



**OFFICIAL REPORT**  
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

# Education and Skills Committee

**Wednesday 24 March 2021**

**Session 5**



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**EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE**

**11<sup>th</sup> Meeting 2021, Session 5**

**CONVENER**

\*Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)

**DEPUTY CONVENER**

\*Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)

**COMMITTEE MEMBERS**

\*George Adam (Paisley) (SNP)

\*Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP)

\*Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab)

\*Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con)

\*Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green)

\*Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)

\*Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con)

Alex Neil (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP)

\*Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD)

\*attended

**THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:**

John Swinney (Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills)

**CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE**

Gary Cocker

**LOCATION**

Virtual Meeting



## Scottish Parliament

## Annual Report

### Education and Skills Committee

*Wednesday 24 March 2021*

*[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:15]*

### Decision on Taking Business in Private

**The Convener (Clare Adamson):** Good morning. I welcome everyone to the 11th meeting in 2021 of the Education and Skills Committee. I remind everyone to turn mobile devices off or to silent mode for the duration of the meeting. This is the final meeting of the committee in this parliamentary session. We have received apologies from Alex Neil MSP.

Agenda item 1 is a decision on whether to take agenda item 5 in private. Do members agree to do so?

As no member has indicated otherwise, that is agreed.

10:16

**The Convener:** Under agenda item 3, the committee will consider the draft annual report for the parliamentary year from 12 May 2020 to 25 March 2021. Our legacy paper, which was published on Monday, summarises our work since the committee was formed in 2016. Do members have any comments on the annual report?

I do not see any indication that members want to make comments on the annual report. I thank the clerks for their work and their help in drafting it.

## Subordinate Legislation

### Looked After Children (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2021 (SSI 2021/103)

10:15

**The Convener:** Agenda item 2 is consideration of a negative instrument, details of which are in paper 1. Do members have any comments on the instrument?

I see no comments. The committee is agreed to make no recommendations on the instrument.

## Coronavirus and Education

10:16

**The Convener:** Agenda item 4 is an evidence session on coronavirus and education. We have a strict time limit for this item. I remind members that we want to be clear of it before 12 o'clock.

For the final time in this parliamentary session, I welcome to the committee John Swinney, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills in the Scottish Government. I invite Mr Swinney to make an opening statement.

**The Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills (John Swinney):** Good morning, and thank you for the opportunity to take part in the committee's proceedings this morning. As the convener indicated, I will be doing so for the final time in this parliamentary session.

I know that I speak for many of us who, as parents, were delighted to see our children return to school in recent weeks. Children seeing their teachers and friends again offers a degree of routine and familiarity. For older pupils in secondary schools, for whom things are not quite back to normal yet, even returning to school for short periods of time each week allows them to reconnect with their peers.

It remains our intention that, as the final element of the phased return, all pupils will return to full-time in-school learning after the Easter break. The advisory sub-group on education and children's issues met again yesterday and stressed the importance of strengthening other mitigations, such as ventilation and outdoor learning, as part of relaxing the strict 2m physical distancing requirements between pupils in secondary schools. We will publish associated guidance to enable school staff to prepare accordingly. In addition, we will need to continue to carefully monitor the data over the coming weeks, including learning from the experience in England. However, at present, the proportion of primary schools and early learning and childcare settings with incidents remains low. Where outbreaks have occurred, they have predominantly—[Inaudible.]—higher case rates in the local community.

I take considerable reassurance from our enhanced asymptomatic testing programme, which will be further expanded to include secondary 1 to secondary 3 pupils after the Easter break. The take-up of that testing offer has been encouraging. In the week ending 7 March, more than 56,000 staff and 12,000 pupils took tests. The number of positive asymptomatic cases identified has been low. Since the programme began five weeks ago, 0.1 per cent of cases have been

positive after confirmatory polymerase chain reaction—PCR—testing. The programme is helping to break chains of transmission as early as possible, and I encourage all those who are eligible to make use of the offer to do so when they return to school.

Despite the progress that has been made, I do not underestimate the extent to which children and young people have experienced disruption to their daily lives as a result of the pandemic, nor do I underestimate the physical and mental health impacts of lockdown. From our work, including January's equity audit, we know that those impacts might have fallen unequally across society. Therefore, I am pleased to tell the committee that we intend to provide an enhanced range of summer activities for children and young people in order to address the impacts that are associated with extended periods of isolation and reduced participation in normal activities. That offer will have children's rights and needs at its heart and will seek to provide opportunities to connect and socialise while accessing a range of activities, combined with broader supports where they are needed. It will build on local offers that are already in progress, recognise the need for flexibility to deliver by using local assets and connect with wider offers from partners such as sportscotland and Creative Scotland.

In addition, I am delighted to announce £19.4 million of Scottish Government funding to support a six-year mentoring programme by MCR Pathways to help young people to reach their full potential. That programme will be delivered in partnership with local authorities that wish to participate and will be part of the Scottish Government's young persons guarantee to provide long-term support where it is needed most. We will work closely with our colleagues in local government to shape the detail of the programmes.

Those investments are in addition to almost £400 million of funding that we have committed already for education recovery during this year and next. Over the next few months, we will continue to develop all aspects of our education recovery strategy with our partners and stakeholders. In parallel to the national qualifications 2021 group, key partners have collaborated to ensure that the hard work of learners is recognised and allows them to achieve the qualifications that they need to proceed to the next stage of their education or to enter employment. The alternative certification model that has been developed aims to strike the right balance between teacher judgment and local and national processes to ensure fairness and consistency, which we have put in place. To aid that, I have asked Her Majesty's Inspectorate of

Education to undertake a review of local authority approaches to quality assurance activity.

