

COVID-19 Recovery Committee

12th Meeting, 2021 (Session 6), Thursday 25 November 2021

Baseline health protection measures: preparing for winter and pathways to recovery

Introduction

1. At its meeting on 28 October 2021, the Committee agreed to undertake a short inquiry into baseline health protection measures: preparing for winter and pathways to recovery.
2. The inquiry will focus on three broad policy areas:
 - health and social care services;
 - the hospitality, business and leisure sectors; and
 - schools.
3. At this meeting, the Committee will focus on schools and will take evidence from the following witnesses—
 - Gary Greenhorn, Co-Chair, ADES Resources Network, Association of Directors of Education in Scotland
 - Larry Flanagan, General Secretary, Educational Institute of Scotland
 - Margaret Wilson, Chair, National Parent Forum Scotland
 - Jim Thewliss, General Secretary, School Leaders Scotland

Background

4. The Scottish Government's [Strategic Framework](#) (last updated on 16 November 2021) explains how it plans to respond to COVID-19 and what it seeks to achieve. This explains that the Scottish Government's overall aim is:

“To suppress the virus to a level consistent with alleviating its harms while we recover and rebuild for a better future”.

5. The Scottish Government hopes to achieve this aim using measures such as ventilation, face coverings, vaccination and social distancing etc. These are what are known as “baseline health protection measures”.

6. This inquiry will consider what role baseline health protection measures, in particular ventilation, will play in lessening the impact of COVID-19 over the winter period. It will also investigate what measures are required to support long-term recovery.

7. On 3 August 2021, the First Minister announced that local authorities would receive an additional £10 million to support enhanced ventilation in schools, [informing parliament](#) that—

“Ventilation is one of the most important ways in which the risk of Covid transmission can be reduced – and so improving it will be vital, now and in the future, to ensure that schools and childcare centres are as safe as possible.”

8. The Scottish Government wrote to the Committee on 19 October to explain that existing baseline health protection measures in schools are to remain in line with its guidance on [Reducing Risks in Schools](#) (last updated on 1 October 2021).

9. On 29 October 2021, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills [wrote](#) to the Education, Children and Young People Committee updating it on the outcome of CO₂ assessments being undertaken by local authorities across Scotland’s learning estate.

10. On 17 November 2021, the Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Covid Recovery [wrote](#) to the Committee regarding children and long COVID. It provided details of the [summary report](#) published in August 2021 by the COVID-19 Scientific Advisory Sub-Group on Education and Children’s Issues on the evidence on children, schools, early learning and childcare settings and transmission from COVID-19. The letter also included information on the work being done by COSLA and the Scottish Government to advise schools on ventilation and on how this issue is being monitored by education authorities.

11. In this evidence session, the Committee will also consider other baseline health protection measures such as face coverings, social distancing, test and protect etc., that are relevant to the school estate.

Evidence

12. The Committee has taken evidence in November from the following—

- 4 November 2021 - experts in ventilation
- 11 November 2021- stakeholders in the health and social care sectors
- 18 November 2021- stakeholders in the hospitality, business and leisure sectors

13. The papers and transcripts from those meetings can be found on the Committee's [website](#).

14. The Committee has received a written submission from the Scottish Youth Parliament to inform this evidence session, which is provided in the **Annexe**.

Next steps

15. The Committee will highlight the evidence it has heard in a debate in the Chamber on 2 December 2021.

**Committee Clerks
November 2021**

Submission from the Scottish Youth Parliament

Covid Conversations

Young people's views on Covid-19 restrictions, August 2021

Four MSYPs took part in a Covid Conversation on Thursday 19th August 2021. Two MSYPs responded to the discussion questions by email. MSYPs were encouraged to consult young people before the session. This briefing outlines a summary of the issues raised.

GENERAL THOUGHTS ON COVID RESTRICTIONS

Thinking about the different restrictions and regulations that have been put in place over the past year, which stand out to you as the toughest to follow (for you or other young people)?

- **Not being able to see friends or family members**

“Seeing vulnerable family members who were shielding... it’s not easy not being able to see people... It was hard not being able to see family members if you’re used to seeing them every week. My friends said the same thing. Not being able to see your grandparents, particularly if they are older...”

