



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Education and Skills Committee

Monday 27 July 2020

Session 5



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

© Parliamentary copyright. Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body

Information on the Scottish Parliament's copyright policy can be found on the website - www.parliament.scot or by contacting Public Information on 0131 348 5000

Monday 27 July 2020

CONTENTS

	Col.
DECISION ON TAKING BUSINESS IN PRIVATE	1
SCHOOL EDUCATION AND EARLY LEARNING: COVID-19	2

EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE

16th 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:

Councillor Stephen McCabe (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities)
John Swinney (Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Roz Thomson

LOCATION

Virtual Meeting

Scottish Parliament

Education and Skills Committee

Monday 27 July 2020

[The Convener opened the meeting at 16:00]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Clare Adamson): Good afternoon and, on this dreich summer day, a warm welcome to the 16th meeting in 2020 of the Education and Skills Committee. Our first item of business is a decision on whether to take in private item 3, to allow discussion of today's evidence. Does any member object to taking item 3 in private? As no member objects, we agree to take item 3 in private.

School Education and Early Learning: Covid-19

16:01

The Convener: Agenda item 2 is on the impact of the coronavirus outbreak on school education and early learning. We welcome to the committee John Swinney MSP, who is the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, and Councillor Stephen McCabe, who is the children and young people spokesperson for the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities. The cabinet secretary will make an opening statement on behalf of the education recovery group.

The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney): On Thursday last week, I made a detailed statement to Parliament in which I outlined the progress that we have made towards fully reopening schools in August, and I set out how we are working with partners to address the wider impacts of the virus on the health and wellbeing, educational progress and attainment of our children and young people. It is a moral and educational imperative that we support our children and young people to get back to school as soon as we know that it is safe for them to do so.

The education recovery group, which I chair with Councillor McCabe, draws together the Scottish Government, our partners in local government, professional associations, education advisers and representatives of parents to prepare our education system to recover from the disruption of Covid. As part of that work, the group has received scientific advice from the Covid-19 advisory sub-group on education and children's issues. The education recovery group has taken that advice into consideration and, last Friday, finalised guidance to provide for the safe reopening of primary and secondary schools on a full-time basis for all pupils.

The guidance clearly sets out the approach that must be taken, including a number of specific risk-mitigation measures that will need to be introduced in all educational settings in order that they provide a safe environment for staff and pupils. As part of our statutory three-weekly review process, a final decision on reopening schools will be taken by the Scottish Government Cabinet on Wednesday, and that will be set out to Parliament by the First Minister on Thursday. That decision will be based on whether prevalence of Covid within our community is at a sufficiently low level to enable schools to fully reopen. Given the development of the guidance that has taken place, a decision that we will reopen schools is the more likely.

Throughout the crisis, there has been an important focus on supporting children and young people who rely on schools, early learning and childcare because those places offer safety and stability that they would otherwise lack. That is why learning hubs for vulnerable children and key workers have remained open over the summer and why, as we plan for safe reopening of schools, meeting the learning needs of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds continues to be a priority.

That is also why I reiterate my commitments to taking stock of the impact of Covid-19 on equity and to closing the attainment gap. Our shared vision for education in Scotland remains—that we achieve excellence and equity for all children. Our partners in local government are as committed as we are to getting our children back to school. Having witnessed closely the endeavours of colleagues across the sector in recent months, I am confident that we will, if we continue to work together, be in the best position to support our children and young people to return safely to education and to achieve that aim. I look forward to discussing the issues with the committee this afternoon.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): Good afternoon, cabinet secretary and Councillor McCabe. The guidance on what happens with testing and positive cases in schools is still vague, which is adding to anxiety in school communities. For example, it is still not clear what the repercussions would be for a pupil's school if a Scottish Government tracer were to tell the pupil to isolate at home. I have pointed before to protocols that exist in New Zealand, where a school or early learning service that has a confirmed or probable case of Covid-19 must close for 72 hours to allow contact tracing and then, potentially, for a further 14 days. Why is it not possible to have a similar national clarity in Scotland?

John Swinney: The answer to that question has to be set within the general context of what is becoming increasingly obvious, which is that the test and protect approach in Scotland is very effective, as we have seen vividly in a couple of examples in Dumfries and Galloway and, more recently, in Lanarkshire, where individual positive cases have been identified and the test and protect arrangements have come into play. Contact tracing is undertaken and individuals are required to isolate. In those examples, we have seen clear evidence that the tracing system is working effectively to follow up contacts. That would be no different in an educational setting from what it would be in any other setting in our society.

Our guidance makes it clear that two confirmed positive cases in a school within a 14-day period

would be defined as an incident within that school, so it would be necessary for the school to contact one of the health protection teams that are available in all localities around the country. However, because of the intense scrutiny that is being applied to every positive case—not just in educational settings—I doubt that that contact would be required.

I reassure Beatrice Wishart that, on a daily basis, when information arises about positive cases, our health protection teams around the country seek information about connections between those cases in order that they can identify possible clustering of activity. That approach was the core of our recent response to the cases in Lanarkshire.

Beatrice Wishart: I have one more question, which is on the time to implement change. New guidance is to be issued later this week, and teachers will have two in-service days before they welcome children back to the classroom. The expectation is that they will be ready with a flexible system that will be unlike anything that has been worked with before. We have seen the speed with which big decisions are being made and enforced following incidents in Spain over the weekend, so teachers and school staff might have to respond quickly to new developments. Would you acknowledge that that will create an extra burden for teachers and school staff?

John Swinney: I acknowledge that these are challenging times for everybody in our society, and it is no different for schools. I freely concede—although it is not really a concession; rather, I am happy to say it—that I have some anxiety about the reopening of schools, because of the degree of change that it represents to arrangements in our society. For four months, we have been in a situation in which we have had limited gatherings and limited contact between individuals. The opening of schools will be a significant next step in the move out of lockdown.