The HMIE review will not add to the workload and pressure on schools. Its focus will be on local authority quality assurance activity, which is a key aspect of this year's approach to awarding national qualifications. The review, combined with Scottish Qualifications Authority processes, will support confidence that learners across the country are getting the grades that they deserve.

Just as the approach to certification has been co-produced, there is a role for all parts of the system to work together to ensure that it delivers for our young people. I am confident that everyone will work together to achieve that most important of outcomes.

I express my sincere thanks to Scotland's children, parents, families, teachers, school leaders and support staff for everything that they have done during the past year. I am very grateful for all the support that has been provided to ensure that our children and young people continue to make progress in their learning and development.

I look forward to answering the committee's questions.

**The Convener:** Thank you, Mr Swinney. We move to questions from the committee. I remind members that, if they wish to ask a question, they should type R in the chat function.

**Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con):** Good morning. I apologise in advance for not staying to the end of the committee session.

I open with the back-to-school plans. Specifically, does the Government intend to change its advice or requirements around social distancing on the school estate? The reason for the question is that, at 2m social distancing, especially in the classroom environment, it is virtually impossible to get all students back to school. You have just made a commitment to get all young people back into school after the Easter holidays. That is welcome, but the anecdotal feedback that we have had in the past few weeks is that, due to social distancing needs, those who have returned to school prior to Easter have not always been engaged in traditional classroom learning. Some pupils have been getting a somewhat reduced school experience, because not all schools can accommodate all pupils with social distancing. Does the Government have a position on that? Can you give clarification and confirmation that back to school means back in the classroom?

**John Swinney:** The fundamental point that I think that Jamie Greene is looking for me to confirm is that a return to full-time face-to-face

schooling in the secondary sector will require the removal of the 2m physical distancing requirement for pupils in classroom settings. That is the assumption on which a full-time return to school is based.

In all likelihood, the requirement will remain for physical distancing between adults in schools and between adults and pupils in schools. There will be a need for a whole variety of other mitigation measures to be in place but, fundamentally, the 2m physical distancing requirement will have to be relaxed to enable a full-time return to face-to-face schooling in the secondary sector. The education advisory sub-group has looked at all those questions and it, as well the education recovery group, will have to monitor the data on the prevalence of the virus to determine whether that is a safe assumption for us to operate on when it comes to the moment of returning to schooling.

The committee will appreciate that that moment remains a few weeks away. The first return to school after the Easter holidays is 12 April for five or six local authorities, with the remainder returning on 19 April. There is a bit of time to elapse before we can be definitive. We know that the spread of the virus can accelerate, but we hope that that will not be the case. There is a wide variety of societal mitigation factors, not least of which is the extensive prevalence of the vaccination programme.

Fundamentally, the assumption about a full-time return to face-to-face schooling in the secondary sector will be predicated on a relaxation of the 2m physical distancing rule for pupils within the school estate and in a classroom setting, but we will likely require pupils to observe other constraints when moving around in school, and there will be further mitigating factors.

**Jamie Greene:** I understand that. It sounded as though there was a yes in there. Before I ask my other question, I will push you on something that you said towards the tail end of your previous answer. If the advisers say that conditions do not merit a full return to schools, the decision that you have made a commitment to might change. In other words, a lot of parents are under the assumption that their children will be going back to school full time after Easter come what may, but it sounds to me as though there is an element of doubt, which is understandable given the ever-changing virus situation. If that is the case, when will the final decision be made so that parents can plan around it, particularly in relation to childcare and work arrangements?

**John Swinney:** Certainly in relation to the primary sector, I am proceeding on the assumption—although I am not sure that “assumption” is the right word—or on the foundation of having returned the primary sector

and early learning settings, and we are now back in that mode of operation on an on-going basis. The only circumstances in which arrangements around primary education or early learning and childcare would change would be if we had a wider virus problem of the type that we had to respond to in January, which I sincerely hope will not be the case. I do not expect that to be the case, because of the comparatively low levels of the virus.

In relation to the secondary sector, we are proceeding with a certain amount of uncertainty—I can only express it in that way to the committee. We want to take decisions at the earliest possible opportunity to give confirmation, certainty and as much notice as possible to families and schools. I hope that the committee will understand that I have to inject a certain amount of caution in relation to definitively saying what the position will be, because I must monitor the data and the information that prevails during the next two to three weeks. I give the committee the assurance that we will clarify and confirm the arrangements as early as possible.

10:30

**Jamie Greene:** I understand. I am sorry to push the issue—this was not my intended line of questioning, but your answer has expanded on it—but you said that you will wait another two to three weeks before making a final decision. That will take us to the middle of April, which is just about at the end of the Easter holidays for some. How much notice will parents be given? Will it be a few days, or a week, or a fortnight?

**John Swinney:** The sub-group from which I take a great deal of advice on those questions will meet again on 6 April, so I do not want Mr Greene to leave the conversation thinking that the decision will be taken in the middle of April.

Advice and guidance will come to ministers in early April. Obviously, the sub-group will be in a position to look at a lot of the data that has emerged from the experience in England, and that will give us much more of an insight into the circumstances that are likely to prevail and how we might take decisions accordingly.

There will be a decision in the aftermath of 6 April on whether our central planning assumption of a return to full-time in-school face-to-face learning after the Easter holidays will prevail. That is the timescale for such confirmation.

**Jamie Greene:** Thank you for that—that is very helpful. If it is okay, convener, I will ask one substantial question and then leave others to pick up the questioning.

**The Convener:** I have a number of members who want to come in. If there is time at the end, I will bring you back in, but I will move on, if you do not mind. I call Daniel Johnson.

**Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab):** In a sense, my questions follow on from those from Jamie Greene, who asked about the coming academic term. I am interested in the medium to longer term.

For good reasons, the whole of the private and public sectors have been working on a week-to-week and month-to-month basis. We hope that, with the completion of the vaccination programme through the summer, we will be able to move towards a position in which medium-term planning is possible. What work is the Government undertaking to look at what the implications, in relation to social distancing and infection control requirements, of a fully rolled out vaccination programme will be in terms of planning for the education sector as a whole?

Obviously, this is the time of year when the next school year would usually be planned. However, at the moment, a lot of the assumptions and underpinnings of what will be possible are not clear. What is the medium-term plan for the coming academic year and beyond, when we are in a steady state, once we have rolled out the vaccination programme?

**John Swinney:** In answering Mr Johnson's question, I go back to the position that prevailed last August. Between last August and December, by and large, we managed to sustain normal face-to-face provision of schooling in all sectors. I appreciate that, in among that, there were classes and cohorts that had to self-isolate. However, fundamentally, for the overwhelming majority of pupils, the normal arrangements prevailed between August and December. Obviously, in that period, the vaccination programme did not have any real presence—it began to really motor only in January 2021.

I hope that that reassures Mr Johnson that my fundamental planning assumption is that, from the end of the Easter holidays, we will return to the delivery of face-to-face schooling in a fashion that we would all recognise, and that that will be the assumption for the period going forward. In among that, mitigation measures will undoubtedly have to be in place. There will have to be arrangements to take into account the necessity for greater hand hygiene.

With regard to movement around schools, there will be requirements for physical distancing, and there might well be requirements for adults in schools to continue to observe physical distancing. Fundamentally, I am optimistic that the core educational offer that we make available to young



people in Scotland will prevail after the Easter holidays. My assumption is that that will be the operating basis for the period beyond.

**Daniel Johnson:** Thank you. That gives us a sense of the broad outlook, which would need to be underpinned by guidance and, I presume, a broader set of strategies for dealing with the new context, including infection control, and in terms of educational recovery and identifying gaps. Is the Government planning to issue guidance for the new school year, and will it produce a strategy for educational catch-up? If so, when will we see those things?

**John Swinney:** I am glad that Mr Johnson has raised the issue, and I am glad that he used the term “catch-up”, because it allows me to air the issue. We have to open up and explore the issue, which is a substantial one. Therefore, Mr Johnson knows that I will engage constructively on his question.

I am nervous about the concept of education catch-up. Over the past two weeks, I participated in two calls with probably more than 1,000 teachers, which were facilitated by Her Majesty's chief inspector of education. On those calls, there was a lot of feedback that, despite the disruption to learning, young people have actually learned a great deal during the process.

We have to be careful about the language that we use when we talk about what has happened to young people. On those calls, teachers offered a lot of evidence that the resilience of young people has been greatly strengthened by what they have had to adapt to as a consequence of lockdown. They have undertaken extensive learning as a consequence of all that. That is not to say that there is not a necessity to focus on how we support the learning of individual young people to make sure that they accomplish the learning outcomes that we expect them to achieve on an on-going basis. However, that concept is quite different from the notion of “catch-up”, if I can use the word from Mr Johnson's question, which is the word that is used extensively in the media debate on the issue. During lockdown, young people have been learning a lot through remote learning, led by their educators, but they have also learned a lot outwith formal education. We should recognise that there are benefits and advantages to all that. Crucially, we have to focus on the needs of individual young people in supporting their learning outcomes.

Mr Johnson also raised the issue of a wider strategy on such matters. That will be the product of discussion among the education recovery group. Just last week, we had a substantive discussion about it, and we will have further discussions. It has to be a system-wide conversation in which we formulate the views

among professional staff, the professional associations, local authorities and directors of education, working with the Government and our agencies, to make sure that we put in place the strategic guidance that enables such an approach to prevail.

**Daniel Johnson:** I have one final question.

**The Convener:** Is the question in the same area, Mr Johnson?

**Daniel Johnson:** It is about the consequences for the coming academic year.

**The Convener:** If it is in the same area, please go ahead, but be brief. If it is not, I will bring you in at the end, once other members have had a chance to come in.

**Daniel Johnson:** Critically, there needs to be guidance for the coming academic year that takes account of the risk of new variants that could supersede or overcome protections against the virus. Are those contingencies being drawn up? Will they be transparent? We know what plan A is, but we also need to know what plan B is, if new variants emerge in the population.

**John Swinney:** Health colleagues and the Government more widely are monitoring closely all the information about possible new variants, which is very material to the control of the pandemic.

I hope that the committee will take some reassurance from the vigorous way in which our public health authorities have pursued examples of the Brazilian variant when it has presented itself in Scotland. The public health response has been absolutely targeted and focused to avoid further spread of variants with which we are unfamiliar or about which our knowledge is uncertain. We will pursue that public health approach vigorously.

Mr Johnson raised a question on contingency planning for the delivery of education should we face a more acute clinical situation. I assure the committee that the work that is being undertaken in the delivery of remote learning has been viewed to be a strong proposition in the judgment of Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education and in the wider debates. I want to strengthen that further through the national e-learning offer, to make sure that ever more provision is in place to support remote learning should we be in a position in which we need to rely on that as an on-going contingency.

My fundamental plan is to get young people back into face-to-face learning at the earliest possible opportunity, which I expect to be after the Easter holidays, and to sustain that thereafter. If there was a need to deploy a contingency, it is likely that that would be a reliance on the remote learning model that we have put in place. If that could be operated alongside some in-school

provision, which is also what we have operated since January, that would be the approach that the Government would take with our partners.

**Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green):** I will follow up on the line of questioning about what the near future will look like—the term from August onwards. Outwith a very small number of children and young people in very specific circumstances, most under-16s will not receive the vaccine any time soon. Given that, is the intention to continue to offer asymptomatic testing for senior school pupils from August into the new term?

**John Swinney:** That is my expectation, yes. Mr Greer has pursued that issue vigorously. The asymptomatic testing programme has been a welcome development and there has been a welcome level of participation by senior pupils and staff—it has been quite extraordinary, to be honest. I am optimistic that that will continue with S1 to S3 pupils when the programme is rolled out after the Easter holidays.

**Ross Greer:** That is excellent to hear. I thank the Government for introducing the programme. This is not my main line of questioning, but are the numbers on participation available? If they are not close to hand at the moment, it would be good if they could be circulated later, as they would be interesting.

**John Swinney:** I am now looking at a folder, but a number is not leaping out at me yet. I will write to the committee about the numbers. As I said in my opening remarks, in the week ending 7 March, 56,000 staff and 12,000 pupils took tests. Therefore, the level of staff participation is extraordinary and really welcome, and the pupil numbers are very encouraging. Obviously, we will have more of that in the weeks to come as more pupils are back in school.

From all the accounts that I hear, the logistical arrangements for distributing all the testing kits to 2,500 schools around the country have been, with the exception of snowfall, pretty straightforward.

10:45

**Ross Greer:** Excellent. Thanks very much. I—

**The Convener:** Mr Greer, in fairness to other members, if possible, can you ask a line of questions as one question? If we do not cover everything, I will bring you in again at the end.

**Ross Greer:** I entirely appreciate that, convener. I will ask one slightly elongated question.

The committee recently heard from the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland, who, when asked how his office has been able to engage with the Scottish Qualifications Authority

on the alternative assessment model, described that as “very challenging”. He said that, before his office is satisfied that the SQA is meeting its requirements to respect children and young people's rights,

“there is still a very long way to go”.—[*Official Report, Education and Skills Committee*, 10 March 2021; c 32.]

Are you concerned by those comments? What is your level of awareness of engagement between the commissioner's office and the SQA?

**John Swinney:** There are two dimensions to that question. The first is about the SQA's engagement with young people in the determination of the policy and practical approaches that the SQA takes forward. That is essential. If it was essential before a week past Tuesday, it is very essential after that, because we have now incorporated the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child into Scots law, primarily to drive a culture in Scotland in which we are attentive to and adhere to the respecting of children and young people's rights.

The SQA is doing a lot of good work to engage young people. It has established a young learners panel, which enables the SQA to engage on those questions. That is fundamental, and I am satisfied that the SQA is doing that. Obviously, I am keen to ensure that that approach is sustained. That is the purpose of the whole approach on many of these questions, and particularly the incorporation of the UNCRC.

Secondly, in relation to the engagement with the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland, the commissioner will speak for himself about whether that engagement is satisfactory. I want the SQA to engage constructively with the commissioner. The Government engages constructively with the commissioner. I often think that we do everything that is asked of us and that we do things as we should do them, but sometimes that attracts criticism from the commissioner, as is his right and his role. The SQA might find itself in a relatively similar position. However, I encourage strong and close co-operation to enable the commissioner to form a view on the steps that the SQA has taken on these important issues.

**Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD):** I align myself with the cabinet secretary's comments in his opening remarks in thanking pupils, parents and teaching and support staff for all that they have done in the past year. I recognise that teachers are working parents, too.

I want to ask about the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development interim report on curriculum for excellence. In evidence to the committee and in response to one of my questions, you confirmed that you discussed the

interim report with the OECD. However, responses to our freedom of information requests show that that never happened. I asked about that issue last week. Why did you choose not to have that conversation? What contact has the Scottish Government had with the OECD since it received the draft report?

**John Swinney:** There is an on-going dialogue with the OECD about the report. I think that I have confirmed in parliamentary answers that it has raised issues with me and has asked for my opinions about certain questions that it is looking at, as well as for my impressions and reflections on wider questions involving the issues that are at the heart of its review. However, that has been about substantive educational questions. The key point is that the OECD is going through a process that the Government has commissioned it to go through in response to some of the choices that we have made and that the Parliament or the committee has asked us to make. The OECD is pursuing that agenda and has undertaken some recent stakeholder engagement to enable it to finalise the report, which we expect to receive in due course.

**Beatrice Wishart:** Do you expect to meet the practitioner forum to discuss the report over the coming weeks?

**John Swinney:** I do not.

**Beatrice Wishart:** Let us move on to the subject of additional teachers. The extra teachers who were employed through the emergency funding are obviously providing much-needed support at the moment. Can schools rely on that extra support beyond the end of the school year, and should those staff expect to have the same jobs in the next school year?

**John Swinney:** We are getting into tricky territory, given the fact that I am not the employer. However, in general, I think that there is no reason why that should not be the case, because the funding for the additional teachers has been provided for school years 2020-21 and 2021-22. In my opinion, there is no reason why teachers who have been part of the additional cohort that has been taken on—or part of any additional cohort that has been taken on in the context of Covid—should face any uncertainty about their position, because the finance is available to enable local authorities to offer continuity of employment.

**Beatrice Wishart:** My final question is about school counsellors. Do you have a figure for the number of new school counsellors who have been recruited, further to the commitment that the Government made?

**John Swinney:** I do not have a precise number in my head. I will probably have to write to the committee on that point. From my recollection of

parliamentary answers, I think that the commitment to that programme of employment has been completed and we are satisfied with the information that has come back from local authorities about that recruitment. Obviously, we are in slightly different circumstances because schools have not been back full time, but local authorities have engaged very constructively in the programme and I understand that that commitment has been fulfilled. However, I had better write to the committee to clarify the precise details of that.

