



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Education and Skills Committee

Friday 5 June 2020

Session 5



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Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Friday 5 June 2020

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EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE

13th Meeting 2020, Session 5

CONVENER

*Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
*Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab)
*Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con)
*Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green)
*Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con)
*Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
*Alex Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)
*Gail Ross (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP)
*Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Larry Flanagan (Educational Institute of Scotland)
Jim Thewliss (School Leaders Scotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Roz Thomson

LOCATION

Virtual Meeting

Scottish Parliament

Education and Skills Committee

Friday 5 June 2020

[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:00]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Clare Adamson): Good morning, and a very warm welcome to the Education and Skills Committee's 13th meeting in 2020. Our first item of business is a decision on whether to take items 3 and 4 in private, in order to allow members to discuss, respectively, the evidence that we take today and the committee's work programme. Does any member object?

As there are no objections, the committee agrees that those items will be taken in private.

Subordinate Legislation

**Education (Deemed Decisions)
(Coronavirus) (Scotland) Amendment
Regulations 2020 (SSI 2020/149)**

**Education (Scotland) Act 1980
(Modification) Regulations 2020
(SSI 2020/150)**

**Nutritional Requirements for Food and
Drink in Schools (Scotland) Regulations
2020 (SSI 2020/153)**

The Convener: The next item is consideration of three negative instruments of subordinate legislation. Do any committee members wish to comment on the instruments?

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

School Education: Covid-19

10:01

The Convener: Item 3 is an evidence session on the impact of the coronavirus outbreak on elements of school education. I warmly welcome Larry Flanagan, who is general secretary of the Educational Institute of Scotland, and Jim Thewliss, who is general secretary of School Leaders Scotland.

We move straight to questions, and I invite Gail Ross to open.

Gail Ross (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP): Good morning, panel—thank you for joining us this morning. I will start by asking about the return to school in August. A lot of parents have contacted me with their concerns about the blended learning model. We have been told by the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, and it is set out in the document “Excellence and Equity During the COVID-19 Pandemic—A Strategic Framework for Reopening Schools, Early Learning and Childcare Provision in Scotland”, that local authorities will have to develop their own local plans. How has the voice of teachers been taken into account in the development of the Scottish Government's plans? How should teachers and parents provide input to the local authority plans?

Larry Flanagan (Educational Institute of Scotland): The primary route for discussion has been the Scottish education recovery group, of which Jim Thewliss and I are members. Beneath the main body, 10 workstreams, with membership drawn from across all the teacher trade unions, have been developing advice, so there has certainly been input to the discussions around how we address the challenge of Covid-19 in education.

We are now at a stage where the discussion is moving out to local authorities. The SERG material contains a recommendation that local negotiating committees should be involved in those discussions. That is happening in most local authorities, although not universally at present. Much of the discussion concerns the mechanics around the length of the school day and the pattern of attendance.

Over and above that, there are much bigger issues such as the educational content, how we deliver classroom teaching and how blended learning works. Education Scotland is developing a resource package to support schools in that regard. However, if you have seen the results of the EIS survey, you will know that teachers are concerned about whether they will have adequate time before August to prepare for what will be a very different way of delivering education. If a

teacher is going to see their pupils for only a third of the time that they normally would, that presents a really significant challenge. Blended learning can mitigate some of the damage, but it cannot restore all the learning elements completely.

I am clear that, although blended learning can offer us some useful platforms—in a normal situation, it would have a lot of strengths to recommend it—we are operating on a deficit model. Children are attending school for less than half the length of a normal week, which will have an impact on their learning. In particular, it will have an impact on those who are already the most disadvantaged.

Even if we take steps to address information technology inequities, there is still a huge challenge with regard to the ability of some families to support young people in their remote learning. That is a huge issue, and we need to look at how we provide additional support to the most disadvantaged. The EIS survey results make it clear that our members' biggest concern is that the disadvantage that some children already suffer as a result of poverty is being more deeply entrenched by the way in which we are currently having to operate. As a society, we need to give that some serious thought and look at how we can address that challenge.

Jim Thewliss (School Leaders Scotland): I agree entirely with everything that my colleague said—[*Temporary loss of sound.*]

The Convener: Sorry, Jim—we cannot hear you. I do not know whether there is a problem with broadcasting. I will ask the clerks to contact you, and see whether we can improve the connection and come back to you. I am sorry about that.

Does Gail Ross have another question for Larry Flanagan?

Gail Ross: Yes—I have a couple of questions. To follow on from Larry's Flanagan comment that those in the profession are concerned about not having enough time to prepare in the lead-up to August, how can local authorities support teachers to prepare? Will teaching staff have to come in over the summer holidays? If so, will that be senior management teams, faculty heads or all teachers, or will it be up to each individual school to decide?

Larry Flanagan: There is a huge challenge for Education Scotland in looking at how it supports schools. One of the ambitions for the blended learning approach is that Education Scotland resources will be packaged in such a way that teachers will be able to use them almost off the shelf.

Once pupils are back in school, one of the difficulties for teachers will be that, even if they are teaching smaller groups, they will be teaching full

time. All teachers will be fully class committed for the whole week, so there will be limited time for them to undertake the blended learning approach, because to do so effectively would be almost a full-time job in itself.

The education recovery group's current thinking is that the package from Education Scotland will match progression in the curriculum in a way that means that teachers will know what will be available, and they will be able to reference the package as part of their classroom teaching without necessarily having to do all the preparation and correction. At least, that is the theory.

Education Scotland is working hard just now, and at yesterday's meeting of the education recovery group we had a report on some of the progress that has been made. Education Scotland is hoping to put into the system this month an indication of how its approach will work, at least in the first few months. It will be an on-going project. Teachers will know—for example, if they are teaching two-dimensional shapes as part of the primary curriculum—that there are resources available on Education Scotland's glow website in addition to what they are using in class. They can direct pupils to that website for reinforcement or exercises. The role of local authorities is to provide that additional support. We are looking for Education Scotland to have a national resource that everyone can tap into. Locally, schools will need support in getting that additional support for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Members might have seen the drive to recruit former teachers or people who were on the register. A lot of them might be reluctant to go into schools, or schools might have limited capacity—if a school only has so many classrooms, it can have only so many teachers. It might be useful for some of the staff to be employed as peer support or tutor support, so that children from disadvantaged backgrounds get support from an adult who can reinforce the teaching. That is where the local authority has a particular role, as the employer, in providing additional resource to schools and supporting the work that is being done there.

Gail Ross: Thank you. My last question—

The Convener: Gail, I would like to bring Jim Thewliss back in to answer the questions before your final question.

Jim Thewliss: [*Temporary loss of sound.*]

The Convener: I wonder whether broadcasting could try switching off Mr Thewliss's video to see whether we can get sound from him. Jim, can you try speaking again?

Jim Thewliss: [*Temporary loss of sound.*]

The Convener: I am really sorry. We obviously have severe gremlins in the system this morning. We will try to get Jim back online, but for now we will go back to Ms Ross for her final question.

Gail Ross: My final question is for Larry Flanagan. Teachers have contacted me about the Scottish Government's strategic framework. There has been a lot of discussion about the limited evidence on how the virus affects children, how they can be asymptomatic, how they could be carriers, and so on. That leaves teachers and classroom assistants with an element of uncertainty. There is a bit in the strategic framework about test, trace and isolate, and about the use and supply of personal protective equipment, but some teachers, especially those in a primary school setting, are reluctant to wear a mask in the classroom in case it is a bit intimidating. Questions about PPE still have to be addressed. Who will supply that PPE? Is that up to the school itself or is it up to the local authority, or is it the responsibility of the Scottish Government?

Larry Flanagan: Before I answer, I just want to say to the convener that, before Jim Thewliss got cut off, I heard him say that he agreed with me. You can take that as a given. *[Laughter.]*

The PPE issue is quite complex. To date, in the hubs, there has been agreement that, where staff are working in close proximity with young people, such as in helping them with their mobility or their toileting arrangements, PPE is appropriate. It has certainly been made available in additional support needs hubs.

We have had a lot of queries from members about whether PPE is required. The current guidance is that, by and large, unless you are physically close to young people, it is not required. It will be available in schools primarily to deal with any incidents of pupils or staff becoming ill and showing symptoms. PPE will be there to help with immediate isolation and making sure that the infection is confined as much as possible.

The issue that has come up with respect to the return to school is not so much PPE in the clinical sense, where it is a specific requirement because of proximity, but in the general rule about face coverings as opposed to face masks. Members are asking why, if people have to wear a face covering in a supermarket or on a train, they would not wear one in a classroom, which is also a confined space with multiple other people. So far, we have taken the line that, if someone wishes to wear a face covering, they should be allowed to do so, and they should explain why to the children. A number of young people may be sent to school by their parents with face coverings, as a precaution.

10:15

There needs to be some consistency of message from the Government. If face coverings are seen as important in X, Y and Z, it is difficult to see why they are not important in school environments. I take the point that, for some young people, it may be off-putting. Also, some teachers may not wish to wear them, and I do not think that it should be compulsory. However, lots of young people would understand why someone was wearing a face covering. They are going to have to understand why they are 2m apart from one another, and it would only add a little to the explanation.

There needs to be some flexibility, because we cannot get away from the fact that, no matter what the evidence tells us, that evidence is quite often contested anyway. It is about recognising which bit people want to listen to rather than being inflexible. People are worried and have their own health concerns, and reassuring them about their own personal safety is probably fundamental to having them work effectively in the classroom. I think that we will need to be fairly flexible on issues such as face coverings once pupils and staff are back, come August.