I readily acknowledge the significance of the point that Beatrice Wishart has made, which is that good, clear advice and guidance should be available to school staff the length and breadth of the country. I am confident that we will, because of work of the education recovery group, be able to deliver such advice to members of the teaching profession and other school staff around the country.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): Blended learning was predicated on a reduced number of pupils in schools being the inevitable consequence of the need for social distancing. Distancing was provisionally dropped at the end of June but now appears to be back for high schools, which are simultaneously being told not to reduce capacity. How are schools expected to distance pupils when

classrooms and buildings are no bigger than they were in March?

John Swinney: The advice is based on scientific evidence, which demonstrates that young people are at low risk and have very limited prevalence in the transmission of Covid. However, the evidence becomes more equivocal on that as we move up through the ages of young people.

The guidance that has been put together recognises that and encourages schools to do what they can to maintain physical distancing between pupils. The guidance gives examples of how that should be done; for example, in terms of circulation of young people through schools, spacing within classrooms and variation in class sizes in order to level out different groupings within individual subjects to ensure that there are no concentrations of pupils in areas. The guidance goes into a considerable range of options about how those things can be done through use of space in schools and encouraging young people to physically distance. As a consequence of the strategic decisions, we can engage young people in the learning process and enable them to reconnect with their education.

Councillor Stephen McCabe (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities): There will be limited opportunities for social distancing in secondary schools, where, for example, the roll of the school is high. Mr Swinney has given examples that are in the guidance, but they will not be applicable in all circumstances.

Ross Greer: The guidance on masks seems to be out of line with their purpose. We wear masks to protect each other, not ourselves. The guidance says that anyone who wants to wear one should be allowed to do so, but they are effective only if almost all of us wear them to protect each other. If masks are required in shops, buses and trains for anyone over the age of five, why are they not required in high schools? On what basis was it decided that distancing was worth recommending for high schools but mask wearing was not?

John Swinney: There are a couple of important points to make about face coverings. First, members of staff are being encouraged, when they are in classrooms, to maintain physical distance from pupils. However, the guidance supports members of staff wearing some form of face covering where that is not possible. The guidance also makes it clear that, in any circumstance, an individual who wishes to wear a face covering should be able to do so as part of the general societal efforts to provide protection. The judgment in the guidance was predicated on the fact that, in a school environment, the wearing of face coverings over a protracted period of time might not be conducive to a satisfactory educational experience for young people.

16:15

As part of the process of reopening schools, we have to be willing to revisit particular issues. If we think that there is a need to take further action or to move on issues, we should be open to doing so. The education recovery group has developed the guidance on the basis of the best information that is available. However, as colleagues know, there is a rapidly expanding information base on Covid, which might require us to do different things at different times.

Councillor McCabe: There will be circumstances in which face coverings and additional personal protective equipment will be required. Those will be determined by risk assessments that are carried out at school level; for example, PPE will be required for members of staff who are required to provide personal care for young people. With the return to school, there is also the issue of building confidence in the system, because there is a lot of anxiety in school communities and the wider community about the return to school. A number of stakeholders were involved in developing the education recovery group guidance. Although the scientific advice might suggest that face coverings would not be required other than in the type of circumstances that I mentioned, we are trying to a degree to address that anxiety and to take members of staff, pupils and their parents with us on the journey. The return to full-time education after five months of, essentially, no education is a huge challenge. It is important that the guidance reflects levels of anxiety and that it strikes the right balance in addressing those anxieties.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): I will follow on from Ross Greer's questions. Are you saying that social distancing in secondary schools is desirable but not essential or mandatory? The answer from Councillor McCabe suggested that in many schools it might be unrealistic to expect it to happen.

John Swinney: The advice that we have received from the advisory sub-group was that there is no necessity for physical distancing in secondary schools. However, in applying the precautionary principle that Councillor McCabe alluded to, we came to the view that, where possible and practical, physical distancing measures should be taken—hence my example in which there being a number of classes of different sizes in the same subject might mean that there are opportunities to vary class sizes, in order to reduce the number of pupils in classrooms. The guidance says that if physical distancing measures can be taken, they should be taken, but not at the expense of full-time return to schooling for all pupils being undermined.

Jamie Greene: Thank you for clarifying that.

Councillor McCabe is working closely with local authorities. Last week, there were new reports that he had said that it was “not a done deal” that all schools would return full time from 11 August. Does he think that it is now a done deal? How ready are councils to reopen schools fully to all pupils in just a few short weeks?

Councillor McCabe: We have been developing guidance intensively for the past month, and we had previously produced guidance for blended learning. Schools and local authorities have engaged in that process, and directors of education and chief executives have been represented on the education recovery group. They have been consulting their members and informing the development of the guidance.

Local authorities and education staff have a fair idea of what kind of guidance will be published on Thursday, and they have been preparing on that basis. Education Scotland and the education recovery group have surveyed how prepared councils are, and we have been getting feedback from directors of education. They are confident that they can implement whatever decision the Government makes this week. If that means full-time education, they can implement that by August; if it means blended learning, they can implement blended learning.

We are saying that it is not a done deal because we do not know today what decision the Cabinet will make on Wednesday. I do not know that decision—the Deputy First Minister alluded to the basis on which it will be made, but I do not know it. The feedback that I have received from directors of education shows that they are confident that they will be able to get schools back into full-time learning in August.

Jamie Greene: I will keep my supplementary question short.

If an announcement is made on Thursday that schools should revert to blended learning, which is a possibility, do all schools have a contingency plan for that, and is two weeks enough time to reconfigure schools and classrooms?

Councillor McCabe: Councils and schools were planning for the blended learning model until 23 June. A lot of progress was made on that. Furniture was moved and other measures were put in place. There were investigations into transport contracts and arrangements for additional cleaning. The plans were not absolutely finalised, but they were well advanced. Those plans are there, should they be required. Let us hope that they are not required and that we are able to return schools to full-time education. That would be the best thing for the young people.

The feedback that I am getting from directors of education is that, whatever decision the

Government makes on Wednesday and Thursday, they will be in a position to implement that for August.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): Can Councillor McCabe say how many schools have committed to returning to having 100 per cent of pupils in school?

