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Education, Children and Young People Committee

Impact of Covid-19 on children and young people



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Education, Children and Young People Committee

To consider and report on matters falling within the responsibility of the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills and matters relating to the Historical Abuse Inquiry within the responsibility of the Deputy First Minister.



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Introduction

1. The Covid-19 pandemic has affected every part of all our lives, presenting challenges to the way we work and learn. It has also significantly challenged how and, at times, to what extent we can interact with our families, friends and communities.
2. The Committee was keen to consider the impact of the pandemic on children and young people, particularly on those who—
 - have additional support needs,
 - are care experienced; or
 - are from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.
3. We therefore agreed to undertake a short inquiry to look at this. In this work, the Committee took written and oral evidence from a variety of organisations including—
 - Association of Directors of Education in Scotland (ADES);
 - Autism Resources Co-ordination Hub (ARCH) - South Lanarkshire;
 - Centre for Excellence for Children's Care and Protection (CELCIS);
 - Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland (CPAG Scotland);
 - Children and Young People's Commissioner;
 - Children In Scotland;
 - Children's Parliament;
 - Convention of Scottish local authorities (COSLA);
 - Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS);
 - National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT);
 - National Union of Students Scotland;
 - One Parent Families Scotland;
 - Scottish Children's Services Coalition (SCSC); and
 - Social Work Scotland.
4. The Committee is grateful to all those who shared their knowledge and experience.
5. The evidence received, perhaps unsurprisingly, confirmed that the impact of the pandemic has been most profound on those who are most disadvantaged and already require additional support.

6. Put simply, the challenges that people face have been exacerbated by the pandemic and those with additional challenges have therefore been impacted more.

Lockdown

7. Most children and young people, from March to the summer holidays in 2020, were educated at home. They were no longer able to attend nursery, school, college or university, and instead had to access learning online.
8. A second national lockdown began on 26 December 2020, during which most children were, once again, learning remotely.
9. Although a return to in-person schooling was phased in for different age groups between February and Easter 2021, it was not until after the Easter break that all schools were able to offer a full return to pupils.
10. During lockdowns two key measures were put in place to ensure that children's learning could continue: education and childcare hubs and online learning.
11. The hubs were set up to provide in-person learning provision and childcare to vulnerable children, and to the children of keyworkers, who were unable to work remotely, provided that there was not another parent or carer at home.
12. The Scottish Government emphasised the need to keep the number of children in hubs as low as possible, to minimise the potential health risk.
13. Eligibility to access these hubs was set by local authorities who determined, within their own area—
 - which occupations they classed as being 'key workers', and
 - what constituted vulnerability.¹
14. The Committee acknowledges the scale of the challenge involved in responding to the pandemic and setting up these hubs, particularly at pace. The hubs were described by the Children and Young People's Commissioner as being "incredibly effective for the children who were there".²
15. However, in written submissions and during the evidence sessions, the Committee heard examples of children and young people who were unable to access educational hubs for a variety of reasons including that they—
 - were not eligible as their parents or carers were not designated as key workers despite their employers' insisting on a return to their workplace;
 - were not eligible under their local authority's definition of vulnerable children;
 - were shielding, or living with people who were shielding; or
 - required support for complex additional needs that could not be provided in the hubs.
16. The Committee recognises the considerable efforts of all those who were supporting, and continue to support, children and young people during this challenging time.

Online learning

17. For the vast majority of children, who were not in education hubs, their education was delivered remotely. Generally, this meant that lessons, instruction and support were provided online.
18. Teachers and pupil support staff developed lessons and delivered feedback through platforms such as Seesaw and Microsoft Teams.
19. Supporting the quality, accessibility and effectiveness of that remote learning has been a key policy focus for national and local government.