The Convener: You talked about flexibility and about face coverings not being compulsory for teachers. Is there a risk that parents will feel uncomfortable that pupils could be moving to different classes, certainly in the secondary setting, in which the teachers take a different approach? If they feel that it is important that the teacher wears a face mask, that could undermine their confidence in the safety of the school environment.

Larry Flanagan: That would all be down to communication. If the reasons why things are happening are explained to students and parents, and if an element of personal choice is involved in how people deal with their own concerns, that issue can be resolved. It will not necessarily undermine confidence in the school setting.

There may well be young adults in secondary schools who choose to wear face coverings because of their own concerns. In the guidance, there is a recognition that, although there is 2m physical distancing in class, that is more difficult to police when students are on their own time—at lunch or in breaks. By and large, our young people are quite responsible. If they want to use face coverings, as long as it is clear why that is happening and why there is a choice about it—as for any teacher—we are probably okay with that.

The Convener: Thank you.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): Good morning to Mr Flanagan and everyone else.

I will take a step back. We have dived straight in at the deep end in talking about blended learning. At what point has anyone questioned what blended learning is about? I have had a lot of emails from teachers and parents who are genuinely concerned about the effect that it will have on the education of their young people.

I appreciate that the premise relates to health and safety, but what evidence do we have that attending school for two or two and a half days a week is any safer than attending for four or five days a week? What conversations has your organisation had with teachers who are perhaps not entirely on board with the blended learning approach?

Larry Flanagan: There are two questions there. First, blended learning, as a concept, is not Covid related but exists in the education sphere anyway, and Education Scotland is looking to conduct some research into the ways in which blended learning can be effective. I am of the view that, if we were not in a Covid-19 scenario but were simply looking at using blended learning as an additional tool, it would be very effective because, in many ways, it can bridge the gap between school and home and allow quite a lot of reinforcement of aspects of work that are helpful in closing the attainment gap. Having said that, I think that we are in a deficit model with regard to using it in the current situation.

Secondly, the only reason why schools can offer only two or three days to pupils is the need for physical distancing in the school. If there were no physical distancing, schools could be back. However, in the current situation, there would be a health risk. We have seen on our televisions recently situations in which physical distancing has been set aside as people have gathered to protest about various things, and one of the comments is always that a lack of physical distancing gives rise to an increased risk of Covid-19 infection, because people are mixing. If we reach a stage at which physical distancing is no longer a Government directive for the protection of public health, the capacity of schools will increase. However, until we can get pupils back into schools in classes that are of a normal size—actually, I should say in classes that are of a smaller than normal size, because we support smaller class sizes as a matter of principle—we are going to have to live with blended learning.

The other option is that we simply do what we can in schools. To me, though, that will simply increase the deficit, because, although blended learning is not a perfect solution, it certainly gives us additionality to the time that is spent in school.

To be honest, we are where we are. There is no easy solution, and the public health and safety message is critically important.

Jamie Greene: I agree that we are where we are, but that does not mean that we should not challenge things. Your organisation represents a large body of the professionals who will have to deliver this Government policy. I hope that, if there is concern that the approach is not the right one, you will be vocal about that.

Parents are asking how on earth they are going to be able to go back to work, when it is safe to do so, if their child is at school for only two days a week and they are supposed to be supporting them at home, either helping them with dial-in virtual education or doing what they have been doing over the past couple of months. The idea that they are going to be able to home school indefinitely until the schools are back up to normal capacity is an issue, because that will prove challenging for a lot of parents. It will also prove challenging for teachers, because teachers have children, too. Yesterday, I received an email from a teacher who said that they had been asked to go back into school in June, but they also have to provide childcare for their own children, and they have been given no provision to deal with that. My concern is that we might be so focused on the means to an end—that is, the need to have distancing measures in place—that we forget about the effect that that will have on the education of our children.

How equipped are teachers to deal with the blended learning approach on a long-term basis?

Larry Flanagan: There is certainly a challenge for teachers who have underlying health conditions and are shielding. Further, our survey indicated that just under 30 per cent of teachers have personal childcare responsibilities. The issue of childcare responsibilities is being considered, with regard being given to childcare provision being made available on an on-going basis just as it will have to be made available for children of key workers, depending on where we are in relation to the situation with Covid-19.

Teachers have concerns about what is going to happen. The blended learning approach that will be adopted in August will be different from the home learning that is taking place just now. It will not rely as heavily on parental involvement, because the teachers will be directing the lessons much more specifically so that the in-school provision matches the home learning. Exactly what approach is taken will depend on the age and stage of the child. For younger children, clearly, parental involvement is a key motivating factor to their getting the work done in the home environment.

I agree that this is not an ideal situation. There are lots of issues within it. We are committed to trying to make the approach work, but we have said to the Scottish Government and the

Convention of Scottish Local Authorities that there are huge workload implications. That is the case even with the current arrangements. Our survey showed that 60 or 70 per cent of staff find it difficult to separate their working day from their family life because the online world is ever present. There are certainly a lot of concerns on the part of the profession, but there is also a strong commitment to delivering as effectively as possible for young people. By and large, people feel that schools have worked well with regard to the home learning experience and have taken a collegiate approach, but I have said elsewhere that the challenge of blended learning next year will be the biggest curriculum challenge of the century. If you thought that curriculum for excellence was hard, wait until 11 August. There is a huge challenge ahead of us.

Jamie Greene: I am minded to agree with you. You are right: we are staring down the barrel at the moment, and we are facing a difficult year for young people, the consequences of which will be with them throughout their lives.

I know that others will join me in thanking the teachers and school staff who are watching this for everything that they have done during the past couple of months—it is important to get that on the record.

What commitments and reassurances have you been given that your members will be regularly tested for Covid-19? That might be one way of putting some minds at rest. Has any commitment been given that they will be tested before they go back into schools? Will there be on-going testing?

Have commitments been made about the amount of resource that teachers will be given? I have heard of people having to use their own computers to make up educational resources because they have been given nothing at all and are having to rely on their peers. There does not appear to be any centralised approach to resourcing teachers for this new model. How confident are you that teachers will have everything that they need to do their job safely and properly?

Larry Flanagan: There are two challenges within that, one of which is about the issue of resource. For the current situation, there was an assumption that teachers would be well versed in remote teaching and learning and be well able to deliver it. However, lots of teachers face the same problems as pupils in having limited internet access and hardware that does not work—Jim Thewliss could not get on with the software on his laptop this morning. Working remotely is always a challenge, and we think that there needs to be a recognition of the resource that is required.

I am aware that we are keen to recruit teachers to support this effort, yet some local authorities are offering temporary posts rather than permanent posts, and others have suspended their recruitment. There is a dialogue going on in the background between the Scottish Government and COSLA about additional costs. That issue needs to be resolved, because we cannot cope with the demands that are going to be made next year if we do not get additional resource. We need money to pay for additional teachers. The £30 million that the Scottish Government provided for additional information technology equipment was welcome, but it gives an indication of the scale of the need that exists.

If you look at the additional support needs in our schools and think about the staff—beyond teachers—who will be needed to support young people's wellbeing and resilience in what is a traumatic period for them, you can see that there is a huge cost to be borne if we are to make the approach work. The last thing that we need is a wrangle around what money is available. I understand that COSLA and the Scottish Government need to have those discussions, but we would like to see a strong commitment to ensuring that the funding is in place in schools to deliver whatever is necessary on behalf of our children and students.

Jamie Greene: Has the Government made a commitment to teachers that they will be tested at least once, if not regularly?

10:30

Larry Flanagan: There is an on-going discussion about that. Our initial concern was about test, trace and isolate being in place, on which progress has been made, but there is a discussion to be had about testing. I am a member of the Scottish Trades Union Congress group that is discussing proactive testing with the Scottish Government. That is happening in care homes now, and there have been discussions about doing that for the fire service, because of how its shift patterns work. There is certainly a debate about whether proactive testing would control the situation and make the school environment safer. It is not absolutely straightforward, because you have to test every second day, which is a big commitment, but it is an area that is under discussion at the moment. We would welcome clarity about that, as it would be reassuring for staff.

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): My question follows on from Jamie Greene's question. Larry Flanagan can disagree if he thinks that I am wrong, but a better consensus has developed between the Scottish Government, local authorities and the teaching unions with regard to

which schools might be able to reopen than has developed in England. We have had some agreement on the possibility of starting on 11 August, but the EIS set out some strong red lines, one of which was that test, trace and isolate must first be in place. Helpfully, the EIS shared with the committee the letter that it sent to its local representatives, which has an extensive checklist of more than 35 things that need to be in place before schools can safely open and blended learning can start.

What progress has there been on the ground? A lot of those things will only be—[*Temporary loss of sound.*]—at a local authority or even a school level. What feedback is Larry Flanagan getting from EIS local branches on consultation and the progress that has been made in putting all those things in place?

Larry Flanagan: I agree with your point about there being a strong consensus through the education recovery group on the potential restart date in August, which is caveated by whether the health situation will allow that to happen. We have avoided the fracture lines that have occurred in England, which is welcome.

Having said that, you hit the nail on the head in asking me about local discussions, because, although there has been broad consensus at a national level, there have been difficult areas for some individual councils, and we have had difficult discussions with COSLA on progressing Scottish Negotiating Committee for Teachers circulars, which seem to get caught up in COSLA's internal approval system.