Councillor McCabe: We do not have that information about individual schools. All councils will commit to a 100 per cent return to the classroom at some point in August. As the media has reported, there may be a period of phasing in, which is perfectly sensible. Children and young people have been out of school for five months and they are not returning to the school environment that existed before Covid-19. Some of them are not returning to the same school: they may be going from primary into high school or from nursery into primary.

It would be sensible to have a phasing-in period to allow pupils and staff to get used to the new normal, which may be with us for some considerable time. The feedback that I have from local authorities is that they are confident that all pupils who are able to be, because of their health, will be back in school full time in August.

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): On that point, how often is a picture of the state of readiness built up by COSLA and the Scottish Government on the basis of information being fed from schools into local authorities and local authorities then updating the Scottish Government? We often hear the answer, “We don’t have that information,” but I would have thought that such information would be presented to COSLA and the Government regularly.

John Swinney: I will come in first on that point. A great deal of work is undertaken in the dialogue between local authorities and individual schools and between Education Scotland and individual local authorities. For example, Education Scotland will report to the education recovery group, to me and to Councillor McCabe about the levels of preparation and capability in relation to schools returning full time. That enables Councillor McCabe to assure the committee that local authorities are confident that schools can return full time if the decision is taken that that should be the case.

There is a flow of information that enables us to be confident that all local authorities are engaging in that process and that—by virtue of that—they are engaging with their schools to enable a restart of education to take place in August.

Councillor McCabe: I will come at it from a slightly different angle because, as well as being COSLA’s children and young people spokesperson, I am the leader of a council.

I engage regularly with our director of education to get updates on where we are in progressing our plans to return to full-time education. The convener of the committee will also be having regular dialogue, and the Opposition spokespeople will probably be having regular dialogue as well. We have had regular meetings of our emergency committee throughout the pandemic period, and I have had regular updates on education and, indeed, the return to school. We will have a meeting of our committee tomorrow, at which we will get an update on where we are in relation to the return to school.

There is not only the Parliament, the Government and COSLA, as a corporate national body; there are—I do not know—1,000 councillors throughout Scotland who are actively engaging in the process to ensure that their councils are ready. Obviously, our directors of education are also members of the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland, which has continued to meet regularly throughout the process. Through their representative on the education recovery group, the directors of education have informed the guidance. I assure the committee that there is a huge commitment in local authorities and across the education community to return our children to full-time education in August and that, if the Government makes that decision on Wednesday, we will be ready for it.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: I thank Councillor McCabe for that answer. I appreciate that a huge amount of work is being done and that a huge amount of information is coming through. The question is simply about where that standardised approach is at. When we, as a committee, look at issues such as this, we obviously want to be able to see the state of play. I wonder whether the information has been coming through in that standardised approach.

I will briefly ask two questions—which are probably for the cabinet secretary—about social distancing. What on-going monitoring of the impact of social distancing will take place in schools, and what on-going review of the science of social distancing—particularly in a school environment—will continue once schools reopen?

John Swinney: There will be very regular monitoring of all aspects of the return to full-time schooling. In finalising the guidance on Friday, the education recovery group recognised that we will continue to meet on an on-going basis to review the information on all aspects of the return of full-time schooling and the issues that will arise from that.

As I think I highlighted in my answer to Beatrice Wishart, we will be paying very close attention to any cases of Covid that emerge in whatever setting, but there will be a particular focus on

educational settings once the schools resume—even more of a focus than there is on other sectors just now.

16:30

We will also continue to receive information from the education sub-group that provides us with scientific advice, because, as it acknowledges in its publications, there is an emerging volume of scientific information and we are at a relatively early stage in the understanding of Covid. Examples, studies and research will come out that will inform our thinking, and, as I indicated to Mr Greer, we will have to be prepared to revisit some of our assumptions if other information comes out that challenges them.

The advisory group has said that its advice is given at a particular moment in time. We all accept that the advice may change because there may well be a change in the understanding of Covid, and we have to be open to addressing that if we want to create a safe environment in our schools.

Councillor McCabe: The reality is that we are at the start of a journey and we do not know how things are going to pan out. It is important that there is continued scrutiny at the national level. The education recovery group will continue to meet, and all the stakeholders in it will be involved in that process.

However, as I keep reiterating—I do not know why I should, but I keep reiterating this—the provision and delivery of education on the ground are the responsibility of democratically elected councils. All those councils and the elected members within them will be keeping a close eye on and closely scrutinising developments and the return to schools, and if there are any issues, I would expect elected members to raise them as well. I would expect elected members to be seeking appropriate information in order to monitor how safe it is for our schools to return.

It is important that we get information disseminated down to the local authority level on, for example, the number of positive cases, because local authorities, as the contingency planning authorities that are responsible for resilience management, will be closely involved in managing any incidents. The stark reality is that we know that there are going to be incidents of Covid-19 in our schools and we are going to have to manage them effectively.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): It is clear that a significant amount of information is being shared between councils and the ERG, and monitoring that is going to be important. A critical factor in successful implementation of the guidance that will come forward will be the nature of the school estate—the fabric and design of

school buildings, but also school capacity. Councillor McCabe, that must be one of the key bits of information that you, on an individual basis, are discussing with your director of education. Can you shed any light on what information is being gathered by other members of COSLA?

I also ask the cabinet secretary to say whether that information is being collected and consolidated centrally.

Councillor McCabe: I understand that information on the capacity of the school estate across councils is available nationally, and it is absolutely available locally. The plans for both blended learning and full-time return will take account of the capacity in schools. The school estate was obviously one of the key constraints in the blended learning model for every authority, but it was a greater constraint for some authorities than for others. That meant that the level of face-to-face learning that was being offered in blended learning models varied across the country.

In the guidance, the plan for full-time return is to have every child back in school. However, as we know, there are schools that run at 100 per cent capacity, schools that run at more than 100 per cent capacity and schools that run at 40 per cent capacity. The figure varies from school to school and from authority to authority, and individual plans will take account of that. There will be national guidance but there will also have to be local decision making, because councils and schools face different constraints.

John Swinney: Overall school estate statistics are gathered annually. The other week, I was looking at an Excel spreadsheet of the individual capacity and percentage occupancy of individual schools the length and breadth of the country—that information is gathered and it is available. I am pretty certain that it is also published, but I will write to Daniel Johnson to confirm that point.