Scottish Government action

20. In its [education recovery plan](#), published in October 2021, the Scottish Government outlined the resources it had committed to supporting recovery. This included £240m for the recruitment of extra staff to ensure resilience and provide additional support for learning and teaching.
21. A further £145.5m is being added permanently to the local government settlement from April 2022, which the Scottish Government states will allow local authorities to offer sustained employment of additional teachers and support staff. Resources were also provided to local authorities, colleges and universities to support children and young people's access to online learning. The Scottish Government intends to provide a digital device to every school-aged child by 2026.
22. Through Education Scotland, the Scottish Government supported schools and teachers in their delivery of remote learning, developing a National e-Learning Offer. This support is continuing throughout academic year 2021/22, offering resources for the classroom, and also professional development supporting teachers to deliver more effective remote learning.
23. The Scottish Government also provided resources for free school meal alternatives during the period of remote learning and school holidays.
24. In its recovery plan, the Scottish Government made clear that recovery should be consistent with existing policy frameworks and be considered in developing wider changes to policy.
25. It also highlighted existing policy commitments which the Scottish Government believes will help to contribute to recovery including—
 - provision of free school breakfasts and lunches all year round for all children in P1-7;
 - provision of digital devices for every child;
 - abolition of fees for instrumental music tuition;
 - removal of core curriculum charges; and
 - the full rollout of 1,140 hours of high-quality Early Learning and Childcare (ELC).
26. The Scottish Government's approach suggests that it believes that the pandemic has deepened and compounded existing challenges, rather than creating new ones.

Assessing initial need

27. While the pandemic has posed challenges for everyone, there are some children and young people who have faced more significant challenges than others. The extent of the impact on different cohorts is, however, difficult to ascertain in the round.
28. Several contributors highlighted that there was, and continues to be, a lack of data and research to provide a broader understanding of the potential, and actual, impacts of the pandemic on children and young people.
29. In its evidence NASUWT cited examples of other countries, including the USA and the Netherlands, where research was undertaken at the outset of the pandemic, to better understand what was required and where funding should be targeted.³
30. It stated that this was not the case in Scotland, arguing—
 - ” we feel that there has not been a properly researched first step to identify the need, or at least to aid local authorities and schools in identifying the need before deciding where the funding should go.⁴
31. Despite the amount of time that has passed, NASUWT argued that there is still a need for further study and evidence gathering to better focus further deployment of funds, stating—
 - ” We still need a national steer on the questions to ask so that they are the same across the country. You would then be able to rely on the data that you get and better work out who, where and what you need to target. That consistency has been missing.⁵

Measuring the impact

32. The Committee recognises that there has been work to understand the impact of aspects of the pandemic, including the [Equity Audit](#), which was published by the Scottish Government in January 2021.
33. The audit focused on the impact of school closures during the first lockdown and identified differences in the experience between children and young people from more and less advantaged backgrounds. It highlighted evidence which suggests that the negative impacts on attainment and ‘learning loss’ is felt more strongly by socio-economically disadvantaged pupils.
34. A theme of the Committee’s work since it was established has been the lack of adequate data to measure the breadth of the aims of education policy. The recently published [Achievement of Curriculum for Excellence \(CfE\) Levels](#) data indicates an impact on primary school pupils’ attainment of literacy and numeracy. However, there is not similar evidence at secondary level, nor in the areas of health and wellbeing.
35. In his evidence to the Committee, the Commissioner for Children and Young People highlighted this lack of data—

” We know what has happened—we have really good evidence on that—but it is hard to measure its impact, particularly on mental health, long-term physical health and educational attainment, because we do not have the frameworks in place. ⁶

36. Such information and frameworks could help decision makers to more fully assess what measures may be most effective to support children and young people, and their parents and carers.
37. The Committee recognises that work has also been undertaken by organisations to speak to children and young people, and to capture the examples of their experiences during the pandemic. For instance—
 - [‘In Isolation, Instead of School’ \(Iniss\): Vulnerable Children’s Experiences Of Covid-19 And Effects On Mental Health And Education](#);
 - [Lockdown Lowdown III](#), the third survey by the Scottish Youth Parliament, Youthlink Scotland and YoungScot - conducted between 31 March and 31 May 2021 - to seek the views and experiences of young people through the pandemic.
 - [The reported effects of the pandemic on pupils in special schools and colleges and what they need now](#), funded by the Nuffield Foundation; and
 - [Experiences of vulnerable children, young people, and parents during the Covid-19 pandemic](#). Published by the Scottish Government this report highlighted findings of “qualitative research conducted with a range of children, young people and parents in vulnerable or seldom heard groups, carried out to explore their lived experiences during and throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.”