Yesterday, I was on the phone with our local association secretary. In a number of councils, agreement has been reached on ensuring that risk assessments are being done, deep cleans or enhanced cleans are taking place and all the public health mitigations for operating buildings are being addressed. However, there are a number of councils with which we are moving rapidly to a dispute situation. One local authority has said that it simply does not have the money to do an additional clean, so it will not do it, yet it will still reopen its schools. We have said that there is a national agreement that cleaning buildings is a prerequisite for reopening them, and we are in a dialogue about that. In addition, some local authorities are instructing all their staff to be in schools from Monday, despite very clear guidance that staff should be back in small groups for the purpose of preparing for next year and that public health remains the overriding concern.

There have been—and there still are—areas to be sorted out in relation to individual local authorities. The national guidance from the education recovery group indicated that LNCTs should be involved in that, and we are trying to

use those mechanisms. We are trying to avoid dispute in those areas, as the public health guidance is pretty clear. COSLA has been involved with the education recovery group, so the guidance that has come from it is agreed guidance. However, we have to make sure that it is put into effect operationally, so that we do not end up with the kind of disputes that we have seen in England, which drain energy and morale at a time when we want to be working together to deliver effectively. I hope that we will get some of those fires put out and be on an even keel moving forward.

Iain Gray: Is it fair to say that some—or the bulk—of those problems are resource related? That goes back to the point that you made in answer to Mr Greene's question about what additional resources are required by local authorities to deliver the required safety measures in schools so that they can reopen safely.

Larry Flanagan: Yes. Although one or two of the problems are administrative or operational issues, lying behind a lot of it is a desire on the part of local authorities to achieve additional funding for additional costs arising out of Covid-19, and dialogue about that is on-going. From an EIS point of view, I have been here before in relation to COSLA and the Scottish Government debating the pros and cons of resourcing.

Our view is that, if we have agreement on the measures that are required, the resource has to be found to deliver those measures—otherwise all the effort in reaching agreement becomes a bit pointless. Although I do not know what stage they are at, I know that discussions are taking place between COSLA and the Scottish Government, and we hope that the issues are resolved early so that we do not end up with any fault lines across a number of councils when we need maximum unity in moving forward.

Iain Gray: My final question—

The Convener: I am sorry to interrupt you, Mr Gray. I note that Mr Thewliss is back. I hope that we can hear from him on the first two questions that you put.

Mr Thewliss's microphone is still muted.

Jim Thewliss: Can you hear me?

The Convener: Yes, we can—and we can see you as well. Welcome back, Jim.

Jim Thewliss: Thank you very much. I did not hear the two questions that Iain Gray asked Larry Flanagan, but I heard the responses. I am more than happy for you to come back to me if you want to ask anything further.

The Convener: We will go back to Mr Gray.

Iain Gray: I will ask my last question, on which I hope that both Jim and Larry might have a view. It goes back to some of the questions that Gail Ross opened with.

Larry, you talked about the importance of additional support for young people who face the greatest barriers to educational achievement and about the extra support that they might need to mitigate the impact of these months of lockdown. It was particularly interesting that you talked about perhaps deploying retired or additional teachers to give face-to-face tutorial support. Will you enlarge on that? Is face-to-face personal support from teachers the critical factor when it comes to support for those young people who are at the wrong end of the attainment gap? Will it really make a difference for them?

Larry Flanagan: The short answer is yes. Addressing any additional support need—whether it arises from poverty, from having English as an additional language or from a specific need—is labour intensive and requires staff to work with students. The ability of staff to do that in schools will be limited, for all the reasons that we know of. We should look at how we deploy additional resources to support disadvantaged young people in the blended learning model.

One of the research findings about the massive open online courses that some universities offer free of charge is that—despite the fear that they would take over from universities—most of those courses end up falling because people do not maintain their motivation throughout the course. Working remotely requires motivation, which is a missing ingredient for a lot of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Mentoring support would therefore be critical. It could also play to our strengths. Although a lot of retired teachers, who are older, would not be keen to go back into classrooms, they might be interested in working with young people in education but in a different way.

The EIS and other teaching unions raised the idea of an equity audit. We must look at the impact of Covid-19 and of school closures on the most disadvantaged and then have an action plan to address that. If we do not have an action plan, we will see that disadvantage deepening. It will not only have an impact in the next year or two but will cause a lifelong deficit in those young people's school experience. We would argue that the top priority as schools restart is to meaningfully address that challenge to delivery equity.

Jim Thewliss: I will develop what Larry Flanagan has said.

The first priority, as we move back to normality in education, is to engage. The secret to any successful educational programme is the level of

engagement between young people and teachers in schools, and we can apply that idea to the circumstances that we are discussing now. There are youngsters for whom engagement was an issue even before we were in the situation that we are in now.

We should start by looking at engagement across the board. We can use the resources that we have and any extra ones that we can find. We could look at people coming back into teaching. We must target resources when we start to engage and to support. Thereafter, as Larry said, the equity audit will be critical to what we do. The level and detail of the engagement will be based on the knowledge and understanding that we have about where those young people are with their learning.

We are at a very early stage, and we have never been in a situation like this before, but we can roll back to first principles. A level of engagement, of understanding and of pedagogical development that enables us to engage meaningfully with learners—and at a point in their learning at which we can start to make progress—will make the equity audit more meaningful. That will help us to understand how we can reduce the deficit that will, undoubtedly, be there.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): Good morning colleagues, and to Mr Flanagan and Mr Thewliss. I am pleased to see that we have managed to get both panel members back.

My line of questioning is on vulnerable children and follows on from the questions from Gail Ross and Iain Gray. At the beginning of the pandemic, teachers recognised and understood how important it would be to ensure that vulnerable children were supported properly during lockdown. Providing care for such children in hubs made a lot of sense, but we are aware that many of the children who were identified have not been attending. Local authorities are now being asked to increase the number of children who attend. What do you think about the measures that have been introduced to achieve that? Have local authorities struck the right balance between supporting vulnerable children in hubs and supporting families in their homes?

Jim Thewliss: I will answer the second part of your question before we get into the detail of the first part. Given the speed with which things moved at the beginning of the crisis, the matter was addressed in perhaps the best and most effective way in which it could have been addressed. Gradually, through the past 10 to 12 weeks, schools—particularly the guidance staff—have begun to better understand the dynamic of vulnerable young people not engaging with the system. Through the existing systems in schools,

we have started to make contact and engage with difficult-to-reach families and young people.

Between now and the summer holidays we are at a critical stage in how we bring staff back into schools. To rehash the conversation that we have just had with Iain Gray, the priorities that we set over the next two to three weeks will be important in setting up a system of engagement that looks at the learning pathways that young people have had disrupted over the past couple of months. We need to re-engage and make learning a sensible and understandable process for young people and their families. We do not know what the level of intensity will be in August, because the health protocols and everything else will change between now and then. However, it is important that, over the next two to three weeks, we start to put systems in place and work assiduously to gain some level of engagement with those who are disengaged.

Larry Flanagan: The evidence from our survey showed that the hubs worked well for children of key workers, who were regular attenders, but, as Jim Thewliss said, they did not engage effectively with vulnerable children, many of whom simply did not attend the hubs. Some schools and local authorities have worked very hard to overcome that challenge by reaching out through staff visiting families or through social work involvement. For children who are at risk and are most vulnerable, there is a need for us to be more than just schools.

I do not see any prospect of getting significant numbers of those children back over the next couple of weeks. Some local authorities are moving their hub provision to childcare provision in preparation for the service that will run over the summer. When we come back in August, instead of the hubs there will be childcare provision for the children of key workers. The point that Jim Thewliss made is critical. The challenge is engaging with children who are most at risk, and we need to look at that issue specifically.

I do not blame anyone for what has happened with the hubs. The offer was there, and efforts were made to keep people engaged. The fact that everybody was in lockdown and, therefore, parents were at home anyway and were not required to be at work explains why some parents kept their children away from the hubs, even when they were entitled to be there. There was also a level of fear about the risk of being in school buildings.

When we look back, we can say that the best effort was made at the time. However, there is now a deficit because of how the situation developed, so we need to factor in an additionalality to address that deficit, or it will not be overturned.

Beatrice Wishart: I agree that some parents were concerned about their children going into school buildings and that, because many parents were at home, they thought that there was little point in sending their children to a hub.

I have a particular interest in the impact on children who have grown up in households where domestic abuse has been experienced, the effects of which can often be long term. I appreciate that you have already touched on this, but how can we measure whether the lockdown has had long-term educational impacts on certain groups of children, such as children from deprived households, and how can we mitigate that in the months and years to come? I believe that we have a significant opportunity to move forward from what has been done in the past in that area. Do you agree?

Jim Thewliss: I do. There is an opportunity here, but there is also a challenge. The group that we are talking about will not be the same group that schools were comfortable in knowing that they had identified at the beginning of March. The trauma that will have been visited on families and individuals between then and the period between now and August is such that we will be looking at a different group—an expanded group—of young people, who will face different problems and challenges. Schools are well aware of that.

There are systems in schools for engaging with disengaged families and young people who have challenges in their lives and in engaging with education. It is important that we understand—I think we do—that we will have to ramp up the way in which we communicate with, listen to and get in touch with people, and how we find out what is happening in the school community with a view to addressing the issues that Beatrice Wishart described and one or two other issues. There are things that will have happened that will be revealed to teachers that have never been part of the acknowledged identification of disadvantage or abuse, and we will have to be acutely aware of that and put in place systems to deal with it.

Let us say that a young person who walks through the door in August reveals in all innocence and honesty that, throughout the previous three months, people in their house had been partying every night. That will be a major issue, which will have been unknown to us in the past, and we will have to start addressing it in how we support that young person and their family.

Therefore, it is not simply a case of rewinding, resetting and moving forward from where we were in mid-March. We will have to have a completely new system and a completely new understanding of the lives and the lifestyles that young people have experienced during the present period.