**Beatrice Wishart:** Thank you. That would be appreciated. I think we understand that the school counsellors were needed before the pandemic and will be needed even more as we go forward.

**John Swinney:** I unreservedly accept Beatrice Wishart's latter point that the necessity for school counsellors is ever greater as a consequence of the pandemic. A lot of the approach that we have taken to the return of secondary pupils, in particular, has been about trying to address some of the anxieties and worries about wellbeing that lie at the heart of the question that Beatrice Wishart has put to me.

**The Convener:** Three members have not asked initial questions, but I am conscious that Jamie Greene has to leave. Mr Greene, if you can roll everything into one question for the cabinet secretary, I am happy for you to come in.

**Jamie Greene:** I appreciate that, convener, and I apologise to the other members for jumping the queue.

Cabinet secretary, I want to push you on an issue. You briefly mentioned catch-up in your exchange with Daniel Johnson, but I wonder whether you have any comment to make on the attainment gap. You will be aware of comments that were made yesterday by the Auditor General for Scotland, who said that

“the pace of improvement”

by the Scottish Government

“has to increase”

if the attainment gap is not to widen further.

You are probably also aware that the commission on school reform argued for additional teaching time for catch-up learning. The commission's paper contained some interesting ideas and suggestions about how schools could use teaching resource for catch-up lessons.

Wrapped into that is the issue of supply teachers. I spoke to one yesterday who said that they have been out of work since last August. Given the focus on attainment, surely we should get resource from every possible source. What commitments will be made on that?

**John Swinney:** There were certainly a few topics in those questions. To be honest, the Audit Scotland report was a pretty fair read. It highlighted that progress has been made on closing the poverty-related attainment gap, and it marshalled the fact that progress has been made in the overwhelming majority of local authority areas on the indicators that the report focused on. The report looked at slightly different indicators from those that the Government looks at in the national improvement framework, on which we consulted extensively. On the whole, the report made a pretty fair assessment of the situation.

I accept, as we have always accepted, that closing the gap will be a long-term endeavour. We never said that it would be done in five years; we said that it would take at least two parliamentary sessions. If the Government is re-elected, we will continue the work to sustain the agenda, which is crucial to the life chances of children and young people.

The report accurately charted the progress that has been made. We will want to make progress and intensify that going forward. The report also said—fairly—that it is likely that the pandemic has inserted further challenges into the education system, which we must address under the recovery agenda that I have talked about.

I welcome the opportunity to air the position on catch-up beyond what I said in response to Daniel Johnson. Quite a discussion is needed about the concept of catch-up, which I know the commission on school reform pursued in relation to additional teaching time. As with many things in education, I could marshal a different opinion that set out how, in pedagogical and educational terms, increased class contact time beyond what young people already experience could be counterproductive to their educational journey.

There is a substantive educational debate to be had about the correct approach. As I said to Daniel Johnson, young people will have learned a lot and acquired greater skills during the lockdown as a consequence of adapting to the circumstances.

I am keen for us to have an open educational debate. In the education recovery group's discussions, there has not been a strong argument in favour of the proposals that the commission on school reform made. I am not dismissing those proposals; I am saying that we need to focus on the different opinions.

My core early priority is to get schools back as quickly as I can and to get them back to operating normally. Teachers will assess the challenges that young people face as a consequence of the disruption that they have experienced. We must

look at such points of debate as part of the process.

I am sorry about the representation that a supply teacher made to Mr Greene, because I cannot fathom why supply teachers would not have posts now. As I said in response to Beatrice Wishart, I am not the employer of teachers, but I have put a lot of money into the system to provide enough opportunities for supply teachers to be fully occupied. Some directors of education have told me that they could do with more supply teachers but cannot access them in their localities, where they are using all the supply teachers who are available.

There may well be different problems around the country. In some areas, there may be circumstances in which individuals cannot secure employment because there are too many supply teachers available, while in other parts of the country there may not be enough supply teachers. I am happy to engage further on that issue. As I say, I cannot see any good reason why supply teachers would not be fully occupied, given the fact that we have put so much money into expanding provision in the education system.

11:00

**Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab):** I want to ask about the Covid-19 education recovery group—CERG—which the cabinet secretary has referred to once or twice. In the Audit Scotland report that was published earlier this week, the Auditor General says:

"The CERG was not part of the process for all decisions. For example, the Scottish Government's final decision to reopen schools after the summer holidays in August 2020 was not discussed with the CERG in advance and represented a significant change in plan with little notice."

More recently, in the past couple of weeks, we had the decision for pupils in S1 to S3 to return to school partially at this time. The Educational Institute of Scotland and School Leaders Scotland, which are both members of the CERG, said that that decision was also not discussed with the recovery group. Why are such critical decisions made without discussion with the recovery group?

**John Swinney:** I take issue with the suggestion that there has been no discussion of those issues with the education recovery group. I stand to be corrected, but, to the best of my recollection, various options are discussed. For example, the recent step that was taken to return all secondary pupils on a limited basis was aired with the education recovery group. I accept that it was not agreed by the group, because it is ultimately ministers who have to take the decisions that they consider to be appropriate on the basis of the wider discussion that we have.

One of the challenges is that there will not be unanimity in the education recovery group on all questions. In that respect, as somebody has to take a decision, what often happens is that we will air the issues, hear people's views and then get to that moment when we have to consider what will happen next. Essentially, it falls on my shoulders to say, "We will consider these questions." It is about hearing people's perspectives, and I listen carefully to the different views. However, I do not think that anyone would expect the education recovery group to take decisions that the Cabinet is properly required to take and is accountable for to Parliament through the normal lines of political accountability.