38. However, despite data and knowledge being collected at local or organisational level, a comprehensive analysis of the impact of the pandemic on different cohorts across the country has not been produced. As such, it is challenging to draw conclusions as to the extent of the comparative impacts on different cohorts.
39. The Committee acknowledges the sheer scale and variety of challenges posed by the pandemic. It also recognises the efforts of all those working to support children and young people and respond to these challenges, at pace.
40. While there has been significant resource put in place to respond to the issues caused by the pandemic, it is not clear to the Committee whether the Scottish Government was able to gather the necessary data at the outset of the pandemic, to identify and understand needs of different groups and to allocate resources accordingly.
41. The Committee notes that the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills' response to the Committee's pre-budget letter considers the issue of data held on the impact of the pandemic. The Cabinet Secretary's letter outlined the Government's approach to understanding the impacts of the pandemic on pupils. This noted the measures contained in the National Improvement Framework; the measures in future NIFs will be the subject to a consultation in 2022. The Cabinet Secretary also highlighted approaches to evaluation in the updated Scottish Attainment Challenge.
42. The Committee welcomes this work. However, it is not clear to the Committee how this work will support the understanding of how the pandemic has affected different groups of learners. For example, it is not clear how this approach will supply answers to questions such as whether the impact on learning is different when taking account of factors such as rurality, age, disability, ethnicity, gender and so on. These questions would appear to the Committee as important to understand the challenge the education system faces and in developing the policy responses and the distribution of any additional resource.

The Committee therefore recommends that the Scottish Government should commission research utilising quantitative and qualitative methods, as a matter of urgency, to provide an analysis of how different cohorts have been affected by Covid.

43. This could draw and then build on existing research, to give a more comprehensive view of the current situation.
44. This should ensure better understanding of what the needs of different groups are now, in order to assist local authorities and national agencies in determining what additional measures may be necessary to support children and young people.
45. The Achievement of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) Levels data, referred to above, was released after the Committee had concluded its evidence gathering and was therefore not considered as part of this short inquiry. However, the Committee intends to consider the issue of attainment, and the Scottish Government's approach to reducing the poverty-related attainment gap further in 2022.


Assessing interventions

46. In its report of March 2021, [Improving outcomes for young people through school education](#), the Auditor General of Scotland stated—

“It is now more important than ever that schools, councils and the Scottish Government are clear about:

- the priorities for education recovery from the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and how to improve outcomes beyond what was being achieved before;
- what that means in terms of the anticipated outcomes for children and young people; and
- how these outcomes will be measured, reported and acted on.”

Additional staff

47. £240m was provided for the recruitment of extra staff in order to ensure resilience and to provide additional support for learning and teaching. In their written submission, jointly produced with Social Work Scotland, COSLA and ADES confirmed that over 1,600 teachers and staff have been brought in as a result of this funding.⁷
48. However, the Committee was unable to discover exactly how the rest of this money has been spent, and how well these resources have met the needs of pupils.
49. Several witnesses suggested that there had been an increase in the number of children and young people requiring additional support as a result of the pandemic. Examples of those needing extra support included children and young people who have—
- not been able to engage in online learning;
 - experienced increased anxiety both during lockdown and upon returning to the school, college or university environment; and
 - transitioned during the pandemic, whether into primary school, secondary school or post-secondary school destinations.
50. In their evidence EIS, SCSC and NASUWT highlighted pressures that existed, pre-pandemic, in respect of delivering support to children and young people with additional support needs (ASN). EIS stated—
-  Covid has certainly exacerbated additional support needs across the board, but we already faced acute needs in ASN prior to Covid.⁸
51. In its evidence to the Committee, CELCIS raised concerns that, as a result of the pandemic, more children and families will require targeted support and intervention, at a time when there is even more demand and squeeze on resources and capacity for staff.⁹