Larry Flanagan: To echo Jim Thewliss's point, the experience of Covid-19 has revealed just how deep the fault line is when it comes to inequalities in our society. I think that people have become much more aware of the challenges around low wages and absolute poverty. The number of young people who have been severely traumatised will have increased during the lockdown, and when those children come back to school, that will offer an opportunity to address some of that trauma.

It is useful to know that the curriculum workstream from the SERG has identified children's health and wellbeing, including their mental wellbeing, as being the key priority for the recovery curriculum. When we go back into schools, the assessment that we are interested in will not necessarily be to do with young people's educational progress; it will be to do with their wellbeing. We must make sure that we nurture them in the school environment, which, for many children, is a strong and safe environment.

To go back to Iain Gray's question, schools have been stripped of educational psychologists and specialist staff such as the additional support staff who work with young people. We need more counsellors and more specialist staff, and that requires additional resource.

I repeat the point that I made earlier—working with young people who are damaged by their life experiences is a labour-intensive process. We need to spend time with the young people, so we need to have the staff to do that. One of the strongest messages to come out of an equity audit would be that we need to resource remediation to deal with the trauma that a significant number of our young people will have experienced. Some young people will have come through lockdown relatively unscathed, other than missing their friends and being at school, but we need to address the needs of those young people who have been damaged and have experienced things, as part of their young lives, that we wish they had not.

The Convener: Beatrice Wishart, do you have a final question?

Beatrice Wishart: No, I will leave it at that stage. Thank you, convener, and thank you, panel.

The Convener: Thank you. That is helpful, because a few members have yet to come in.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): Some of the issues that I wanted to raise have been touched on by colleagues, so I will look at the requirements for blended learning and what teachers need in order to deliver that.

Before I do that, I pay tribute to teachers, who have been going to extraordinary lengths and

putting in a huge amount of effort to make home learning work. My central concern, which reflects what Larry Flanagan said about the home element of the blended learning in the new school year being much more teacher led, is that we might be asking teachers to deliver the impossible—to look after a classroom and lead learning at home. I would like to understand more detail about what is envisaged. How is it supposed to work? What additional support, such as additional people to lead that learning, is required to make that work effectively? I am happy to go to Mr Thewliss first, given that Mr Flanagan has had a lot more shots so far.

Jim Thewliss: Thank you for that, Mr Johnson, although I suspect that Mr Flanagan will have much more to say about it than I do.

Your point is well made and well understood. We are moving into a system in which we have to start school up again, look at the young people we will get through the door and devise a system that will support all young people, both learning in school in a different context and learning outwith school in an unknown context. There is a workload issue, and what is achievable must be clearly understood at the outset. The system must be based on the most effective way in which we can get young people to learn. It is also a resource issue. The system that we will have until the summer is not the same as the one that we will have in August. The notion of what blended learning will be also has to be shared with the profession in a certain way.

There will be guidance for professionals on what blended learning is coming out of one of the workstreams. It is not a thing; it is a way of responding to a set of circumstances that young people will find themselves in. It is easy to say "blended learning" and make it the same thing as distance learning and using IT to learn, but it is not the same thing. The discussions that we have had over the past eight or nine weeks have related to the hardware that is required and the platform on which we can deliver blended or distance learning. We are now into a discussion about pedagogy and how individual pedagogies, working throughout the system, can look at engagement with young people and how we support them at that point in their learning, given their attendance and non-attendance at school between now and getting back to normality.

11:00

I understand that I may not be getting to the nub of your question. However, it goes without saying that, if we are going to do that, we need resource in excess of what we have now. If we wish to work with every child in Scottish schooling—and each one of them has had their education disrupted to a

certain degree—we have to find the most effective and efficient way of using the resource that we have now and decide how to expand and develop it.

In doing that, we must also ensure that we keep our workforce sane and healthy, because we are in a deficit situation and the last thing we need is the workforce starting to fall off because we are putting far too much pressure on people.

To a degree, people understand what is ahead of them. No one is certain about how it will operate, but we understand that it is going to be different and that we are going to have to operate in an unfamiliar way. It is important that schools, school leadership and people in the wider community understand and have realistic expectations of what we can do and what the journey back to normality will be like, as well as how long it will take and all the other things that we will have to adjust and change before we get back to normality. We need to do that in such a way that young people recover and people in the system have confidence in what education has done and could go forward to do.

It is not as straightforward as dropping something called “blended learning” into the system and saying, “Here’s what it means to everyone,” and that will solve the problem—it is a very complex problem. Blended learning is sophisticated, and we have to understand the levels of sophistication to be able to engage with young people at the level of their understanding and their progression in learning in order to make sense of the way forward. There will be different implications for young people across the system: those within broad general education, those in the senior phase and those who, as we have discussed, have been disengaged from their learning. It is very complex and very sophisticated. The profession is up for it, but we have to take great care of the professionals out there and the ways in which they will address this particularly complex, demanding, time-consuming and stressful situation.

Sorry, I said that Larry would say more about that than I would. Go on, Larry—beat that.

Larry Flanagan: I agree with Jim. The question is well focused, because one of the most popular areas on our website is the advice on teachers’ health and wellbeing. Even in a working-from-home scenario, we have had to say to people that they need to stop sometimes and separate their work life from their personal life.

Excessive workload in schools has been an issue for a number of years, and it will be a challenge. The education recovery group guidance has advice about the importance of teacher wellbeing as a prerequisite to pupil wellbeing in

schools. However, there will be a need for constant reminders about that, because—even in a normal situation—being class committed for all their contractual hours, doing their preparation and corrections, along with all the additional parental liaison and reporting fills the week already, and that is before we even start to look at the challenges of blended learning. Therefore, we will have quite strong parameters around how all that will operate.

Something more positive is that, in response to the survey that we carried out, over 70 per cent of teachers said they felt that the way their school developed home learning was done in a collaborative and collegiate manner, that they had been involved in the discussions and that the expectations of both parents and their school were reasonable.

That arises out of a collegiate approach being taken and teachers being given a voice and agency in how things are delivered. Rather than being parked, the empowerment agenda that we were engaged in is critically important. Schools and teachers must feel that they have a level of control over what they are being asked to deliver. I hope that the increased collegiality and teacher agency that has been experienced by the majority of our members during the lockdown and home learning period continues into the new arrangement, because that is quite an important mechanism in terms of teachers’ sense of wellbeing.

Daniel Johnson: My next question follows on directly from those comments. One of the things that I have been struggling with relates to a fairly fundamental point of pedagogy. Rightly, at the heart of curriculum for excellence is the principle of teacher-led learning. During the past couple of months, teachers have by themselves created a lot of material for their pupils. That has required an extraordinary effort on their part, but it is absolutely what we would expect them to do under pre-existing practice.

However, with regard to home learning, in terms of the timeframes that are involved and the constraints around delivering something that is consistent and which is deliverable by parents, I wonder whether we need to do something that turns that approach on its head. I think that Larry Flanagan hinted at doing something in that regard when he talked about off-the-shelf content.

Do we need to reassess the experiences, outcomes and benchmarks to ensure that they make sense in the blended-learning environment? Do we need more off-the-shelf options for teachers to deliver, rather than requiring them to come up with a brand new set of materials? There have been some calls for an emergency curriculum—for want of a better term—to be

developed, in order to ensure that there is a degree of consistency. What are your thoughts about consistency in the curriculum and what delivery of blended learning requires? What will make it easier for teachers to deliver that approach?

Larry Flanagan: I have been involved in the workstream that is considering the curriculum. It has split the approach into two phases. The first is a recovery curriculum that will potentially run from August to October to cover the initial phase of people getting back into schools. In that phase, the focus will be very much on engagement, nurture and getting young people back into learning mode. Within that will be a recommended focus on literacy and numeracy, as key starting points.

After we had dealt with phase 1, there was a discussion about whether we would need a different curriculum, per se. The consensus was that we will not, because our curriculum is already founded on nurturing principles. We use an active learning approach and we engage with young people. We do not want pressure on time in the classroom to mean that people revert to didactic teaching, with the teacher at the front delivering the lesson and the pupils being recipients. We do not want to lose the positives that we have gained in curriculum for excellence about pupils working in groups and teachers interacting with pupils, because those aspects are core to how we nurture and support young people in any sense. There would be winners and losers if we were to go back to didactic teaching, in terms of how it operates.

The consensus is that we should not go for a different curriculum. There will be an initial focus on nurture, literacy and numeracy. Thereafter, we will, essentially, use the curriculum approach that curriculum for excellence envisages.

One of the reasons for the unity around the 11 August start date is that what is offered by Education Scotland will have a timeframe that is common across all schools. There will be an attempt to ensure that course content matches where schools would normally be in terms of progression—I am talking more about secondary schools in that regard—which means that the off-the-shelf approach would work, because it would match what is being done in schools.

I hesitate to bring it up, but the really big challenge will be around the senior phase and the Scottish Qualifications Authority, because there are, in relation to awards, parameters in operation that do not apply in the three-to-15 age group. It is useful that the Government has said that it will not collect the curriculum for excellence levels data and that, in the initial period, assessment will be focused on assessment of children's needs rather than on attainment. That sends a useful signal

about our priority being young people's wellbeing, in the first instance. However, if, as we get further into the year, in November and December, it seems that physical distancing will be in place for the foreseeable future, we will have to undertake on-going review of the curriculum and how it is working, because we might have to adapt to the circumstances.