**Iain Gray:** The cabinet secretary says that he stands to be corrected. He has already been corrected by the Auditor General, the EIS and SLS. They say not that those decisions were not agreed by the education recovery group but that they were not discussed by the group. What confidence can we have and what assurances can the cabinet secretary give us that the full-time return to school after the Easter holidays has been properly discussed and, if possible, agreed with the education recovery group?

**John Swinney:** I simply have to disagree with the view of the Auditor General, the EIS and School Leaders Scotland. The issues are aired, although I accept that they are not finalised or agreed. I know that the EIS—

**Iain Gray:** Why would they make that up? I do not understand why they would do that. Why would the Auditor General make that up?

**John Swinney:** From my recollection—I stand to be corrected; I will go away and check the record, and I will write to the committee about it—the issues are aired with the education recovery group and we listen to people's views. Then, ultimately, I feed back those views to the Cabinet and the Cabinet takes the decisions.

I will go away and check all the records on that point. However, on having that issue put to me, my sense is that such matters are aired in the education recovery group, although final decisions on them might not be taken there. That is how I would characterise the situation, but I will check and, if there is an issue, I will write to the committee about that.

**Iain Gray:** What about the return after Easter?

**John Swinney:** When it comes to the return after Easter, the education recovery group has already discussed some of those questions. We will meet again tomorrow. Despite the fact that the Parliament will not be sitting, the education recovery group will continue to meet on a weekly basis and I will continue to chair all its meetings. I might not chair its meeting on 6 May—I might

bring that meeting forward a day, as I might have other matters on my mind on that day—but the education recovery group will continue to be engaged on all those questions.

**Iain Gray:** I could chair it—I will be free on that day.

**John Swinney:** Despite Mr Gray's impending relaxation, I cannot imagine that he will be able to extricate himself from being busy on 6 May, though he might surprise me in that respect.

**The Convener:** Have you finished your questions, Mr Gray?

**Iain Gray:** Yes, indeed.

**The Convener:** We will move to Mr Mundell.

**Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con):** I want to go back to the issue of catch-up. I am willing to accept that the situation is not as straightforward as some people would argue, but I struggle to accept that the past year has been good for a lot of young people. Although it is true that some will have benefited from picking up additional experience outside the classroom and will have done well with remote learning, it is clear that there are young people who have really struggled in the past year, and the parents of such children have repeatedly raised concerns with me. Will an individual assessment be carried out for each young person to see whether they require any additional support as a result of the disruption to their learning?

**John Swinney:** I want to reassure Mr Mundell that I am in no way dismissing the issue. I totally acknowledge the point that he makes about the experiences of young people. I cannot for a moment say that I think that the school year 2020-21 has been ideal—it has been very disruptive for young people and families. I acknowledge that disruption.

Mr Mundell probably alluded to this in his question, but I am keen for the education system to engage with young people and families to establish what needs to be done to support individual young people to fulfil their educational potential. For some young people, that might require additional intervention, and schools will be able to plan how best that can be done. It might involve rebalancing elements of the curriculum for individual young people, and the recruitment of additional staffing resources will be crucial to enabling that to happen. For example, individual young people might need greater intervention when it comes to the acquisition of literacy skills as opposed to numeracy skills, or whatever happens to be the case.

In addition, provision is available through the national e-learning offer. Through that, schools can point young people to, and support them in

accessing, additional learning opportunities that are now readily available across a range of senior phase subjects and the broad general education. The national e-learning offer can act as a focal point for additional learning opportunities. On top of that, tutoring and mentoring opportunities are available, and, during the Easter break, most schools will operate some additional facilities, as they would normally for senior phase candidates, to prepare them for certification.

I reassure Mr Mundell that I am very open to a discussion about what the process of providing additional support would look like and what it should feel like. Obviously, there are some education recovery resources that the Government has not yet allocated, which could well be allocated to such a purpose.

I return to Beatrice Wishart's question about supply teachers. There are other resources that we could well allocate that could be used in such an area, but we need to have an open discussion about what that would look and feel like rather than say that everybody has to stay in school for an extra hour every night or something like that. Educationally and in pedagogical terms, the advice that is available to me is that that would not be a productive intervention.

**Oliver Mundell:** I agree that it is not just about the classroom. I am concerned about young people in rural communities who have missed out on a number of experiences. In particular, I am concerned about those at the end of primary school who would have enjoyed going on residential trips and doing other bits and pieces. Socialisation is as important as other learning for those young people, and there is a recognition that that has been missed.

On additional resources, I go back to a question that I have asked several times over the years in this committee and in the chamber. I am still very concerned that, despite lots of additional money going into the system, 3 per cent of schools, I think, still do not get any pupil equity funding. When it comes to balancing decisions on how we can best support individuals, headteachers in smaller schools, many of which are in rural areas, do not have the same discretion to support young people. Has the cabinet secretary given any further thought to that?

**John Swinney:** I would like to say one thing about the question that Mr Mundell asked earlier. I completely accept that young people in certain cohorts have really missed out in the past year. Rites-of-passage moments for lots of young people, involving the trips that every school goes on every year, have not happened. I know acutely that those are very painful losses for children and young people. However, members will appreciate that we simply cannot, unfortunately, delve into

residential trips just now. I would love to enable that to be the case, but that simply cannot be done with the pandemic. As soon as it is safe to do so, we will enable that to be the case.

Mr Mundell has argued consistently for the distribution of pupil equity funding and about the fact that it does not reach 100 per cent of schools. I have looked at that issue in two ways. First, the fundamental point is the purpose of pupil equity funding, which is to target funding towards measures that are required to close the poverty-related attainment gap. Fundamentally, there has to be a measure of poverty to determine where that funding should be distributed.