Daniel Johnson: The cabinet secretary does not need to write to me about that point; I know that the capacity statistics are published. My point is that, because of their design, for example, certain schools will find it difficult to implement one-way systems. Individual councils must be recording those issues on a risk register; the question is whether those risk register items are being collated. However, unless there is particular insight on that point, I am happy to move on.

John Swinney: I reassure Mr Johnson that one of the explicit elements of the guidance is the necessity for risk assessments to be undertaken on a school-by-school basis. He makes the fair point that the school estate varies in its character; therefore, there will be a necessity for risk assessments to be undertaken on an individual institutional level, to make sure that the guidance

can be implemented satisfactorily and that any issues that arise can be addressed. As part of our regular monitoring of the implications of school opening, we will wish to identify, through our dialogue with local authorities and schools, the issues that emerge and, as a consequence, whether any change to the guidance is required.

Daniel Johnson: I have a brief question on PPE. The issue of PPE for teachers and pupils has been covered, but it is often support staff who come into the closest contact with pupils, because of the nature of their work and because they support children with particular needs. Will there be specific PPE guidance for support staff?

Councillor McCabe: I was not talking about teachers earlier; I was talking about all staff in schools. People often differentiate between teachers and other staff in schools, but, as far as I am concerned, all staff in our schools make an equally valuable contribution. Earlier, I gave an example of somebody providing personal care, but it is not necessarily teachers who provide personal care; support staff do that. On the basis of risk assessments, PPE will be provided to every member of staff who requires it.

Going back to the previous point about risk assessments, councils and schools have already undertaken many risk assessments in their preparation for blended learning, and they have worked with their trade union colleagues to agree those risk assessments. A lot of the risk assessments will need to be revisited on the basis of a full-time return to school, and that will be part of the process that will be under way in the next few weeks. Schools and education authorities are used to carrying out risk assessments.

Alex Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): What are the plans for the testing regime? In particular, how often will staff and students be tested? Are the arrangements the same for primary and secondary schools? Do we have the necessary resources in place for the testing and tracing system to make sure that the work is done satisfactorily?

John Swinney: The first point is that it is important to consider the issue in the context of the wider test and protect arrangements that we have in place in Scotland. An individual who is symptomatic should seek a test in accordance with the guidance that has been outlined. The situation in that regard in a school setting is no different from that in any other setting in society. That is a fundamental element of our approach.

However, we want to enhance the surveillance testing that is available in schools. Public Health Scotland has been working with the education recovery group to develop an approach that will involve sample testing being undertaken across a

wide cross-section of schools in Scotland to ensure that we properly and fully monitor any changes in patterns that may emerge as a consequence of the reopening of schools. That additional layer of surveillance testing that will be available within our schools will provide reassurance that an effective approach is being taken to the identification of any changing pattern of Covid and will enable us to take action accordingly, should the need for us to do so arise.

If positive cases of Covid are identified in schools, wider contact tracing work and consequent follow-up action will have to be undertaken. Schools will be required to get in touch with public health authorities if such circumstances arise.

The Convener: Do you wish to add anything, Mr McCabe?

Councillor McCabe: The Deputy First Minister covered most of what I would have said. The only thing that I would add is that the detail behind the broad approach that he outlined will be in the guidance. The education recovery group has had the benefit of direct discussion of such issues with Public Health Scotland and, collectively, we are satisfied that what is proposed in the guidance should provide reassurance to school communities and the wider community that, where cases emerge, we will respond to that and that the testing surveillance that will be put in place will be fairly rigorous.

Alex Neil: This question might be a bit premature, but I will ask it in any case. There has been a lot of talk about a vaccine becoming available in the next six months or so. Let us hope that that happens. Has there been any discussion about prioritisation of people in the education section for vaccination? For example, will education staff be high on the priority list? Will students—older students, in particular—be on the priority list? Has any thought been given to that?

We have been waiting for months for an antibody test that is 100 per cent reliable. Lots of promises have been made about the provision of such a test but, so far—to the best of my knowledge—we still do not have one. If we get a reliable antibody test, that could change things, including for the testing regime in education. At this stage, can you tell us anything that we do not already know about antibody testing as it applies to the school sector or about prioritisation for vaccination?

John Swinney: I do not have any further information on antibody testing of the kind that Mr Neil seeks, but there is a lot of optimism about the development of a vaccine. On Thursday, the First Minister and I were briefed on the developments that are under way in the production of a vaccine,

and we explored many of the issues that Mr Neil has raised about the prioritisation that will need to be undertaken in the event that we have a reliable vaccine. Such issues are being actively discussed within Government, and we are taking advice from those who can provide it. Last week, we talked directly to developers of the vaccine. We looked at the range of different possibilities that may emerge and, flowing from that, the identification of key groups that will need to have priority in the process.

As Mr Neil indicates, we are at a very early stage in the process, but sustaining our education system will be a key priority. None of us wants there to be any more disruption to learning than the disruption that has inevitably taken place since March. Therefore, Mr Neil raises valid issues for us to consider in our prioritisation.

The Convener: Mr Greer wants to come in on this area.

16:45

Ross Greer: I have a question on testing. Enhanced surveillance testing is not regular testing, so it will not be offered to every teacher and older pupil. One teacher put it succinctly to me last week when they said, “If football players can get regular testing, why can’t we, given the number of people we are in close contact with for prolonged periods of time?” I accept that we will get more detail on that later this week, but, whatever the testing arrangements are, will they be fully operational on 11 August?

John Swinney: The test and protect arrangements will be fully operational on 11 August. We are working at speed to put the arrangements for enhanced surveillance testing in place. I cannot say definitively that it will be available on 11 August, but Public Health Scotland is working very actively to ensure that that is the case.

The Convener: Thank you. We move to questions from Dr Allan.

Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): I have a question for Councillor McCabe. You mentioned that we are at the start of a journey, with schools coming back. I understand and accept your point about the longer term. In parents’ minds, a commitment has been made to taking the first step of that journey through the education recovery group and elsewhere. Is the scientific advice changing the only thing that would change that approach, or are you suggesting that there may be other reasons why that first, important step would not be taken on 11 August?