“I’m very close to my family and miss my friends, but it’s been difficult to not see family or friends... it’s been hard, but straightforward in the sense of using your common sense, avoiding crowded places... the most important one for us was making sure I was safe and that my mum and dad were safe. My mum is a nurse, she was going to the hospital every day; she saw the most horrendous times... the most important thing was making sure we were safe.”

“Lack of social opportunities, sports clubs, youth work/centres being closed, and [being] unable to meet with friends [was] very socially isolating... [it was] particularly detrimental to vulnerable young people.”

- **Only being able to leave the house for specific reasons or limited times each day**

“It was difficult to have the restriction on how many times we could leave the house. I like to walk around and see people, so the restrictions of only being able to see one person and having to distance from them - having to remind each other to step away. I couldn’t see my friends who aren’t from around here. I have lots of friends in Glasgow and Edinburgh - so I couldn’t see anyone except my family or the friend who lives down the street from me... By the time restrictions eased, I was too scared to travel.”

- **Social distancing, particularly for young people who are blind or partially sighted**

“... keeping my distance was hard - I would forget, my mind doesn’t have a ruler! In shops, it was fine because they had stickers, but not everywhere had stickers, so I found it hard to know what two meters was.”

“I have no peripheral vision, I only have centre vision, so standing away from people made it hard because I couldn’t see anyone else, so I couldn’t tell how close they were to me... In shops, great there were stickers telling you how far apart you needed to be, but I couldn’t see the stickers. So it was a good idea for people to see, but thinking about blind people I don’t think they did that in a good way. I have been asking a lot of people if they could have made them tactile in any way, but no-one came to a solution. Having a guide dog - guide dogs aren’t trained to keep two metres away. The general public thinks the guide dog will do that, so knowledge about how guide dogs aren’t trained to do that [is needed]. I have some friends in Glasgow who have guide dogs who have been shouted at a lot for following the arrows the wrong way, or walking on the wrong side - I don’t think it’s necessary for sighted people to shout at them or get aggressive that they’re walking on the wrong side... I’ve continuously asked decision makers to think about making tactile stickers on floors - even when I’m using my long cane I find the bumpy bits at the road really helpful - but nothing has been done about this.”

“The most difficult for blind and partially sighted people is social distancing because we rely heavily on people guiding us; we try to be as independent as possible... but at times we need to get guided. I think part of the problem is that if there is two metres or one metre, it’s trying to make sure you keep your distance, knowing when you’re coming too close to people or need to step back a bit - that’s been the most challenging... I’ve not had any negative experiences, but I know from other people they’ve had negative experiences and abuse, particularly in supermarkets.”

How do you feel about the Covid restrictions now? Do you think the current restrictions are fair for young people? Why?

- **Overall, young people have mixed feelings about the current restrictions**

“I’ve got mixed feelings. I agree we need to be unlocked, but I don’t like idea of clubs being open because cases are going up again... I’m a bit unsure... I’m not going to go to a club, not going to chance it. But with uni being back, I think that should be more prioritised than clubs. I know it’s bad for the hospitality industry, but a nightclub being open shouldn’t be as important as education. I think some restrictions, seminars being in person is good, but some people want lectures to be in person instead of online. Having 100 people in a lecture hall wearing masks doesn’t feel great...”

“I think it is good that we are now more able to lead a normal life, however understand that some of my fellow young people are still classed as at risk therefore are struggling to enjoy the same freedoms that the majority now have. Some rules don’t make sense regarding self-isolation.”

“I’m looking at it from the fact I’ve got a key worker in my household. In a lot of ways, the restrictions easing, there’s a massive risk. The way we’re doing it here is definitely really good, it’s a lot more cautious. The restrictions need to ease, we know they need to ease for the economy, for the mental health of children and young people, for us all. It’s not been easy for any of us, so in some ways they

needed to ease restrictions... But from a healthcare perspective, there's a lot of anxiety that people will flout the rules and pretend it's not happening."

"Currently restrictions are fairly lenient and allow a lot more freedom, I think it was a needed reprieve, I do worry though that with cases rising so much, that people lives are at risk, and that maybe we opened up too soon."