Secondly, the question is whether the current distribution mechanism is doing that effectively and comprehensively. Mr Mundell has pursued that point with me for some time. My answer to that question is that the current distribution mechanism is doing that as comprehensively as it can with the measure that I have found to do that so far. I have not been able to find a measure that enables me to go any further or to stretch its reach any further.

The final point that Mr Mundell raised will probably always be the case among small rural schools in which it is difficult to identify instances of poverty. The measures that we have capture a lot of that, but they might not capture all of it. I have undertaken work, but we have not managed to get a better mechanism beyond what we currently have to distribute that funding. However, I certainly remain committed to exploring whether it is possible to do so.

**Oliver Mundell:** I have a final, small question. Would the cabinet secretary take account of rurality as a factor in and of itself when considering the further money that is to be allocated for Covid recovery? Those young people have missed out far more on the social aspect. They do not have other young people living in close proximity to them, and they have had limited social opportunities in the past year.

11:15

**John Swinney:** For a number of the funding streams in the distribution arrangements for Covid recovery finance—rather than pupil equity funding or the Scottish attainment challenge—through our dialogue with the settlement and distribution group that advises the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities on such questions, we have increased the accent on rurality as a factor in the distribution formula. The factor of rurality has had a greater influence in the distribution of Covid recovery moneys than it would ordinarily have in other circumstances, and I will continue to apply that factor going forward.

**Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP):** There seems to be quite a difference among local authorities in relation to the distribution of devices, although I know that they were funded for that purpose. How is that being addressed, particularly with a view to the use of the devices in the medium to long term? Some areas seem to be missing out.

**John Swinney:** There have been three elements to the approach to funding devices. The starting point was to gather data from local authorities, so we asked them to give us their best estimate of the gaps in the availability of digital devices. The first tranche involved the distribution of the 25,000 devices that the Government had bought early in the pandemic, so that they were available to us. We distributed them to local authorities based on the need that was expressed. We then balanced that with a distribution of cash sums to local authorities, because some local authorities already had in place extensive provision of devices for students.

The third tranche was to make available financial flexibility around a sum of £45 million, which enabled schools and local authorities to choose how they would use money to fill some of the digital gaps. Among all of that, I am confident that in excess of 70,000 students have been supported with devices and connectivity packages.

The pandemic has exposed the fact that we need to have in place a more comprehensive solution regarding the availability of devices for learning purposes. As an example, Scottish Borders Council distributes devices to all learners. That was a great council policy decision and I am glad that the council took it in advance of the pandemic. However, not all local authorities operate on that basis. Wider progress needs to be made on the issue, because digital devices and connectivity—I will show my age here—are the jotters of the 21st century.

**George Adam (Paisley) (SNP):** We have had an unprecedented year, and young people, teachers and those who are involved in education have had to deal with that. Much like you, cabinet secretary, I am a great one for seeing a challenge and trying to find a way to make things work.

I looked at some of the submissions that we received from local authorities and, being quite parochial, I went straight to the one from Renfrewshire Council. Renfrewshire Council said that, initially, it did an audit to see what the pandemic had done to the attainment of pupils, and then it checked the findings to make sure that it could work towards putting the resource in. It looks to me as though it is a local authority that, like other local authorities, is getting the data and, even though it is facing a challenge like no other, is trying to find a positive way forward. I know that

the committee has to go through everything but, rather than allowing a cloud of despair to cover us, surely it is a case of rolling up our sleeves and getting on with the job.

**John Swinney:** There is a fair amount of pragmatism in Mr Adam's perspective, as always. The last year has been really disruptive and none of us would have wanted that, but the education system has run at the problem, and at fast pace.

Despite the worries and anxieties, staff generally want to be back in school. They might be anxious—and they are right to be—but they also want to be back in school. The provision of remote learning since January has been first class. Staff have used the preparatory period since the lockdown in March 2020 and the return to school in August to produce a lot of really good stuff. The remote learning offer has been high quality for children and young people around the country.

Renfrewshire Council has a strong track record in data collection and evidence-based policy making. In partnership with the University of Strathclyde, the council has run some outstanding literacy programmes, involving Professor Sue Ellis, which have transformed the approach to literacy. I visited a primary school in Renfrewshire that won a United Kingdom award for its application of the literacy programme. I do not think that it is in Mr Adam's constituency, because I am sure that he would have been there if it were. That award arose from a strongly evidenced research programme on the acquisition of literacy skills. Renfrewshire Council was prepared to change practice and do things differently because the evidence showed that there was a better approach to helping children to acquire literacy skills. That is commendable and is what education is all about—researching, challenging existing practice and being prepared to do things differently if that is in the interests of children and young people.

**The Convener:** I will bring in Daniel Johnson and ask Mr Greer to indicate in the chat box whether he has an additional question.

**Daniel Johnson:** I do not have an additional question, convener.

**Ross Greer:** Cabinet secretary, I know that you are familiar with the issues raised by the children's commissioner about young people's ability to access appeals directly. A very short SQA consultation is on-going; it is only for two weeks and closes this Friday. Is your understanding of the current process that it is a question of how young people can directly access appeals, or is it still a question whether that is appropriate at all?

**John Swinney:** It is quite difficult for me to give a definitive answer to that question today because the consultation has not reached its conclusion. I

can answer it by saying that the SQA has assured me that it is proceeding with the consultation on a basis that would satisfy the requirements of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which would require the considerations that lie at the heart of Mr Greer's question to be taken into account. I would have to wait to see the outcome of the consultation and the proposals that emerge from that to know by what mechanism that would be achieved.