Councillor McCabe: The decision to return to school—whether on a full-time or a blended

learning basis—will be taken by the Government, which has the power to direct local authorities to reopen schools on whatever basis. Schools will reopen in August, and the basis for that will be determined by the Government's decision on Wednesday and Thursday.

Dr Allan: My point is that COSLA sees no reason why that should not happen.

Councillor McCabe: I see no reason why that should not happen, but the Government will make that decision. It will not be down to COSLA—which is not a public body anyway—and it will not be down to local authorities, because the power to make the decision now rests with the Government under the Coronavirus (Scotland) Act 2020. The Government will issue directions.

Dr Allan: Thank you. The other thing that I want to ask about—[Inaudible.]

The Convener: Dr Allan, there is a bit of feedback. Will you try again?

Dr Allan: My other question is about children in vulnerable groups and from vulnerable backgrounds. What is your view—particularly the cabinet secretary's view—on how best everyone can ensure that those children's needs are taken care of when schools go back? I am thinking particularly of the cohort of children and young people who did not attend the hubs that were provided over the lockdown period. Do you have any observations about how we can best ensure that the specific needs of those children are met?

The Convener: Councillor McCabe, do you want to go first on that question?

Councillor McCabe: Yes, I am happy to go first on that. As we said in our response to the committee's letter—and as I think I said the last time I was before the committee—even though many vulnerable children did not attend hubs, there was still a lot of contact with them, whether that was through social workers or third sector partners. There is an understanding of those young people's needs, and in preparation for the return to school it will be necessary to focus on those needs, which will be done on an individual child basis. Schools will take the appropriate steps to ensure that young people get the support that they need to readjust to being back in school and, potentially, to catch up on any learning that they may have missed.

John Swinney: Schools have undertaken a very large amount of good work in support of young people over the period since the lockdown began, through both the local authority-organised hubs and the outreach work that many schoolteachers and other school staff have been involved in to maintain the contact with individual pupils that Councillor McCabe mentioned.

There has been a very determined effort on the part of schools to operate outwith their boundaries in order to reach young people and support them, particularly in cases of vulnerability. That brings in some of the wider scope of local authorities in providing essential support to families with vulnerability, so schools have not somehow been operating in isolation from the general work that local authorities have undertaken. Indeed, local authorities have been using some of the school channels to support vulnerable families.

We all recognise that, when the schools return, a greater degree of vulnerability is likely to be prevalent within them as a consequence of the lockdown. That will require the focus and attention of staff. In our guidance for the education system, we have made it clear that there is a necessity to address such issues as part of the preparation for learning that is undertaken to support young people. Focusing on individual children's needs will be the crucial way in which individual schools address those issues, and schools excel at doing that in drawing together all the different resources that can make an impact on the lives of individual young people.

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): My question follows on from Dr Allan's question. Notwithstanding the work that has been put in over the lockdown period in the hubs and with home schooling, everyone agrees that pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds will have suffered the most from the closure of schools and that the attainment gap will have widened. The Government has always made it clear that its priority is to close that gap. In England, there is a national plan to provide tutoring for such pupils. I am not in a position to comment on the quality of that plan, but if everyone agrees that the attainment gap will have widened, why do we not have a national plan for new and additional support to try to get rid of that increase in the attainment gap when our schools go back?

John Swinney: The approach that we are taking is essentially a coherent one between national Government, local government and schools, which are working collectively to close the poverty-related attainment gap.

One of the key features of our education system in the period running up to Covid was an intense focus across the education system on tackling the poverty-related attainment gap. As we know from the available data on the distribution of pupil equity funding, poverty is distributed very widely across our country: 95 per cent of schools are in receipt of pupil equity funding, which is a response to the measurement of poverty within our society.

Our approach is that the best support is that which is put in place at a local level, on a school-by-school basis, to support the needs of individual

children and young people, and the Government is supporting that process by recognising the need to recruit more staff to achieve that end. We have put in place resources to recruit more teaching staff and other staff in order to support the delivery of that educational activity and provide the opportunity for the school system to make an impact on learning that we fear has been lost as a consequence of the lockdown.

That support can reinforce the investment that has already been made through the pupil equity funding and the Scottish attainment challenge, which have put in place a focused amount of activity and effort to ensure that the needs of young people who have experienced disadvantage can be properly and fully addressed through the power of education.

Councillor McCabe: The primary focus at this point is to get our young people back into school. Once they are back in school, assessments will need to be carried out of where each individual child is, and plans will need to be put in place to support each child in terms of catching up or whatever. That will require resources. There are resources in the system through the attainment challenge funding, as the Deputy First Minister said. Those resources will be needed more than ever as we try to address those concerns.

Iain Gray: There are two things that I do not understand about that response. The attainment challenge funding was already there. It is a significant investment in closing the attainment gap. My question was about what more we are planning to do and about resourcing to redress the damage that has been done by Covid.

On top of that, I note that Mr Swinney has said on a number of occasions that he has increased the flexibility in the use of that funding, but it was there to close the attainment gap. That implies that the funding can now be used by local authorities more widely, as they need it. Perhaps that means that there will be a reduction in the resource that is directed to closing the attainment gap. As for the funding for additional teachers that Mr Swinney announced last week, it amounts to about one third of a teacher per school.

I therefore return to my initial question. What new and additional resource and plans are in place to try to redress the damage that has been done due to Covid to pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds? There must be something new and different.

John Swinney: I have just explained—and Mr Gray reinforced the point—that we have made additional resources available for local authorities to recruit additional staff to support that effort. We have also put in place resources to support local authorities to bridge some of the issues around

digital exclusion that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds experience—to bridge the digital divide. Those are the measures that we have already taken to support the delivery of enhanced measures to close the attainment gap and to recognise that we will have to ensure that, as a system, we focus on that priority as we address the learning loss that has been experienced as a consequence of the lockdown.