Jim Thewliss: Daniel Johnson talked about the possibility of an emergency curriculum. We will not go anywhere near that. The recovery curriculum that Larry Flanagan talked about is not an emergency curriculum but is meant to bring us back to a level at which we can provide the consistency that we have lost, which Mr Johnson asked about. The recovery curriculum will take us back to curriculum for excellence and will deliver the consistency and the national approach that curriculum for excellence provides.

It is useful to have one or two distractions removed along the way. For example, the removal of the requirement for reporting on curriculum for excellence levels and so on has been useful for the education recovery group's discussions about how we can implement a recovery curriculum that will bring us to whatever normality will be, as and when that normality comes into play.

There are two key aspects to what we are doing. The first concerns the impact and influence that Education Scotland is having, and can have, in terms of how it supports that journey and supports the profession on that journey. The second is about the need to get out into the system. Workstream 1 has produced a definition of, and a guide to, blended learning. Sometime after August, those two key aspects within the recovery curriculum will take us to a place where we can start to refocus the system within broad general education, and where young people can find themselves a level in their learning that is consistent with recovery, then progression.

Larry Flanagan's point about the senior phase and qualifications was well made and is a matter of active discussion within the education recovery group. The future will determine how we will move in relation to that.

Daniel Johnson: I was going to ask a third question, but I recognise that we are only halfway through the list of members who want to ask questions, so I will leave it there.

The Convener: Thank you. That is extremely welcome. I was just going to say that half of members have not been able to ask their questions yet, so it would be helpful if members could be generous in giving up opportunities for questions, and if witnesses could give succinct answers.

11:15

Alex Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I will begin by highlighting practical issues that have arisen during home learning, which will have an impact on the success or otherwise of the blended learning model. They relate in particular to information technology infrastructure.

Many parents, pupils and teachers have told me that, even when they have the latest technology at home, lack of an IT support infrastructure is an issue. When somebody, whether it is a teacher or pupil, has an IT problem at home, there is nobody there to sort it. In many areas, there is no such service at all. Will there be provision made for that kind of service in the future?

A report has come out this morning from the University of Edinburgh's school of social and political science. One of its recommendations is that there should be a nationally run centralised online IT infrastructure. Would you both agree with that?

Jim Thewliss: The straightforward answer is yes—I would agree with that recommendation. Over the past 12 weeks, we have found out an awful lot about how we can support, and how we do not currently support, distance learning. Once we unravel that, we will be in a much stronger position with regard to that aspect of learning. We will be in our current position for a while, although we have developed and moved on significantly from where we were eight to 10 weeks ago. It is reasonable and sensible to assume that suggestions such as that one from the University of Edinburgh this morning will add to the discussion and debate in a positive way.

We are finding things out. I suspect that, once we have had time to recap and reflect, we will be in a much stronger position in relation to education of young people across the board. As we move forward, we can look at how we will expand and develop learning in ways that we have previously thought about but have not done, until this point. Necessity has been the mother of invention, and has put us in a place where we can start to do things an awful lot better than we have been doing them.

Alex Neil's point was well made. We are still finding our way through, but at some point, once we have young people back to where we feel they should be in their educational progress, we will reflect on the good things that have come out of the current situation.

Larry Flanagan: The lockdown experience has certainly shown up the issue of digital inequity. We know that there are challenges: for example, when there are two or three children in a household and only one laptop, so there has to be a rota for use of it.

In an EIS survey that was to do with colleges rather than schools, we found that many college students could access the internet only through their mobile phones because they did not have wi-fi at home that allowed them to access college platforms. There are huge issues in that regard. A dongle for wi-fi access can be very expensive. I have not seen the University of Edinburgh report, but I think that we need to address that inequity.

On the recommendation for a national IT support system, I would have thought that the glow system would provide that, given that it operates across all schools. It has had a chequered history, but it seems now to be being used much more effectively. As we move forward, Education Scotland will certainly use it as a platform for blended learning. Rather than reinvent the wheel, we could consider what might additionally be required to make Glow as interactive and user friendly as possible.

As we saw with Jim Thewliss's internet connection earlier, even when you have the technology, you sometimes need somebody to troubleshoot and resolve issues. That sort of technical back-up is important. We have experience of that with the e-Sgoil online platform in the Western Isles. That is probably an area for future development, but it is clearly critical to blended learning approaches.

Alex Neil: The examples that I have heard about are very similar to Jim Thewliss's experience this morning—there might be nothing wrong with his computer system, but he required IT support to get it sorted. That is a problem when it happens regularly with home working, let alone with blended learning and teaching.

I will ask a related question. The Government has announced funding of £9 million to help poor children to get laptops and so on. In some cases, that money will—in my view—have to be used to improve internet connections and to support basic servicing, as well as to buy hardware, such as laptops.

In your experience, and given what we know from the experience in general over the past 10 weeks or so, how many children will benefit from that £9 million? I think that additional funding will be required for poorer students, because I do not see £9 million filling the gap.

Larry Flanagan: I thought that the figure was £30 million. If you are asking whether we need more money, the answer is yes.

Alex Neil: Obviously, everybody says that they need mair money—we need mair money. However, I am thinking about the size and scale of the problem. Based on the survey that the EIS carried out, for example, can you tell us how many children, of the million or so kids in Scotland, have

no access to a computer or the technology that goes with it?

Larry Flanagan: In response to our survey, 54 per cent of teachers said that lack of internet access has been a key issue in engaging young people during lockdown. We had 26,000 teachers respond to our survey, so you can produce an estimate from that. The problem is certainly not insignificant.

As part of an equity audit, we would need to crunch the numbers, so that we would have a checklist, rather than dealing with the challenge based on anecdote. We should ask, for example, whether the young people in the school have access to, and can connect to, the internet, and we should address that.

The money that has been announced will go to local authorities and will, essentially, then go through schools. It is a bit like pupil equity funding in that respect; schools will be best placed to address need pupil by pupil.

Some local authorities will, clearly, see greater demand than others. Highland Council already has expensive IT platforms in use in its schools, and has issued all pupils with equipment. Glasgow City Council is rolling out distribution of iPads to all pupils. Work is being done to ensure that there is no digital inequity. However, I do not have figures that I can present to the committee now. We would need to look at specific demand then quantify what will be required in order to address that.

Alex Neil: It is a concern if the figure is anywhere near 54 per cent, and it would be at even half that amount. A prerequisite of ensuring that blended learning can work is poor kids having the same opportunities and access to computer equipment as middle-class kids from better-off backgrounds. It seems that IT is a major issue and a top priority to be addressed. We do not have a long time, between now and 11 August, to close the gap.

Larry Flanagan: Jim Thewliss and I absolutely agree that we must address that issue, otherwise blended learning will be off to a poor start.

The Convener: Do you want to come back in on that, Jim?

Jim Thewliss: Yes—briefly. I have two points to make that relate to the discussion that we had about the short-term issues that we need to address to get us through the current situation. Alex Neil's points about equity and the disadvantage that certain groups of young people will face are well made.

In the longer term, when we get through this, much greater discussion will be needed about how we address equity in learning and in Scottish society. One of the greatest ways in which equity

has been addressed in Scottish society is through the baby box; we need to look at expansion of digital awareness and support in the same context. It is not beyond the wit of man to do that. Glasgow can roll out distribution of iPads to kids in schools in Glasgow; can the national Government therefore consider how to take that forward across the school estate to enable young people to engage with learning in a manner that is about more than just getting themselves into the school building?

We need to learn from what we have done in the current period, and we need to invest for the future on the basis of the good lessons on how blended learning, distance learning, home-based learning and parent-supported learning can be taken forward digitally and otherwise. We need to learn from the situation that we find ourselves in. That is not to take anything away from the idea that, although there is £30 million in the short term, we should find more and do better things with it. We could then show you the good practice that we are talking about for the far future.

Alex Neil: That is helpful.

In the interests of time, I will roll my final three questions into one shorter question. A report out just this morning from the University of Edinburgh clearly shows that the educational attainment gap has got worse during the lockdown, that it will get even worse in the coming months and that very special policy prescriptions will be required to arrest that and to recover some of the lost ground. Three of the specific recommendations are that disadvantaged children should be offered catch-up classes during the summer, that they should be offered one-to-one or small group tuition over and above timetabled teaching time when school returns and that the exam diet for 2021 should be cancelled and we should move to a model of teacher judgment and continuous assessment. What are your general thoughts on those recommendations? Will they help?

Larry Flanagan: On the first one, local authorities are considering summer provision, but that is not so much about catch-up classes and more about engaging young people in activities—it is more a nurturing approach rather than an academic drive. To be honest, I think that that is appropriate. Following lockdown, getting young people to mix together and play together again is probably as important as looking to the educational challenges, which will still be there come August.

I agree with the second point, and we advocate the same. We think that, for those who are most disadvantaged, something such as a one-to-one mentoring system is potentially the most effective way of providing the additionality that will be required.

On the SQA, we certainly think that teachers' professional judgment should be central to accreditation. Discussions on that are on-going and there are big challenges. We are looking at what has to be done immediately to future proof next year's accreditation against further impact from Covid-19 and a further lockdown or cancellation of the diet. We have a strong view that we should be looking at exit qualifications to allow for more teaching time and pupil learning. However, whether what happens next year will be exactly what happens further into the future or is just a precursor is still up for discussion. I am totally comfortable with the idea of professional judgment and continuous assessment being centre stage, but a lot of teachers and parents like the exam diet—it is a traditional experience.

There is a big communication issue around changes. Jim Thewliss and I are clear that we want to minimise change, because staff, schools and students are going to be coping with enough without there being too much adjustment to accreditation. This year's qualifications will turn out okay, because professional judgment will be a good yardstick for accreditation.