**Ross Greer:** I will interpret that as a reassuring answer. Finally, and briefly, S6 pupils and school leavers usually finish school in late April or early May. That is the end of their time at school—they do exams during exam week but they do not come back afterwards. Given the unique circumstances this year, is it your expectation that most S6 pupils and school leavers in S4 and S5 will be in school until the end of June to ensure that they have completed the work that is required for the alternative assessment model?

**John Swinney:** I am not sure what is motivating Mr Greer's question and whether he has some S4, S5 or S6 pupil in mind for whom he needs to have a definitive piece of guidance issued, but the situation that he describes would be my expectation. The national qualifications group has delayed the moment for the collection of estimated grades to the very last possible moment of 25 June in order to maximise the time available for learning and teaching.

With the alternative certification model, we have to be absolutely confident that all the learning and teaching that is required to be done to merit certification has in fact been done by the time that certification takes place. Although schools have done very well in the provision of remote learning, and the national e-learning offer has substantially helped with the delivery of learning and teaching, because of the disruption, we have to ensure that there is adequate opportunity for learning and teaching to be accomplished. I therefore expect it to be on-going in schools much later in the school year than would ordinarily be the case.

**The Convener:** I think that Mr Gray wants to come back in at the last moment.

**Iain Gray:** It is a follow-up question from Ross Greer's line of questioning.

The cabinet secretary said in his introductory remarks that he believes that the alternative certification model will not impose a significant additional burden on schools, but I think that we have all heard, if only anecdotally, teachers saying that the model that is being pursued is imposing or will impose an enormous burden on them between now and June in order to complete courses, complete and mark assessments and make the required assessments for the SQA. The cabinet

secretary said that he has spoken to 1,000 teachers in the past couple of weeks. Did none of them feel that a burden was being placed on them by the alternative model that the SQA has developed?

**John Swinney:** The first thing that I would say is that the alternative certification model has been developed through system-wide collaboration, as Professor Priestley encouraged us to do. The process has been led by the SQA, but it has involved local authorities, directors of education, professional associations and Colleges Scotland in the formulation of the model. There was a deliberate change of approach to ensure that system-wide dialogue took place on the development of the alternative certification model, and it has been developed on that basis.

I acknowledge that there are workload implications for members of staff. I have taken some account of that in the additional payment that is being made to staff who are involved in the process, which I announced some time ago. Also, we have tried to streamline some of the requirements that are placed on schools in relation to things such as the materials that have to be provided, and we have provided schools with assessment items that can be undertaken within schools, which saves schools developing material to provide evidence of young people's performance.

We have tried to structure the approach in a way that does not add to schools' workload. Obviously, we will monitor the situation carefully and determine whether the approach has been successful as the alternative certification model is applied, and we will reflect on that in the light of experience.

**The Convener:** I have a final question. The committee has heard over and over about the anxiety and concern that young people and their parents and carers are feeling about what has happened. That exists for all young people, whether it is those in the nursery to primary transition or the primary to secondary transition, or those who have undergone the certification models last year and this year. It also applies to students in further and higher education. Every one of them has had a unique experience that none of us would ever have wanted them to have, but it is really important to remind everyone that they are not unique in that—this has been a world pandemic and every country has had to deal with those concerns, with schools being closed and everything else.

In the future, when we look back on what has happened to the whole cohort of students and pupils who have been affected, at what Scotland is putting in place to help in the longer term with some of the emotional and stress issues that have



been felt and with the whole element of catch-up and missing out on practical experiences, will there be a way to benchmark that against what is happening in the rest of the world, to ensure that Scotland is meeting the requirements of that cohort?

11:30

**John Swinney:** That is an important issue. We closely examine international evidence, and I benefit significantly from the contribution of the International Council of Education Advisers to bring a broad international perspective around numerous jurisdictions to the work that we undertake in Scotland. I have consulted the council at various stages during the pandemic, and it has given me the familiar level of high-quality advice that I always receive from it.

In addition, we have to focus clearly on ensuring that we achieve the expectations that we want to achieve in Scottish education. The mood that I pick up from within the education system is that educators are desperate to get on with ensuring that young people are able to fulfil their potential—that is what gets them out of bed in the morning. That sense of impetus is really important in the education system.

You started your question by asking me about the further and higher education sector. Last week, the First Minister announced some steps to enable more college students to return because we are keen—we are desperate—to ensure that they are able to make progress during this year. Some of the college-based courses are intensely practically delivered and that is an anxiety to many learners—I know that it is a big anxiety of the lecturers—and why it is important to get students into colleges. We are trying to make sure of as much of that as possible and to provide reassurance to those who find that more challenging at this time.

**The Convener:** That completes the questions this morning. I thank you once again for your attendance at committee. I know that you will leave the meeting now. Thank you very much.

**John Swinney:** Thank you.

**The Convener:** This is the final meeting of the Education and Skills Committee in session 5 of the Parliament. I take this opportunity to thank all individuals, including the many teachers, parents, carers, young people and organisations that have engaged with the committee over the last five years. Their input has been invaluable to our work since 2016 and it is greatly appreciated.

Two of our members, Iain Gray and Alex Neil, are standing down at the end of the session. I thank them for their contributions to the committee and to the Parliament as a whole in their time as

MSPs. They have made a huge contribution to politics in Scotland. I also thank the other members of the committee, past and present, and wish everyone well.

Finally, I thank our clerks, the Scottish Parliament Information Centre and the support staff of the Parliament who have supported the committee throughout the session since 2016.

I thank all members for their attendance this morning.

11:33

*Meeting continued in private until 11:39.*



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.

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