- **Young people find it hard to understand the rationale for different rules**

"One of the things I felt was quite unfair - my uni is doing a blended situation where we are able to go into campus, I think because my class isn't so big, so it's good, but there are universities who are still going to be online. For young people who are going into third or fourth year and are going to have to focus on their studies ... some young people aren't good at focusing online, that's going to be a downfall for some young people... I think there is not enough restrictions in high schools; I know there's only so much you can do... but in my school, how I remember the classrooms, there's a limit in how tables can be set up. I've seen a picture from a class and no-one's wearing a mask; some young people are getting vaccinated, but younger years won't be able to get vaccinated. I really like that 16-17 year olds are getting it. There are plenty of 16 and 17 year olds going to uni. Universities are requiring students to get the vaccine to be able to go to campus, it would have been unfair if they couldn't go..."

"Don't think they need to wear masks at all in clubs now, saw plenty of stories showing people at clubs without masks or any social distancing and it drove me nuts to see."

"Mostly, yes. I think there are little restrictions left that are having huge infringements on young people's lives. I do think though that whilst I think mask wearing is on the whole a good thing, it seems very illogical to have nightclubs open, and allow festivals to happen etc without masks but require young people to wear masks in schools."

"I don't think that the current restrictions are fair to young people, particularly surrounding self-isolation requirements for close contacts who have been double vaccinated. Most young people have not yet had the opportunity to have a second dose of the vaccine due to having to wait 8 weeks, therefore must stay in isolation for the full period, whereas those who have been double vaccinated and are older don't have to isolate if they have a negative PCR test. Therefore, young people are stopped from working and going out of their homes when older people wouldn't [be]. They also have to isolate on return from countries due to not being double jabbed."

"It has been at times hard to follow due to regional differences as well as restrictions differing between England and Scotland. [It's] confusing to hear Prime Minister's briefings and First Minister's briefings saying the opposite. Also, in general, I think there has been a lot of mixed messages throughout the pandemic."

- **Young people find it difficult to find out what the current restrictions are**

“Getting access to the changes - it’s been on the news, but not all young people watch the news. My friend from Edinburgh tried to come and see me in Aberdeen. He said he had no idea what the restrictions were; young people aren’t watching the news, [information] should be put on a platform young people do use.”

“I think the government are doing the best they can at the moment by televising the announcements then posting on social media about them. NHS pages and schools are then sharing them as well as radio and news channels. Unfortunately, if young people don’t access these channels then their information will be limited. Other young people have said it’s confusing and difficult when different places are in different levels. Some also feel that level 0 should have no restrictions, as that was portrayed by the government at the time; however that isn’t the reality now we are there.”

“I personally have to rely on other people talking about the restrictions in Facebook chats unless I happen to catch the news when Nicola [Sturgeon] is talking about restrictions, or if I get ads on YouTube, or see a tweet from Young Scot. I think it’s hit or miss.”

“As a visually impaired person, we go towards the [sources] that have words for screen readers - so things like Instagram where you have to have a picture, your screen reader will just tell you there’s a picture, but if you go to Facebook or Twitter it will read out the words. You can normally make out what the picture is from the text. I want a visual description of the image - during Covid, pictures have been put in and the blind community aren’t going to see what they are. So either using words to describe the picture, or don’t use the picture at all, would help.”

FACE COVERINGS

How do you feel about wearing a face covering?

- **Generally, young people are happy to wear a face covering because they feel safer.**

“I am happy to wear a face covering and most young people feel the same way. Young people I have spoken to feel it should be mandatory for everyone.”

“In terms of face covering, I’ve not had an issue... when we were first told, everyone found it very daunting, a bit apprehensive, because it might suppress your breathing, but I actually think it’s got a lot easier the more you wear it. We’ve been getting the surgical masks; when you get used to it, it’s fine.”

“At the start it was more difficult, because it was another thing to remember... now I carry a bag of surgical masks in my bag in case I forget mine. I sometimes forget I have it on! From other young people, they have the mind-set that ‘*what if I’m vaccinated, why do I have to wear a mask*’. Most young people though aren’t that bothered - we’ve been doing it for 18 months, people just do it naturally. People who are older I’ve noticed they’re not wearing masks... there’s lots of people who just don’t care.”