52. In their evidence, NASUWT and Children in Scotland also emphasised the need to understand which interventions were effective. During the session on 17 November, Children in Scotland stated—
- “We need to know what the impacts of interventions are on children and young people with additional support needs. Currently, we do not know that.”
53. However, they believed that this should be addressed by the implementation of the national measurement framework for additional support for learning,¹⁰ urging that it be progressed swiftly.¹¹
54. The Scottish Government has stated that it intends to publish the national measurement framework in Spring 2022.¹²
55. It is unclear how much of the additional resource provided by the Scottish Government to support recovery has been used to—
- recruit teachers and staff to support children and young people with additional support needs;
 - convert temporary teaching positions to permanent positions; and
 - to support non-mainstream settings.

The Committee agrees that setting outcomes, and clearly explaining how success will be measured, is critical to assessing the effectiveness of any intervention. The Committee would therefore welcome more information from the Scottish Government on the outcomes achieved as a result of the resources it provided to support children and young people during the pandemic, including the specific issues highlighted above.

The Committee notes the work on the findings of the Morgan review. Given the impact of the pandemic on children with additional support needs, the Committee considers that implementation of the recommendations is required as a matter of urgency.

56. The Committee intends to consider further the issue of additional support for learning in more detail in due course.

Food

57. To ensure that children who were statutorily eligible for free school meals received support during the period of remote learning and school holidays, the Scottish Government provided £51 million for free school meal alternatives.
58. Local authorities took a variety of approaches to supporting families to feed their children, providing vouchers, cash or, in some cases, food.
59. In its evidence to the Committee, CPAG Scotland stated that families preferred cash as it allows them to retain the dignity of being able to make choices in how to spend

the money.

60. COSLA explained that the “following engagement with children, young people, families and the third sector, the vast majority of local authorities had moved to cash payments for free school meal alternatives by January 2021.”¹³
61. In its submission, COSLA also highlighted its distribution of Scottish Government funds to support local families with low incomes. This is continuing as it is distributing ‘bridging payments’ over the next year until the Scottish Child Payment is fully online.
62. In its evidence, CPAG Scotland stated that this support provided during the October break and Christmas holidays was hugely valued by families, as are the Scottish child payment bridging payments.

Digital support

63. On the issue of Digital infrastructure and connectivity, the Scottish Government’s Equity Audit stated—
 - ” Where there were gaps in such access – with socioeconomically disadvantaged children and young people potentially being most negatively affected – this had a direct impact on the remote learning experience and the engagement of children and young people.”¹⁴
64. The Scottish Government provided £25m to local authorities to support their efforts to ensure that all young people had access to online learning. Approximately 70,000 devices and 14,000 connectivity packages were delivered as a result of this funding.
65. Colleges and universities received £5m in 2020/21 to support students to access online learning. In its Programme for Government, the Scottish Government announced that £5m would now be provided annually for this purpose.¹⁵
66. CPAG Scotland stated “for children and families who got devices, that transformed things and made a big difference to their ability to engage.”¹⁶
67. Several organisations noted, however, that there were significant difficulties in providing digital devices for children and young people who required them during the first lockdown.
68. Although it was noted that the situation greatly improved during the second lockdown, the Children’s Parliament and CPAG Scotland both highlighted that it is still the case that not all families have a digital device. CPAG Scotland also stated that survey responses collected by them suggested that a significant proportion of low-income families could still be without a device.¹⁷
69. NASUWT highlighted that some rural communities are also still experiencing issues with hardware, software, connectivity and access to digital learning.¹⁸

70. It was noted repeatedly during the evidence sessions that having a device to use is not sufficient, on its own, to support engagement with school, college or university. It demands connectivity, which incurs both installation and running costs. Such costs were, and are, a barrier to many young people from lower-income households being able to engage fully in their education.
71. In terms of moving forward, it was noted across the evidence sessions that, to ensure that a young person can have full digital access they need—
- their own device, whether a tablet or laptop etc;
 - appropriate software;
 - an internet connection, with support for low-income families to help with any associated costs, and for those living in locations without access to a broadband connection;
 - on-going support to help maintain the device and update software; and
 - digital literacy skills – not only for the young person but also the family or carers supporting them. [It should be noted that family members may also have particular requirements, for instance they may be older if providing kinship care or may have English as an additional language.]
72. Young people who have received a device recently will also need support to ensure that they know how to use it effectively, recognising that some of their peers may have had access to a device since March 2020, or before.
73. Children in Scotland and the Children and Young People’s Commissioner also highlighted the limitations of digital engagement for children and young people with additional support needs who require specialist technology¹⁹ or more individualised home learning.²⁰

The Committee encourages the Scottish Government to ensure that the work to roll out devices to children and young people recognises the wider requirements, as detailed above, to ensure that the policy achieves the desired outcomes and contributes to closing the ‘digital divide’. This wider work should recognise that access to the internet may be more challenging in rural locations.

It's not over

74. During 2021, the Covid-19 pandemic receded sufficiently to allow a return to a more pre-pandemic way of life. For most children and young people, this meant seeing friends and family, returning to school and, with it, to a more traditional form of education.
75. It is clear from the events of winter 2021, however, with the rapid spread of the Omicron variant and the urgent response it has demanded, that the public health emergency posed by the pandemic is not over.
76. During the sessions, several witnesses stated that, even before the emergence of Omicron, many services had not been able to return to pre-pandemic levels.^{21 22} This was often owing to a lack of capacity and resilience within their respective systems.
77. The Scottish Government has stated that keeping schools open is one of its highest priorities. The experience of the emergence of the Delta variant in late 2020 clearly had a significant impact upon schools.
78. The Committee has previously considered the operation of the Alternative Certification Model in 2021. There were a number of lessons highlighted in evidence to the Committee, to be derived from that experience. These included the mental health impacts on young people and the impact on teacher workload. The 2021 ACM experience also highlighted the critical importance of scenario-planning.

Given the current, rapidly evolving, situation, the Committee seeks further information on how the Scottish Government has updated its contingency plans as a result of the Omicron variant. The Committee also requests an update regarding how the Scottish Government and Education Scotland are monitoring contingency planning at local authority level.

The Committee would also welcome an update on what scenario-planning the Scottish Government is undertaking with regard to the emergence of further Covid-19 variants in order to ensure the continuity of education and services.

79. The Committee recognises results young people achieved in 2020 and 2021 were hard earned, deserved and fully merited. A key metric which enables the performance of the school education system to be assessed over time is attainment data. The Committee notes that the 2022 National Improvement Framework states—

” “The National Qualification results in 2020 and 2021 provide an accurate picture of the qualifications awarded to learners in those years. Comparisons with previous and future years is possible, provided it is done with an understanding of the different underlying assessment methodologies”.²³

The Committee asks for guidance from the Scottish Government on how such a

comparative assessment would be undertaken.

80. Another key lesson, the Committee has heard in evidence on the 2021 ACM, was the importance of communicating plans to young people themselves.

The Committee emphasises that it is essential that contingency plans are communicated clearly not only to policy stakeholders but critically to parents, children and young people.

The extent of engagement of young people, during the pandemic to date, in the development of policy that directly impacts them was a central theme in the evidence the Committee took.

Further to this, the Committee recognises that communication and consultation with children and young people in particular was often lacking in earlier phases of the pandemic.

Whilst we welcome recent progress made in this regard by the Scottish Government and its agencies, as well as by local government, there is both the need and the opportunity to continue improving such engagement and work in partnership with young people as policy responses to the pandemic continue to evolve.