11:30

Jim Thewliss: On the three recommendations that Alex Neil picked up, numbers 1 and 2 are about additionality in the system. It is sheer common sense that we start to look at that so that we can support disadvantaged young people.

A discussion on the third recommendation—the way in which we look at exams—was beginning to gain traction before we got into the Covid emergency. I am perfectly confident in echoing Larry Flanagan's comments about what we will find in the exam results based on teacher judgment come August this year. The profession's response to an emergency that was thrust on it over about 10 days was absolutely superb; because of that, the profession's position will come out of the situation enhanced.

Harking back to earlier parts of the conversation, I suggest that it is well worth our taking a longer-term look at how we conduct exam diets and discussing whether the way in which we do that is how it should be done in the 21st century. That argument is for another day, but we are well up for having that discussion.

My views are similar to Larry Flanagan's: learning should be promoted, as opposed to having a system in which everything stops for prelim exams at Christmas and no learning takes place, and everything stops for exams in May for three or four weeks and, again, no learning takes place.

That is a discussion for another time and place, but I am more than up for having it, because the way in which we conduct learning and the way in which we assess young people's attainment over their learning journey could be much better.

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I know that the digital side has been covered, but I want to go back to that area.

Over the past weeks and months, I have repeatedly asked—in response to ministerial statements and through oral and written parliamentary questions—for a figure for the number of young people who do not have access to the required technology, whether that is hardware or broadband. The answer that I have received from the Government again and again is that it does not know and that it is an issue for local authorities.

I heard Eileen Prior of Connect say on Radio Scotland this morning that she knows of at least one school in Edinburgh where 20 per cent of the young people do not have access to the required technology. If that is reflected across the whole country—it might be that it is not, or it could be worse in some areas and better in others—that would be a considerable number of young people without the access that they need, and would require far more than the 25,000 laptops that have been provided.

I am surprised that the Scottish Government does not know that figure. Should it have done the work to get an idea of the number of children who have been missing out so far?

Jim Thewliss: The answer to your question is not quite as straightforward as it might seem. There is a whole series of things that, in our current situation, it would have been great to have found out about or understood earlier on. We are now finding things out that it would have been useful to know and that, in the future, it will be important to know.

The question certainly has to be asked, but it has to be asked in a more sophisticated way than you are suggesting. It is not just about the number of young people who do not have access to a laptop; it is about the number of young people who do not have access to a laptop in a household in which there are all sorts of other things going on and in which there is no internet access. We need to ask those questions now and start to understand how to develop learning in a digital context, because we have found out things that will be useful to take forward in the future.

I understand why you are asking the question, but finding an answer at the minute will probably not take the discussion much further forward. We need to find a way through, do what we can,

reflect on what we have learned and move forward in a positive way.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: I want to come back on that. If we cannot ask the question now—to reflect the situation over the past few months—how can anyone respond in terms of a policy of providing laptops? Surely we need to have an idea of what the problem is now so that, by 11 August, when schools return with a blended learning model, we have an idea of young people's needs.

You are absolutely right to say that access to broadband is an issue. I have asked questions about that, too. I have written to the directors of education in all councils and some have come back to me fairly quickly with the figures that I asked for. It is not as though that information, or an estimate, was not available. I am struggling to understand why the Scottish Government could not do the same—obtain that information and make it available to us—so that it can be involved in the planning process.

Jim Thewliss: I cannot answer on behalf of the Scottish Government, but the information that we are getting at the moment will reflect the response that we can make at the moment. There are certain responses being made. Between now and August, we can respond in a much more sophisticated and detailed way. At the moment, we are taking the opportunity to deal with the situation to the extent that we can. At some time in the future, we will start to take a more sophisticated approach than just stemming the dam, as we are doing at the moment.

Larry Flanagan: About 18 months ago, the EIS published a document called "Face Up to Child Poverty: Poverty-proofing your school". With Education Scotland, we are developing a training project on the same concept. In that document, we told teachers not to assume that children have certain things, such as digital access, as a norm. Schools have started to develop a lot of online digital homework, and we have had say, "You might be building in a barrier for young people whose lives are blighted by poverty."

The issue of digital inequity has been there for a while, and the committee is right to highlight it. Not that long ago, I spoke at a housing association in Glasgow that had done a survey of its tenants, less than half of whom had laptops. I happen to know which school serves that catchment area, and it would probably come as a surprise to the school to find that so many children come from backgrounds where such access is not available, because other parts of the catchment area are relatively affluent.

I think that there is a need, as part of the equity audit, to assess the situation with regard to the availability of technology. Some councils will have

a digital strategy whereby they are already supplying equipment. In Glasgow, for example, there is a ready-made calculation, because the council is rolling out the provision of iPads. Schools would probably be best placed to interrogate the situation in that regard. Regardless of whether we have the figures now, we need to assess the situation as part of our approach.

Last week, we had a report from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. Although we are concentrating on digital access, we know that there are still tens of thousands of pupils who do not have a table to work at to do their homework—in other words, lack of access to digital technology is simply one part of the poverty that they are suffering from. Those young people do not have isolated spaces where they can do homework. They are working in households with limited accommodation. When it comes to addressing the impact of poverty on young people's chances, we need to consider much more than just the digital aspect. That aspect is important, because it will be part of the platform in the future, but we should look beyond it in the context of the equity audit.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: You have made the point that parents need to be supported in helping with learning at home; it is not just on the technical side that support is required.

I also know that there are schools in my Highlands and Islands region where staff are having to go in and print off huge amounts of information to send out—there is paper and physical content as well. I think that we have touched on this, but is there more that the Scottish Government could do, or is doing, to support that work? There is a large commitment to physical support from individual schools and teachers, perhaps particularly for primary school children, which touches on Daniel Johnson's earlier point.

Larry Flanagan: I apologise for revisiting my earlier answer, but I think that there is an additional resource demand in relation to how schools are coping with lockdown—and how they will cope with blended learning come August, I hope.

There is an internal battle in each council around resources, with different departments looking for additional resource to deal with Covid-19. The discussions that are taking place between COSLA and the Scottish Government around finance are quite critical to the ability of councils to enable schools to address the issue. The rules have been relaxed to allow the pupil equity fund to be used as part of the response to Covid-19, which is welcome. However, the demands just keep growing, so there is real pressure around additional resource.

I have some sympathy with COSLA on the broader issue, but I am also keen for education to have some priority within COSLA's thinking because, in the past, we have had to have ring fencing around the education budgets to make sure that they were spent where they were targeted. I do not want to get embroiled in the discussion between COSLA and the Scottish Government, but additional resource is certainly a requirement.

Jim Thewliss: The notion of resource is an issue, of course, but one development over the past two to three years is the empowerment agenda, with schools showing themselves to be very adept at responding to identified issues within their own particular catchments and school communities. The whole empowerment discussion has been supported at the school level by the way in which schools have been seen to use PEF money in a manner that targets and focuses on specific areas.

There is another part to the issue, which perhaps goes a bit wider than Jamie Halcro Johnston suggested and is not related to just sending out newsletters and whatever else to parents. One of the discussions that we have been having with School Leaders Scotland members is about how we communicate with parents and the level of communication that we have with them. It is about engaging with not just the whole parent body but with individual members of the parent body in a way that is meaningful to them in the context of their own child. Whether that is done electronically, by telephone, by letter or by actually going out and knocking at their door, the whole concept of communication at a point such as the one that we are at just now is absolutely critical to everything else that we have discussed this morning in relation re-engaging young people with their learning and bringing families into the learning context.

How you communicate, whether electronically or on paper, is not just a matter of money. This is about the whole notion of what you understand about communication and what communication means, not to you as the communicator but to the people with whom you are trying to communicate. We have pushed the message regularly to headteachers over the past two months or so that they should find ways to communicate, that they should not depend on just one method and that they should not believe that, just because they communicate, the people they are aiming at will pick that up. That is another aspect to your question.

11:45

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): The EIS submission refers to specific

challenges, such as physical distancing, for pupils with additional support needs who struggle with conditions. I have two excellent ASN schools in my constituency. Is there enough support and guidance for teachers who deal with children with additional support needs? What options are there to do more? Should the guidance come from local authorities or should it be national guidance?

PPE was discussed earlier. Can you clarify whether that should be sourced from local authorities or elsewhere?

Jim Thewliss: If you had asked me that question eight or nine weeks ago, you would have got a much more robust answer than you will get this morning. Things have moved on.

There have been challenges in how we engage with young people with ASN in the current circumstances. There were challenges early on in relation to PPE, distancing and, I have to say, the level of information and the level of understanding of that information.

Through the experience in the hubs, we have learned a substantial amount quickly. We are in a much better position in relation to how the education sector will start to come out of lockdown now and certainly in August. We are not yet in the best position, but we are certainly in a much better position than we were eight to 10 weeks ago.

The debate between COSLA and the Scottish Government over funding that and everything else lies at the heart of the questions that you are asking.

Larry Flanagan: There is a huge range of additional support needs. Most of the discussion is focused on specialist provision in ASN schools rather than on ASN support in mainstream schools. As Jim Thewliss alluded, that has been maintained in the hub provision for a fairly limited number of students, and there is now quite detailed operational guidance on providing that support.

There was an agreement that PPE would be made available for staff to deploy in certain situations. There are young people with specialist needs for whom close proximity is a requirement. I am not sure whether the source of the PPE is the national health service or the local authority. In ASN schools, the equipment has been provided after initial discussion of its value. That will need to be maintained. I am mainly talking about its use with pupils for whom 2m physical distancing cannot work because of their needs.