- **Some young people find wearing a face covering frustrating because of issues with accessibility and during the summer when there was a lot of hot weather.**

“I wear glasses, it’s a nuisance wearing a mask, but I’d rather wear the mask - it bugs me seeing people not wearing a mask unless they’ve got a medical exemption. If you’ve not got a medical exemption, just wear it... I’m happy to wear it as long as other people do.”

“At the start I found it really hard because I have autism - autistic people hate change, it was a big change - I was forgetting them all the time, walking out of my college class without it. Now I’m used to it so it’s ok. I think that’s the same for other autistic people. At work we have deaf people coming in; people who lip-read find it hard because they can’t see your lips. I know there were special ones made with plastic, but they also steamed up so it wasn’t very helpful. I keep putting mine on upside down because of my vision - I’d love to have braille at the top so I could feel which side is the top!”

“The last couple of weeks, I’ve struggled a lot more because we’ve had a very hot summer so in terms of the hot weather and face coverings, it gets a bit more suffocating, but generally when the weather’s milder, it’s not really that bad...”

Secondary school pupils will continue wearing face coverings in class for the first six weeks of the new term, which starts this week for most young people. What do you think about this?

- **Some young people think masks should be worn at school when young people are moving around, but they shouldn’t have to wear them when sitting at a desk.**

“I think at schools it’s good. In college, we wear them in the lab, but this could happen in any classroom - when moving around we had to wear them, but not actually sitting down still. I think people get a bit annoyed wearing them, so giving the option to take them off when sitting still is something to have in place, but they can keep them on if they want.”

“Some young people think they should be worn in corridors and when moving around school but not when sat in a class. Some teachers and pupils are experiencing communication difficulties.”

- **Some young people are frustrated by the discrepancy between rules for schools and rules for hospitality venues and events.**

“I don’t think it makes sense, if young people can go to a festival with thousands of people, what is the purpose of wearing masks in school, especially considering that there is a 1m social distancing rule in place.”

- **Some young people think wearing a face covering in schools will keep others safe.**

“About schools, I think it’s a good choice, in some schools it’s harder to stay two metres apart. At least for those six weeks, people will be safe... a lot of young people talked about having to isolate because people didn’t wear masks and so they missed out on school - more young people are annoyed that other people aren’t wearing them.”

IMPACT OF RESTRICTIONS

The Covid restrictions for schools have changed over the summer. What is your understanding of the new restrictions?

(Please note - most of the young people who took part in this conversation are no longer at school.)

- **Some young people are unaware that the restrictions have changed.**

A young person who is currently at school responded to this question via an MSYP: “have they? What’s changed? We’re doing exactly the same thing.” When the MSYP told them about the changes to isolation rules, the young person said: “If you’re talking about the changes on isolation then it is a good thing as now people in my class have tested positive but I don’t have to isolate. Before this I would have missed a large part of my education.”

- **Some young people who took part in this session think the new restrictions are positive.**

“I think rules surrounding social distancing have been reduced to 1m which seems more practical. Additionally, now the whole class doesn’t have to isolate seems useful once everyone is still tested.”

- **Some young people highlighted challenges and concerns about restrictions and individual schools’ approaches.**

“I’ve been out of school for a few years, but in terms of isolation and restrictions in general ... I couldn’t imagine being in school and having to do all these things because young people want to be young people, they want to get out and see their friends... I’m glad I’m out of school, I don’t know how people could cope with it. It makes you so proud, young people have done so well.”

“I don’t have experience with school, but a member of Haggeye [the RNIB youth forum] is frustrated - her school in Aberdeen has really bad reviews at the moment. They told everyone they’re not doing assessments, then changed their minds. She’s really stressed - blind and partially sighted people have to work ten times harder than sighted people, to do all that in a week, it was too much. She was doing three Highers and a Nat 5, but ended up dropping a Higher because it was too much for her. She said schools have forgotten about accessibility because it’s not priority at the moment, but it should be, it’s just been pushed to the side.”

How do self-isolation requirements affect young people?

- **Self-isolation can have a huge impact on young people's safety and wellbeing.**

“The majority of young people have to self-isolate if they are a close contact as they have not been double vaccinated. Self-isolation can mean young people are trapped in abusive situations at home without the ability to get out the house for a break. It is very isolating and there isn't enough support given from schools etc, it is also viewed as a negative thing as children are then blamed for having covid.”

“[Young people are] isolated from support networks [which has a] huge impact on those in abusive households. No access to free school meals, and a potential big impact on mental health.”

“For people who've gone into isolation, their mental health hasn't been great. I've got a friend from college who just sits inside all day playing video games, so people like that wouldn't mind, but people who are active it would be a problem. I have to walk my guide dog; not being able to walk the dog would have an impact on my mental health. I use walking for mindfulness, that's been really disruptive during isolation.”

- **Self-isolation can have a big impact on education.**

“My friend said the thing she found really frustrating was the amount of time she lost to do school work because she had to isolate for four weeks straight because of the number of people in her classes who got it. That impacted her education, she had to be at home so long, she couldn't leave or do anything...”

“I think it'll have more impact once I'm back in person for seminars because if I have to isolate, then it would mean I'd maybe miss out on seminars. But I would much rather isolate if I'm pinged or exposed to Covid-19 even though I'm fully vaccinated because I wouldn't want to pass it onto anyone vulnerable by accident and be the reason they become ill”

“Out of all the groups in society, I think young people are one of the groups that have been really badly affected by it, particularly those doing exams.”

- **Young people understand why the self-isolation requirements exist, but find it frustrating if they have to isolate and don't catch the virus.**

“As someone who had to isolate a few weeks ago ... I was a bit annoyed but I understood. My sister got Covid first, then my dad got it a week later, so I had to isolate longer. I didn't catch it, so it seemed really hard because I couldn't walk away - the frustration was more because I didn't get covid but I was stuck at home...”

“If you get pinged you need to do it to keep other people safe, but in terms of that I can understand the frustration with young people who have been told to isolate but don't have the virus. It's not easy.”

MEDIA AND MESSAGING

How do you think young people have been portrayed by the media during the pandemic?

- **Young people feel they have been unfairly blamed for spreading the virus.**

“On the whole, negatively. I think it has been easy for the government to blame every spike in cases on young people.”

“Young people seem to have been blamed a lot for the pandemic, particularly now that the percentage of younger adults in hospital is higher. However it is often forgotten that younger people are currently more likely to not have been double vaccinated at this point.”

“The way media has portrayed us - there have been young people breaking rules, but the media attached themselves to us. They’d sometimes report on people breaking restriction rules, but target young people. They treat us like a stupid generation who doesn’t know what they’re doing. But we’re more following the rules than older generations. They treat us like we’re stupid, like we don’t understand what the restrictions are... in media coverage where lots of young people are not taking the vaccination, they were targeting us but there are so many older people who aren’t taking the vaccine ... The portrayal of young people has been really bad.”

- **Some young people feel that when restrictions have eased and they have been allowed or encouraged to do things, the media has then portrayed them negatively.**

“Particularly students in higher education, who were told they should move into student halls, paid large sums to do so under the pretence that learning would be in person. Then once they arrived were basically stuck in their halls and told they may not be let home for Christmas, and when they socialised within their halls, were photographed and splayed across the news as the sole perpetrators of the virus.”

“Schools are also blamed a lot for rising cases. The eat out to help out scheme was also controversial as young people were encouraged to go out and then blamed for rising case numbers in the media.”

- **Some feel that when a small number of young people have broken the rules, the messaging has been critical of all young people, which they feel is unfair.**

“I think the media has been very critical of young people, especially when uni students went back. First Years in halls, the media had a hoot of a time reporting on young people and parties, and breaking Covid rules. They portrayed young people really badly... There might have been some truth to it, but for the most part young people were following the rules... When older adults break the rules, they don’t get as much energy from the media in the same way as young people sometimes do. It can be really angering as a young person. I will stick to the rules, but why do I bother when the media is just blasting all young people.”

“A lot of young people have been working in key industries and to only be portrayed by the media as breaking rules is unfair. Every generation has been breaking the rules, our own politicians have been breaking the rules, so I think to place such large emphasis on student parties is unfair and categorises all young people. Equally the media has created an image of young people that older generations have bought into, and have thus created a distrust of young people.”

“I think young people are in some ways being unfairly treated... The way the media reports it's as if all young people are like that, but not all young people are like that. It's a generalisation, the media has got it wrong because they're putting all young people under the same bracket, they've been harsh on young people through Covid. I'm a young person, I've been following the rules. It's not fair on us.”