that we have reached a point at which almost all the other regulations and mitigations are being pulled back but education seems to be at the bottom of the pile. We could argue that young people have faced the greatest disruption. Are parents concerned about that? We have heard that devices are not getting out to young people. Not much is being done on the exam front; that seems to have been left to quite late in the year. We have seen other restrictions go, but young people are being asked to continue to wear face masks. Is that a fair observation?

Margaret Wilson: When schools returned in August, 12 to 15-year-olds were just being allowed to have the vaccination. At that time, pupils were told that they would have to wear masks for six weeks and then there would be a review. Most parents understood the explanation that was given at that time: schools were unique, in that there would be large numbers of unvaccinated children indoors. At that point, parents understood the guidance.

As with everything during the pandemic, people understand the guidance at a certain point. We asked for the use of masks to be reviewed. We were always assured that it would be. Just as that was about to be looked at in a positive light, along came omicron. I did not get any emails from parents who were concerned about what their children had to do at that time, as we knew nothing about omicron.

There is a wide range of opinion. Some parents do not want any restrictions. If we have a clear and concise message as to why decisions have been made, more parents will be more accepting of that. That can be difficult.

Children are dealing with stricter mitigations than any other group in society. That is why it is important that all the school mitigations be reviewed regularly.

Oliver Mundell: That is helpful. Greg Dempster, do you have any comments to make?

Greg Dempster: There are a couple of things at work here. First, the First Minister announced only yesterday the changes that will take effect from Monday. CERG has not met since yesterday—it

meets tomorrow—so there has not been an opportunity to discuss the changes that are expected for the rest of society. I am sure that Scottish Government officials are looking at the guidance in order to identify changes that flow from it, and I imagine that there will be quite a few.

11:45

Secondly, the scientific sub-group that advises ministers and provides information to CERG has repeatedly looked at whether masks or face coverings should be required in secondary schools. It is not an area that my membership covers, but I am party to the discussions at CERG and, up until this point, the sub-group's advice has been to maintain the requirement for face coverings. I imagine that the sub-group has been asked to look at that advice again, as part of its on-going discussions, and we should be led by its advice, rather than by vocal groups that have always held a particular view about masks, irrespective of the point in the pandemic.

Oliver Mundell: However, you recognise that masks are a barrier to learning and you want them to be removed as soon as the advice says that it is—[Inaudible.]

Greg Dempster: You say that I want that, but I assume that that is what you want. From my perspective, I am not hearing a great deal from pupil representatives or young people about face coverings being a huge barrier. Of course, they are a barrier for some pupils and in some circumstances or subjects, but the key point is that face coverings have been part of the pandemic response because of advice from the scientific sub-group and others. I am keen to hear that advice, which will inform any change in the guidance not just on face coverings but on all mitigations that remain in schools.

Oliver Mundell: Thank you. My view is that it is a big ask and that it is quite uncomfortable for young people to sit at their desks in a classroom all day with a face covering on. Local young people have raised that with me. However, I have finished my questions, convener.

The Convener: As we draw our session to a conclusion, does James Dornan have any questions to put to the witnesses?

James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP): I have a short question about the terrible option of going back the way and schools having to provide more hybrid and remote learning. Greg Dempster, if that happens again, how prepared are schools to take up that challenge?

Greg Dempster: Everything that I have heard shows that, in most areas, there was an enormous step change from the remote learning that was

provided in the first lockdown to what was offered in the second lockdown.

Sorry—I see the convener now. Does that mean that I have to shut up?

James Dornan: No.

The Convener: Carry on.

James Dornan: It is usually a good plan, right enough. [*Laughter.*]

Greg Dempster: A definite step change in provision has been reflected in every bit of commentary that I have seen on the second lockdown period. I think that schools are much better placed than they were previously to cope with a horrible situation in which we reverted to remote learning. They are more experienced in engaging in that type of learning and teaching. If it did come to that, I hope that we would see another step of improvement.

James Dornan: Before I finish, I welcome Douglas Hutchison to Glasgow. You have a big challenge ahead of you, but I am sure that you will be more than capable of meeting it.

Douglas Hutchison: Thank you.

The Convener: Greg, thankfully, my appearance has never put off James Dornan from saying what he wants to say, and long may that continue.

To end our session, Stephanie Callaghan has a very quick supplementary question about the important issue of the roll-out of counsellors for schools.

Stephanie Callaghan: I, too, offer my congratulations to Douglas Hutchison. It is great to know that you have so much background in, and experience of, ASN.

There has been a lot of investment from the Scottish Government in mental health, including the £60 million for counsellors across secondary schools, but I hear that the provision is quite patchy. In some areas, it seems to be working and there seems to be great progress, but there is not so much progress in other areas. Can you comment on the challenges in that regard? How might we improve provision? Regional improvement collaboratives might be looking at that. I do not know whether the matter comes under Simon Cameron's remit, in relation to a wider view, or whether it might be a question for Douglas Hutchison.

The Convener: I am afraid that the answers will have to be very brief, because we are out of time.

Douglas Hutchison: I am happy to comment. The Scottish Government provided a very targeted budget, with a clear expectation that there should

be a counsellor for every secondary school. The challenge with such a massive expansion in provision is getting a counsellor for every secondary school. My understanding is that that is progressing reasonably well, but the Scottish Government might have more data on it. I am aware that there is good provision in South Ayrshire, where there is at least one counsellor in every school. The budget is very targeted and specific, and the expectation is clear, but the challenge is in getting that number of bodies in a short space of time and ensuring that there are quality counsellors with appropriate supervision.

Stephanie Callaghan: Thank you.

The Convener: I thank Douglas Hutchison, Greg Dempster, Simon Cameron and Margaret Wilson for giving us so much of their time. We have gone quite a bit over time, and I apologise for that, but it has been a very useful session.

The public part of today's meeting is now at an end. The committee's meeting next week will involve an evidence session on the issue of drink and needle spiking.

11:52

Meeting continued in private until 12:12.

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