More generally, a lot of people have emotional and behavioural needs. In our survey, staff in hubs found the emotional needs of ASN young people harder to address—those young people are in a stressful situation because it is a different scenario

from the norm. That is when you need staff to spend time with young people, talk them through it and help them to reach a more comfortable state.

As Jim Thewlis said, you probably can apply some good learning from the hub experience around ASN schools taking back a larger role. Not all additional support needs pupils had to attend the hubs—some were looked after at home by parents or carers. Looking ahead to August, we are now as well placed as we can be to continue that provision.

Rona Mackay: My final question is on an issue that Beatrice Wishart touched on: the rising number of children who are experiencing domestic abuse during lockdown. We have received submissions from Scottish Women's Aid, Children 1st, Aberlour and many other organisations that consider that there needs to be a more co-ordinated approach to keeping children safe during this time and that the definition of vulnerable should include children who are experiencing domestic abuse. The organisations believe that such children should have priority access to learning in hubs, and they suggest that local authorities could work in conjunction with them through the referral pathways. What is your view on that? Is there enough interaction with organisations that deal with those issues day in and day out to help at this particularly concerning time?

Jim Thewliss: There is and always has been a level of interaction between organisations and schools through the way in which the getting it right for every child approach is progressed in schools. As I mentioned, the situation has changed during the past 12 weeks or so, and we all have to be more highly attuned and receptive to the signs that young people exhibit when they come into schools. That being the case, we must up the game in relation to the protocols and level of interaction that we have, which vary across the country. Schools cannot deal with that issue most effectively through their own systems. If, as you suggest, we get the systems right and can access the right people at the right time, we can access the support and back-up that we will need. The point is well made, and we are attuned to that issue.

Larry Flanagan: Our equality department has been doing a lot of work on domestic abuse, and we are networked into a number of bodies that campaign on the issue. As our profession is predominantly female, we have also been making sure that our members are aware of how to deal with domestic abuse if they experience it.

I accept that we need interagency working on the issue, because undoubtedly there has been an increased incidence of domestic abuse during the lockdown, and it has probably been among the

families with whom schools have found it the most difficult to keep in contact. A lot of work has been done by pastoral care staff in the secondary sector and by promoted staff in the primary sector, but, as I said, our survey indicated that contact has not been maintained with a significant number of pupils. The potential impact on young people is a big concern.

Throughout June, there will be an attempt to re-engage with as many vulnerable young people as possible as part of the preparation for August. As I said, I am not convinced that we will make a lot of progress on that in the next couple of weeks, but it will be a priority for schools when they restart to ensure that those young people go back into a nurturing environment and that, if there is trauma to be addressed, we have the resources to do that.

The Convener: I will bring in Dr Allan, although it might be by voice only.

Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): My question is for Mr Flanagan, who touched on the issue of the senior phase and exams. The committee has heard the SQA's take on this year's diet of qualifications—we must talk about qualifications rather than about exams this year. It would be good to hear the teacher's perspective, particularly on estimation. Has there been enough clarity and information about what is being asked of teachers this year?

Larry Flanagan: All the estimates are in, and I think that we are in a good place with accreditation.

During the process, we received a lot of feedback on what was regarded as poor communication from the SQA—there have been some challenges in that regard. We have had a lot of dialogue with the SQA, and Jim Thewliss and I are on the qualifications contingency group, so I would not say that we have not had the necessary discussions. However, the EIS distributed to its members what I consider to be a more detailed explanation of what was happening than what the SQA put out.

The SQA is relying on professional judgment, but, at times, it felt as though it was doing that only because it had no other choice. It could have embraced the process a bit more positively.

I think that the estimates are quite straightforward. I was not convinced that ranking was a requirement. At one stage, I thought that the process was becoming overly complex. However, we have got through it and I know—I am sure that Jim Thewliss will testify to this, too—that there has been a huge effort on the part of secondary teachers to get it right for young people. The estimates have been pored over in departments and schools, with local authority oversight, and I

think that young people can have some confidence in the outcome.

The one area that is perhaps still up for discussion is the SQA's statistical moderation of the estimates. We have been clear that the SQA should not allow a computer model to overturn professional judgment. If the statistical modelling throws up what appears to be a discrepancy, there should be a professional dialogue between the SQA and the presenting centre to find out the reasons for it and, hopefully, an agreed outcome should emerge from that. If, come August, a significant number of schools are seeing their estimates overturned, that will generate a raft of appeals. If that happens on a significant scale, it will undermine the process, so it is critically important that that professional dialogue takes place between now, when the estimates are in, and 4 August—I think—when they are published, so that people can be confident that the published results are a fair reflection of what students have achieved on the back of the year's study.

Jim Thewliss: The process around the estimates during the eight to nine weeks since the decision was made to take the exams out of the system has revealed how robust the assessment system in schools is. We are moving with a degree of confidence about the professional judgment that teachers have shown in relation to young people's achievement and how that will be reflected in the awards and the grades come August.

The point about communication is well made. Like the EIS, we had to spend time reflecting on the SQA's communications in order to inform colleagues exactly what they meant in terms of what was going to happen in their schools. Being on the qualifications contingency group and transmitting that information into it has been fine. The group has proceeded in a positive way—to give credit where credit is due, the SQA's response to the criticism about its communications has been a good one.

12:00

Larry Flanagan made a critical point about what we are seeing in relation to professional judgment and how schools have conducted their way through the process. Communication means dialogue. It does not mean the passing on of information relating to something that is conducted against a statistical model. It is important to conduct a dialogue and progress that discussion in the context of the teacher's understanding of the child's learning, and then, if grades are to be adjusted, to look at it in that way. The time is available to do that, and it would be time well spent.

If we do not do that and we have a plethora of appeals, all that that will do is distract from the work that teachers will need to be doing in August, because it will be teachers who deal with the appeals process. If we take the time to do the aforesaid, the system will be able to progress with confidence and understanding that what the teachers said reflects their professional judgment in a sustainable way.

Dr Allan: Can I take it from what you have just said that you anticipate an increased number of appeals this year?

Jim Thewliss: I do not know whether I am clever enough to answer that question. There is potential for that if we do not get it right between now and August. Larry Flanagan and I have said that, if the SQA has an issue with the estimates that teachers have placed, the SQA should start to talk to us about it. It should not just apply a modelling exercise and take it forward from there; it should talk to us now.

Dr Allan: In the interest of time, I will make that my final question.

The Convener: Thank you, Dr Allan. I appreciate that, and I appreciate everyone bearing with the committee today. Mr Greer is next.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): I will stick with the theme of this year's alternative to the exam diet. I have a couple of questions on the process.

You might be aware that the Equality and Human Rights Commission has raised some concerns about whether the SQA is meeting its legal duties under the Equality Act 2010. The SQA has committed to the committee that it will conduct and publish an equality impact assessment, but it has not committed to when it will publish that, and it has confirmed to us that it will not publish the methodology for its moderation system until the results are released, in August.

If you will forgive me, I will roll several questions into one for the sake of time. Has the SQA shared with you enough information about what it is doing on equalities for you to be confident that it has followed the right process? Do you have any views on when its equality impact assessment should be published? Do you agree with its withholding the methodology for its moderation system until after the results are issued?

Larry Flanagan: It has not really shared the detail of the statistical modelling, but I have been an SQA examiner—Jim Thewliss may have been one as well—and it does not take much to work out what the modelling is going to be. The issue is to do with the weightings within that. Ranking used to be a familiar part of the estimates process. It

was there to avoid unnecessary appeals, because it corrected things in advance.

I am quite happy for the SQA to share the detail, although I am not sure that it will cast much light. The bigger issue is how it applies that, because the equity issue that has come up the most in the discussions is that students from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to be at the borders or thresholds of some of the grade passes.

If the SQA uses its statistical modelling to create a grade boundary—even though there have been no exams—the young people who will be most disadvantaged will be those who just miss out on the grade boundary. Our argument is that grade boundaries cannot be established on the basis of statistical modelling. If the estimates in a particular school or a particular department appear to be stronger or weaker than the modelling would have suggested, the SQA needs to speak to that school or department to find out whether there are reasons for that. There might well be reasons for that. For example, it might be the case that, last year, it did not have two maths teachers, whereas, this year, it has had two maths teachers, so the course has been delivered more effectively.

I come back to the point that we avoid inequity being built into the system by making sure that a professional dialogue takes place before the results are finalised. I am concerned that, if such a dialogue does not take place, the modelling will disadvantage some young people. We know from our working knowledge of the situation that the students who will be on the threshold will include a significant number of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. There is concern about that, but there is a solution, which is to make sure that a professional dialogue takes place.

I am not sure why the SQA is not willing to explain the mechanics of its modelling. We will not see the result of its modelling until the results are released, but if SAGE—the scientific advisory group for emergencies—can explain how it gets to the R number, I am pretty sure that the SQA can explain how its modelling works. I, along with most of the profession, would be happy to see that published. We told the SQA that the more people understand the process, the more chance there is of its being effective, so I am not totally on board with the SQA's reluctance to share that information.

Ross Greer: I would like to follow up on a specific point with Mr Flanagan before we get a broader response from Mr Thewliss.

You mentioned that the weightings are the key part of the methodology that is unknown. Do you have any understanding of the relative weighting that is being given to, for example, the rankings, in relation to which the issue of false precision has

been raised, or the use of school-level historical data? Has the SQA communicated to you the relative weighting that will be given to such data sources?

Larry Flanagan: The short answer is no. We know that those data sources are all part of the mix, but we do not know what the balance is.

I might have misled you by using the term “weightings”. I think that we are talking about iterations of a process rather than specific weightings but, again, I am guessing, because the SQA has not shared that with any of us.

Jim Thewliss: I want to emphasise a few points that Larry Flanagan has made. The SQA has not shared a great deal with us. We have been in the game for a long time, and it is reasonable for us to be able to work out what it is doing, so I cannot understand why the SQA is not prepared to share details of the process. I do not think that it would do the SQA or the system any harm if it were to do that.

I will turn to the issue of young people who find themselves on the cusp between grades. Going back to the discussion about teacher estimates, the notion of inferred attainment and the knowledge that teachers have of young people and of how they learn and progress through their learning was raised as something that schools should use in putting together their estimates. It seems a wee bit strange to say at the beginning of the process that inferred attainment is something that schools should be looking at and then to apply a statistical model at the end of the process, because those things seem to run counter to each other.

That is why there is the notion of using inferred attainment at the start and, if there is an issue at the end of the process in relation to the grade, having a conversation at that point so that the explanation of what inferred attainment has meant in relation to a candidate will become clear and sustainable—or unsustainable. That gives a certain logic to why the grade that the person has got is the right grade rather than the grade that the school estimated, and it enables people to understand that. That process is open, transparent and understandable, and it enables the school to explain what has happened.

Ross Greer: My final question is about next year's exams. I believe that the EIS has already called for continuous assessment rather than end-of-year exams to be used for national 5 and highers, in particular, because of the impact that blended learning will have, which we discussed earlier, and because of the uncertainty about whether a second wave of the virus might result in end-of-year exams being cancelled again.

Given that the SQA has said that it intends to run exams as normal next year, what do you believe the consequences will be, particularly for the attainment gap, of running a normal exam diet in 2021 after an unpredictable period of blended learning leading up to it?

Larry Flanagan: I think that the SQA has said that it is planning for the diet. That is a kind of holding position, because it would be planning for the diet in the normal course of things. I think that it is still awaiting a decision about what is going to happen.

You touch on an important issue. If a course takes 120 hours to teach—that is, 160 hours minus 40 hours of consolidation—and you know that pupils are not going to get that amount of teaching, is it fair to present them with an exam that is based on 120 hours of learning?

The only way that schools can deliver 120 hours of learning for those pupils is by keeping the pupils in the first three years of secondary school at home for a year. We might be able to prioritise a little bit, but we are up against it in terms of the time that is available. At the moment, the discussion is centring on how we can reconcile those two irreconcilable objectives.

Without breaching the confidence of the discussions, I can say that the SQA is saying that the best way of maintaining the integrity of its current system is to maintain the current arrangements, whereas others are saying that, because they cannot deliver the teaching and learning for those arrangements, something will have to change.

There is discussion about the possibility that unit accreditation could be used for secondary 4 pupils and that there could be an exit qualification. That would create 10 to 12 weeks of additional teaching time for pupils in S4, 90 per cent of whom go into S5 anyway. Most of those who leave school go into college apprenticeships, and the unit accreditation would articulate with that. The EIS is advocating that approach, but it still leaves a challenge with regard to the pupils who are leaving after S5 and S6.

I do not think that it is good enough just to hope that physical distancing will ease off at some time so that we will get some more teaching time. I think that we must plan for the worst, which could involve disruption to teaching and learning. This year, the examination diet was cancelled at the end of the courses, so the courses had been delivered. However, if we had to have a school lockdown in January, we would lose teaching time. We must have something that assures the reliability of the accreditation, and the use of professional judgment is a key fallback in that regard. The debate is about whether to work

towards a diet or to have a continuous assessment approach.

A decision on the approach must be made quite soon, because pupils are already in senior-phase classes and teachers are delivering coursework that is based on the existing courses. We do not want to waste time. We need to know what is happening so that we can plan for next year.

12:15

Jim Thewliss: My views on the issue are exactly the same as Larry Flanagan's. It is reasonable to expect an organisation such as the SQA to have a plan for the future. Given that none of us knows what the future is or exactly what will happen in August, when young people go back to school, the decision must be made quickly. If it is made quickly, that will allow the system that is put in place to start working to support young people to get the best from it.

This year, we were fortunate in that, when we decided to pull the exam diet, most of the work had been done. We would want to be in that position again. If we plan for a future in which young people, their parents and the schools understand what will happen in that year in school life, we will be in a much better position to support all young people in the system. Ross Greer's point about the attainment gap was well made. We support everyone in the system if there is certainty; we put everyone in the system at a disadvantage if there is uncertainty.

The Convener: The next question is from Mr Greene. *[Interruption.]* Can we have Mr Greene's microphone on, please?

Jamie Greene: Thank you—I was waiting patiently for the microphone.

The discussion has been interesting, and it is a shame that we are running out of time. I have a question about something that jumped out at me in what has just been said. Larry Flanagan said that it would be better if, when the SQA is moderating grades—in some cases, that will be downwards—instead of doing that and then relying on the appeals process, it contacted schools and teachers to get some rationale for the grades. The SQA might then not have to mark down, which would perhaps reduce the number of appeals. That sounds like a sensible suggestion.

The bigger point is that, when the grades come out, on 4 August, a huge number of people might want to appeal, and it is teachers and schools that will have to pull together the evidence for those appeals. This week, the SQA has reiterated that it will not accept appeals unless there is evidence to support them. It is teachers who will have to pull that evidence together, and that will be a week

before the schools are to reopen. How on earth will teachers put together that evidence when they are supposed to be planning for the reopening of schools? It seems to me that there is a huge timing clash. Do you have any views on that?

Larry Flanagan: On the first point, Jim Thewliss and I are advocating that, if the statistical modelling throws up results that are too positive or too negative, there should be a dialogue with the school to try to reach agreement on that. Having an understanding on that might avoid a raft of appeals from schools.

When we get to the appeals process, schools will submit the evidence on which they made the judgment in the first place. The difficulty is that the SQA is saying that it will consider only the evidence, whereas, in the estimates process, it said that progression could be inferred from classroom observation. The estimates are therefore based on more than just the physical evidence that will end up in the appeals. If the number of appeals is beyond the normal range, processing them will become a huge issue for secondary schools, particularly if some of the appeals are for students who are moving to university, who need results, and so will have to be prioritised.

We should manage the system on the basis of professional dialogue, which has been the basis so far. Schools have had professional dialogue on the estimates, and that has involved more than just individual teachers—the process has been led by principal teachers, and there have been discussions with senior management teams and local authorities. The whole process has already been moderated by professional dialogue, and the SQA should continue that approach in order to minimise the potential for appeals, come August.

The Convener: Mr Thewliss, I know that you have partly answered that question in your previous answers. Do you have anything to add?

Jim Thewliss: I cannot disagree with what has been said, but I have one point to add to it. No one really knows what life will be like, come 4 August, in relation to getting people into school and how we will physically start to get evidence to produce appeals. That is another wee issue to add to the discussion.

We are talking about pre-empting a challenge before it becomes a challenge. If we continue the process of professional dialogue on teacher estimates that has been conducted all the way through the system, we will have a chance of giving the system credibility. If that is not done, it will be taken the other way.

The Convener: I have a final question, which I appreciate is quite a big one. Given the lack of time, if you would prefer to answer it by writing to

the committee with information, we would be more than happy to receive that.

The question is about the challenges for specific subject areas—particularly science, physics and maths—which the committee has looked at in the past. Larry Flanagan said that the challenge is possibly the biggest curriculum challenge of the century, and Jim Thewliss talked about getting back to the previous curriculum as was. There are concerns about science and practical science teaching, given that we have also lost a number of technicians from schools. In music, which has been very close to the committee's heart, it is difficult to see or understand whether there is an impact on pupils' learning to play wind and brass instruments, in particular, from the risks associated with Covid-19 or how there can possibly be a socially distanced choir or orchestra in a school.

Jim Thewliss: Trying to answer that question in the time that we have left is a wee bit of a challenge. However, the point about the curricular provision in schools is well made. The examples that you have touched on are perhaps the most obvious ones, but there will be an impact on all sorts of other aspects of the practical curriculum in schools and the way in which it is delivered.

In home economics and physical education, whole areas of the curriculum—the preparation of food, for example—depend on close physical contact, and there are aspects that are deeply ingrained in the curricular provision and how young people's progress is assessed. There are major issues relating to how the curriculum will be delivered. Even if young people can be in school in their normal circumstances, how can we develop those aspects and take them forward? How can a higher physical education course be taken forward with distance learning and young people being at home? There are huge questions about how the curriculum for those subjects can be delivered.

Larry Flanagan: Those challenges are acknowledged and are being looked at through on-going workstreams. I am talking not just about qualifications, but there are currently elements of some qualifications that could not be delivered. In drama, for example, there are performance challenges. In craft and design, there are challenges when the best health and safety approach is that a person should be 2m away from a child who is using a lathe for the first time. There are considerations around all those things.

I think that there is general agreement that we need to find a way to make those subjects work as opposed to their becoming marginalised because of the challenges. That might mean making modifications to what is delivered. Jim Thewliss mentioned PE. If physical or team sports are not

allowed, PE departments might have to look at alternatives.

That is a big workstream that is being looked at, but there are no immediate solutions. As with many such things, there is a challenge.

The Convener: I am sure that updates on that, if you have any, would be of interest to the committee. We would not want subjects to disappear from the curriculum and opportunities for young people to be limited, even in the short term.

The session has been a mammoth one, and I appreciate everyone—particularly Larry Flanagan and Jim Thewliss—giving their time. I hope that you understand that the meeting has been so long because of the importance that the committee attaches to the areas that we have discussed. It has been an excellent session. Thank you very much for your attendance.

12:25

Meeting continued in private until 13:09.

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