Rona Mackay: Councillor McCabe, there are 6,500 autistic children in Scotland. The National Autistic Society of Scotland is concerned that the transition for autistic children in going back to school will be extremely challenging, and it urges that personal transition plans be put in place for all autistic children. The plans would include visits prior to school starting, designated safe spaces within the school and a principal contact for pupils and parents, among other things. All those things are designed to alleviate stress among the children.

Do you agree that a personal transition plan for those children should be put in place by local authorities?

17:00

Councillor McCabe: As the parent of an autistic child who will be going back to school in August, I fully agree with that. I am sure that directors of education are listening very carefully to the advice from the National Autistic Society. I have certainly shared it with my director of education. Autistic children will be some of the children who will need the greatest level of support in returning to school.

My child is very anxious about returning to school. He has not been doing any learning whatsoever since he has been off school. To be perfectly honest, he is feeling quite safe in the house and the thought of going back to school is making him anxious. I am sure that he is not alone.

However, as we know, autistic children need routine, to be in school and to be supported. It is fundamental—and crucial—that individual plans are in place for all children with additional support needs, not just those on the autistic spectrum.

Rona Mackay: There are two weeks to go. Are you aware of such plans being put in place in schools just now and of how many local authorities are doing that?

Councillor McCabe: I do not have that level of detail; we have not discussed that at a national level. However, as a councillor and a parent, my expectation is that the advice should certainly be given serious consideration. I have no doubt that plans will be being developed.

We are in the difficult situation of being in the middle of the summer holidays. Once staff go back to school, there will not be a lot of time to prepare for the return of pupils, so I do not think that plans will necessarily be in place for the date of return, but they will certainly need to be in place not very long afterwards.

Rona Mackay: I have a final question, which is about the way forward for pupils with additional support needs of any kind. Will each local authority carry out an assessment of those needs in order that a comprehensive plan can be taken forward even when Covid is no longer with us? That assessment—[*Inaudible.*]

The Convener: I think that we heard all the question, but Rona Mackay was cut off at the end.

Councillor McCabe: The answer is very similar to the answer to the previous question. We are supposed to be focusing on the child and to be getting it right for every child, so individual plans need to be in place for every child—and particularly for children with additional support needs. As a local councillor, I certainly expect that.

John Swinney: The guidance that will be issued includes advice on supporting schools to make judgments about ensuring that young people with additional support needs are properly supported on their return to schooling. We have to recognise the clear and real issue, which Councillor McCabe raised, of the anxiety that some young people will face. I know that our education system will be sensitive about how young people are approached and brought back into the education system after such a period of absence. That will be one of the key foundations of the guidance that is issued to schools.

The Convener: Ms Wishart, did you want to come in on this topic?

Beatrice Wishart: I did, but most of what I wanted to ask has been answered, so I will make more of a comment. There has already been a 10 per cent drop in the number of specialist support staff, so I am concerned about ensuring that there are enough dedicated staff to support young people with additional support needs.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: I will return to a subject that I have raised a number of times with the cabinet secretary, which is digital poverty and the laptops that the Government has ordered. Are those laptops limited to one per household? A number of households will have a number of children who all need access to laptops but currently do not have access. Also, what consideration is being given to households—particularly those in remote and rural communities—in which there is no broadband or 4G coverage?

Cabinet secretary, you have assured me that you are working with local authorities to make sure that those laptops are available by the time that the schools go back. What consideration has been given to the need for young people to get training on those laptops, or to get to know how to use them, and to ensure that they work with the systems that the schools in their local authority area use, so that they are suitable to be used?

John Swinney: I recognise Jamie Halcro Johnston's close interest in the issue and I am happy to give him some further information.

On the distribution of the laptops, which is the first part of the programme, we are working closely with local authorities to determine how they should be distributed and to whom. Fundamentally, local authorities and schools are much closer to individual young people and their circumstances, and they are best placed to make a judgment about who would benefit from the devices. That addresses the point that, if more than one laptop is required in a household, and if it is judged to be an appropriate distribution, more than one should be given.

On households that do not have any broadband connectivity, there is a facility within the contract that we have arranged for devices to be produced that can be used with household broadband or, if there is no household broadband, with some other available connectivity.

I suspect that Jamie Halcro Johnston's question on remote areas is encouraging me to go into the question of satellite broadband contracts, which is a separate issue to the programme that we are undertaking, but I am happy to hear any representations from him on that point.

On the availability of the devices, I simply and gently make the point that we are in the school holidays. If the scientific advice is with us, schools will return on 11 August, at which moment we will start to distribute the devices to pupils. That will be done at the earliest practicable opportunity.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: May I come back very quickly on that, convener?

The Convener: Yes, quickly.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: Cabinet secretary, I understand that you said previously that the devices would be with the young people—the pupils who need them—by the time that the schools went back. Now, you are saying that the roll-out will happen as the young people come in. I appreciate that that will partly be about their accessing them from schools, but it suggests that there will have to be a period in which young people will be picking up the laptops, getting used to them and seeing whether there are any

problems. That could delay their using them for days, or for longer if there are any problems.

John Swinney: With the greatest respect, Mr Halcro Johnston, we are getting down to issues that involve perhaps a day. We should leave it to schools to decide exactly how the devices can best be rolled out and what impact they can have on individual young people.

We have purchased the Chromebooks, we are making them available at the earliest possible opportunity and we will continue to work with local authorities to address the digital divide in our society.

Iain Gray: I have a specific question about the workforce. It is probably for Councillor McCabe.

Schools will have to have a much more rigorous cleaning regime. I have heard of one local authority saying that it will need to recruit 165 additional school cleaners in order to make that cleaning regime possible. Were the resources adequate that the cabinet secretary announced last Thursday for staff such as cleaners? Do local authorities have enough resources to recruit the school cleaners that they need, and will they be able to do that within the next fortnight, which is when they will need them?

Councillor McCabe: There is no doubt that that is a huge challenge. Councils were already looking to increase significantly their cleaning workforce and specifications for the blended learning model. The guidance that will be issued on Thursday will take all of that to an even higher level, so more resources will be required for cleaning.