Annex A - written evidence

Association of Directors of Education in Scotland (ADES)

Autism Resources Coordination Hub (ARCH)

Centre for Excellence for Children's Care and Protection (CELCIS)

Child Poverty Action Group

Children in Scotland

Children's Parliament

COSLA

COSLA, ADES and Social Work Scotland joint submission

Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS)

NASUWT

NUS Scotland

One Parent Families Scotland

Scottish Coalition Services Coalition (SCSC)

Social Work Scotland

Annexe B - Extracts from Minutes and links to oral evidence

9th Meeting, 2021 (Session 6) Wednesday 17 November 2021

The Committee heard evidence from Bruce Adamson, Children and Young People's Commissioner; Stephen McGhee, Managing Director, Spark of Genius, and representing the Scottish Coalition Services Coalition (SCSC); Linda O'Neill, Education Lead, Centre for Excellence for Children's Care and Protection (CELCIS); and then from Laurie Black, Convener of the ASN Committee, Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS); Ramon Hutchingson, Co-ordinator, Autism Resources Co-ordination Hub (ARCH) - South Lanarkshire; and Sally Cavers, Head of Inclusion, Children In Scotland.

[Official Report of meeting](#)

[Meeting papers](#)

10th Meeting, 2021 (Session 6) Wednesday 24 November 2021

The Committee heard evidence from John Dickie, Director, Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland; Satwat Rehman, CEO, One Parent Families Scotland; and Dr Colin Morrison, Co-Director, Children's Parliament.

[Official Report of meeting](#)

[Meeting papers](#)

11th Meeting, 2021 (Session 6) Wednesday 1 December 2021

The Committee heard evidence from Jennifer King, Education Manager, Children & Families Service, Dundee City Council and Chair of ASN/CYP Services, Association of Directors of Education in Scotland (ADES); Laura Caven, Chief Officer, Children and Young People Team, COSLA; Mike Corbett, National Official (Scotland), NASUWT; and Joan Tranent, Chief Social Worker, Midlothian Council and Deputy Chair of Children and Families Standing Committee, Social Work Scotland.

[Official Report of meeting](#)

[Meeting papers](#)

- 1 [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): school and early learning closures - further guidance in relation to key workers. Published 24 March 2020](#)
- 2 Official Report, [17 November 2021](#), Col. 3
- 3 Official Report, [1 December 2021](#), Col. 14
- 4 Official Report, [1 December 2021](#), Col. 15
- 5 Official Report, [1 December 2021](#), Col. 28
- 6 Official Report, [17 November 2021](#), Col. 16
- 7 [COSLA, Social Work Scotland and ADES written submission](#)
- 8 Official Report, [17 November 2021](#), Col. 27
- 9 Official Report, [17 November 2021](#), Col. 9
- 10 The establishment of a national measurement framework was a key recommendation of the Morgan Review of Additional Support for Learning. The framework is due to be published in Spring 2022 and will seek to record outcomes for children and young people and the impact of different support interventions.
- 11 Official Report, [17 November 2021](#), Col. 32
- 12 [Additional support for learning action plan: progress report. Published 1 November 2021](#)
- 13 [COSLA written submission](#)
- 14 [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): impact of school building closures - equity audit. Published 13 January 2021](#)
- 15 [NUS Scotland written submission](#)
- 16 Official Report, [24 November 2021](#), Col 15
- 17 Official Report, [24 November 2021](#), Col 15
- 18 Official Report, [1 December 2021](#), Col. 33
- 19 Official Report, [17 November 2021](#), Col. 13
- 20 [Children in Scotland written submission](#)
- 21 Official Report, [17 November 2021](#), Col. 38
- 22 Official Report, [1 December 2021](#), Col. 23
- 23 Scottish Government, [Achieving Excellence and Equity: 2022 National Improvement Framework and Improvement Plan](#), p.17.