On Mr Gray's interesting example, I saw an advert the other night on Twitter from East Dunbartonshire Council, which is looking to hire 72 extra cleaners to work in schools between 9 and 3 o'clock, as some of the cleaning will be done during the day, while children are in situ. The council is also looking to hire a team to oversee the standards of cleaning. Cleaning on its own is therefore going to be a huge additional cost. There will be other costs around school transport and personal protective equipment, which are the type of logistical costs that will be required to be met in order to safely return children to school and implement the guidance.

COSLA gave a public response to the cabinet secretary's announcement last Thursday of the additional £20 million, and I do not feel the need to reiterate it. However, we are in continuing discussion with the Government over additional resources and there is no doubt that the guidance will come with a heavy price tag. We cannot possibly know what that price tag will be, because we have not yet been through the process of acquiring the extra cleaners, putting in place the extra school transport, buying the extra PPE and

so on. However, on the basis of our estimated costs for blended learning and our professional judgment, we know that the price tag will be significantly more than £20 million. We are therefore in continuing dialogue with the Government to secure additional resources.

John Swinney: Last Thursday, I announced £20 million of new resources to address some of the logistical issues that local authorities are facing, but I announced with it our commitment to continue to engage with local government on the identification of the costs. As Mr McCabe has just said, the costs are not yet known. What I was trying to indicate with my announcement last Thursday and the provision of such resources up front was a commitment of good faith from the Government to work with local authorities.

In terms of quantification, the submissions that we received from local government on the costs associated with blended learning estimated that the full-year costs of cleaning and PPE would be £16 million. I therefore felt that producing £20 million before the school year had started and taking the decision to open schools full time, recognising that we will need an enhanced cleaning regime in place, was a reasonable indication of support for local authorities, along with a commitment to work with them to address any issues that arise out of the costings. I reaffirm that commitment today.

Gail Ross (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP): Good afternoon, Deputy First Minister and Councillor McCabe. Constituents have got in touch with me about their children's mental health because some of them are becoming increasingly worried. Some are keen for the schools to go back full time, but some are very nervous about what that means. How will those parents access help and support should they wish to? How are teachers and all the staff in schools going to deal with the challenges? Will the Scottish Government consider introducing mental health first aid training for teachers and staff, should they wish to access it?

17:15

John Swinney: In the curriculum guidance that we have issued for the recovery from Covid, we have made it a significant priority to address the wellbeing of children and young people.

Gail Ross raises significant issues. Young people have spent a long time out of formal schooling and will be anxious about going back. Some young people may have had difficult experiences during lockdown, and some may have suffered bereavement and loss. Our curriculum guidance makes it clear to all staff that we must think through, school by school, how they can

most effectively support the wellbeing of children and young people, and their mental wellbeing is fundamental to that.

I saw some interesting reports today of the steps that Portobello high school, in Edinburgh, intends to take to create a reassuring, welcoming and supportive environment in a large secondary school so that the issue can be properly addressed. I know that schools are considering those issues because of the anxieties that pupils will have.

Our programme to deliver mental health counsellors to schools is well advanced and I answered questions about it last week. There are also proposals for mental health first aid training. I acknowledge the keen interest that exists among members of staff who wish to be able to support pupils in all that they do and to enable them to overcome any issues that they face. If those members of staff wish to access mental health first aid training, I am happy to consider that.

Gail Ross: Some parents are also worried about transitions, and Councillor McCabe said that some pupils are going back to different settings. Transitions can be difficult anyway, even without the current situation, so what measures are being put in place for primary 1 and secondary 1 pupils, and for students in further and higher education, as they make those transitions?

Councillor McCabe: We tried to get schools open prior to the end of term in June, so that some transition arrangements could be made. That happened in my authority, albeit in a limited way. Previously, a pupil who was moving from primary to secondary might have gone to the secondary school for an afternoon or a whole day for a number of weeks. Instead, pupils got a one-day visit to look around and get used to the new environment.

I will go back to my earlier point about the benefits of a phased return. One benefit of that would be that it would allow some transition work to be done in the first week, before a full return. That is an important issue.

I would like also to respond on what was said about mental health. It is a huge issue that will be a focus for education authorities and schools. When the schools go back, children will not be returning to the environment that they left. We cannot expect them to pick up a normal curriculum from the first day, and there must be a focus on pupils' health and wellbeing. That will be a key part of the recovery curriculum. Addressing issues in numeracy and literacy will be central, but pupils' health and wellbeing will be the primary focus in the early days. The suggestion of mental health first aid training is a good one, and it is taking

place in a number of authorities—I know that it is available in my authority.

Pre-pandemic, local authorities were already going through a process of trying to ensure that children had access to counselling services in schools. That is on-going, although the pandemic has interrupted the process. My local authority is in the middle of a procurement exercise, so we hope and expect that the services will be in place early in the school term, although I cannot guarantee that they will be in place for the start of term. That will provide an additional resource for young people.

Of course, young people currently have access to existing statutory services, albeit that those services face challenges because of the pandemic and demands on their resources. Addressing concerns about young people's mental health must absolutely be a huge priority.

The Convener: We are in our last 10 minutes, and four members still want to come in, so quick questions and succinct answers would be very helpful. We might get through all the questions, although I cannot guarantee it. I will bring in Jamie Greene first.

Jamie Greene: I want to return to funding, and I will keep my question simple. I appreciate that, as Councillor McCabe said, you cannot put a number on how much more money you will need. However, when the guidance is produced—we hope, later this week—there will be an opportunity for you to review it and to come up with a number. How quickly will you be able to go back to the Government and say how much money you need versus what has been announced?

Councillor McCabe: Councils will go through the process that I mentioned earlier to put in place additional cleaning staff and contracts for bus services. Although young people might well be getting on the school bus without social distancing, additional safety measures will be required as part of school bus contracts, so there will be additional costs. Councils will collect those costs and will feed the information back through COSLA in an on-going process.

The reality is that we do not know how long the arrangements will need to be in place. People have previously got into trouble by saying that they would be in place for a year, but we simply do not know. We might have to look at the situation term by term or quarter by quarter, but we will collect the costs and feed them back to the Government. I imagine that we will, within weeks of schools going back, be able to make a good estimate of the likely costs for the whole year, based on the initial costs that we face in the first term, and get back to the Government with costs relatively quickly.

Obviously, councils will be required to pay those costs up front at a time when we are facing enormous financial pressures. Despite the significant additional funding that we have received from the Government and the degree of flexibility that the Government has provided, councils are still facing exceptional costs. COSLA's current estimate stands at around £0.5 billion. The costs for education that we are talking about would be on top of that amount, which puts the challenges that we face in context.

Jamie Greene: Thank you for that. The Scottish Government is obviously listening to what you are saying and will, I am sure, respond accordingly.

I have a simple question that many parents have asked me that I would like to pass on to the cabinet secretary. What are the specific metrics or pieces of scientific evidence that you are waiting for to inform the decision that the Cabinet will make this week? Is it the number of positive cases of the virus or the rate per 10,000 people? What measurements will you be looking at in making the decision?

John Swinney: The examples that Mr Greene mentioned are measurements of the prevalence of Covid in our community, and that prevalence is uppermost in the Government's mind. We have seen a sustained reduction in the prevalence of Covid, which led to my announcement on 23 June that it was possible to consider, as a planning assumption, a return to full-time schooling in August.

We have managed to maintain the downward pressure on Covid numbers, although, over the past fortnight or so, there have been a few days when we have seen higher numbers of positive cases. The Government is looking closely and intensely at the data to ensure that the decisions that we take are based on safe and responsible assumptions about the prevalence of Covid. The return to schooling is a very significant decision for the Government to take.

Jamie Greene: So, you are looking at a range of metrics rather than at a single metric.

John Swinney: We look at a variety of data on the prevalence of Covid in the community. The chief statistician publishes a weekly bulletin that sets out the level of infectiousness, the number of cases, projections in relation to the reproduction number and a variety of other factors, all of which play into the very difficult judgment that the Government has to make about whether prevalence of the virus means that it is safe for us to take further steps to relax lockdown.

I make the point that the Government has taken significant steps to relax lockdown in other sectors over the past few weeks and months, so we must look carefully at whether that has had an effect on

prevalence of the virus in the community. We might see, as a consequence of other decisions—those that relate to opening up tourism, hospitality and retail—an increase in prevalence, which would undermine our ability to reopen schools. Nonetheless, the reopening of schools on 11 August is the highest priority for the Government, so prevalence will weigh heavily in the decisions that the Cabinet takes on Wednesday.

Alex Neil: I have a quick question for Councillor McCabe. At the start of the meeting, you said that local authorities have a clear commitment to getting schools back full time in August, but a couple of answers ago you said that the additional cleaners, transport and PPE that will be required have not yet been recruited or put in place.

I think that most people expect the Cabinet to give the go-ahead on Wednesday for schools to reopen; a lot of people will be disappointed if it does not. Given that we are now very close to the wire, are councils in a position to make that happen? Cleaners, transport and PPE will be needed from day 1, so how can that be reconciled with a commitment to schools being open on 11 August?

Councillor McCabe: Although term-time school staff have been on holiday since the end of June, the education and support staff in the authorities—the people who negotiate contracts for buses and who hire staff—have not been on holiday, so that work has been under way. As I said, plans were put in place. There are certainly areas in which it might be challenging to hire staff—for example, there might be problems in hiring cleaning staff. We might also ask additional staff to work extra hours until new staff are in place.

I do not underestimate the logistical challenges in getting all the mitigations in the guidance in place for day 1. All that I am saying is that the feedback from our directors of education, who are co-ordinating development and implementation of local plans, is that they are confident that the measures will be in place by the return date for education.

Daniel Johnson: The cabinet secretary referred to an on-going role for the education recovery group as we move forward, and he said that the science may change. Can you clarify what the ERG's role will be and tell us whether we should expect publication of updated guidance and scientific notes in the coming weeks and months?

17:30

John Swinney: I intend that the education recovery group will continue to meet on an on-going basis to review the experience of the reopening of schools. It will be prudent to monitor for a sustained period all that activity, and to

identify areas in which either we need to enhance the guidance or there are changes to the available scientific advice.

There is a wide understanding that Covid is a changing and moving issue, so we have to be able to respond to changes in the coming period. The education recovery group will continue to meet, and we will make any changes to the guidance that are required. Our strength has been the drawing together of the stakeholders that we needed to draw together to enable the safe reopening of schools. I have welcomed the dialogue and engagement that we have had in that process to date.

The Convener: I understand that Councillor McCabe has to leave at half past 5. We thank him for his attendance.

There is one final question for the cabinet secretary on the equity audit. Are you able to stay for that, or would you prefer that we ask about it in writing, Mr Swinney?

John Swinney: I am happy to stay, convener.

The Convener: I will bring in Ross Greer for the final question.

Ross Greer: The last time that you gave evidence to the committee, you let us know that an equity audit was to be conducted. At that point, it was in the context of the expectation being that there would be blended learning from August. What is the status of the equity audit now? If it is going ahead, how will it interact with the equality impact assessments that all councils and schools are expected to carry out?

John Swinney: I view those as separate processes. Equality impact assessments are key firmaments of public policy and scrutiny that have to be taken forward on their merits.

The equity audit is of a slightly different character. It is about considering system wide what issues have emerged as a consequence of Covid and the implications of those issues for the Government's wider education policy and the challenges that it is trying to address, particularly in relation to the poverty-related attainment gap. Although I am certain that there will be material that is relevant in both, they are two different processes and will be carried out differently.

The Convener: I thank everyone for their attendance today. I especially thank the cabinet secretary and Councillor McCabe for their evidence.

17:33

Meeting continued in private until 17:51.

This is the final edition of the *Official Report* of this meeting. It is part of the Scottish Parliament *Official Report* archive and has been sent for legal deposit.

Published in Edinburgh by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, the Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP

All documents are available on
the Scottish Parliament website at:

www.parliament.scot

Information on non-endorsed print suppliers
is available here:

www.parliament.scot/documents

For information on the Scottish Parliament contact
Public Information on:

Telephone: 0131 348 5000

Textphone: 0800 092 7100

Email: sp.info@parliament.scot



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba