

Annex A

Children and young people with additional support needs

The impact of the pandemic on children and young people with additional support needs and their families has been varied, as you may expect given the wide range of factors which give rise to the need for additional support. The pandemic has had a specific impact on children those with complex needs. Many in this group were required to shield and were additionally impacted by the loss of support systems – education, short breaks, and community supports. Some families in receipt of home support opted to cease the service during the first lock down, to safeguard their child’s health leaving them without any support services. While manageable in the short term, the unanticipated length of time the pandemic has continued, ongoing reduction in short breaks/respite and the effects of the national shortage of home support provision has led to extreme stress, which has been exacerbated by a related reduction in carer supports. The Social Work Scotland briefing paper provided to the Committee provides some examples of the impact, including an increase in children moving to residential care facilities.

Some families with children with autism also experienced specific stress and challenge and their children struggled with the uncertainty and change in routine resulting from the restrictions and pandemic. As lockdown eased, the level of distress and challenge, including self-harm and anxiety related destructive behaviours has become evident.

Other groups who have additional support needs include young carers, those experiencing difficult family circumstances, for example, due to domestic abuse, or drug/alcohol use, those for whom English is a second language, those impacted by bereavement and looked after children. Looked after children are considered below. Some of those children are a hidden group. For all those with additional needs, the evidence is that the mental health consequences of the pandemic have been and continue to be significant. This emphasises how wide-ranging additional support needs are and therefore the child centred, GIRFEC approach required to help them in both their life and learning.

Schools, local authorities and wider partners recognised that the disruption caused the wider public health protection measures taken in response to the pandemic including school closures and restrictions on support services, were likely to more significantly impact on children and young people who have additional support needs. The expertise and judgement of children’s sector professionals working mostly closely with children and their families was key in understanding how to provide that support with schools and other face to face services closed. Our workforce demonstrated creativity, sensitivity, and a real understanding of and commitment to GIRFEC in their endeavours to provide support to children, and families, and learning opportunities.

The Independently Chaired Review of Additional Support for Learning (ASL), carried out by Angela Morgan and published in June 2020 was well received, and the committee will wish to note the [progress report](#) published by Scottish Government and COSLA in November 2021, and [the report](#) from the Additional Support for Learning Implementation Group summarising the group's perspective on taking forward the recommendations and actions published this month. Both reports note that progress has been made, though the pandemic response has challenged this progress. A point to highlight is that Scottish Government and COSLA have agreed with the advice from the Additional Support for Learning Implementation Group that we should re-engage with families and other key stakeholders to inform the ongoing priorities moving forward. The committee may wish to consider how they remain informed about this engagement and the perspectives of children, young people, families and key stakeholders moving forward.

Looked after children and young people, care experienced young people, and children and families on the edges of care

Looked after children and care leavers were particularly impacted by the pandemic. The restrictions, amongst other factors, meant that:

- Children could not see their families face to face without very detailed risk assessments
- Rehabilitation and permanence plans were delayed. This remains the case given the significant backlog in court processes
- There were delays and backlog in the Children's Hearing system
- There was an increase in isolation, particularly for care leavers, and evidence of an increase in suicides and suicide attempts in this group.

To understand and mitigate impacts of the pandemic on children and families, the Covid-19 Collective Leadership Group was established early on in the pandemic, jointly chaired by Scottish and Local Government (through SOLACE representing Local Authority Chief Executives). The Collective Leadership has a wide, cross-sector membership whose key focus is mitigating the impacts of the pandemic on children and families, particularly on care leavers, early years and under-fives and those who may be in need of respite care, amongst others.

The group's work is underpinned by the work and principles of GIRFEC, The Promise, UNCRC Incorporation and is supported by the Children's Services Planning Partnerships Strategic Leads Network. An early piece of work by the group was identifying a dataset bringing together intelligence from the 32 Chief Officer Groups and national agencies and delivery partners including the third sector, Police Scotland the Health Service. This dataset includes key data on what is happening across Children's Services Partnerships to support children and young people on the child protection register, those looked after and those on the edges of care. The dataset also includes reporting on adult public protection issues including homelessness and domestic abuse. This data is used at a local level to inform the work of local multiagency partnerships, and by the group, Scottish Government, COSLA and national organisations to inform any national responses required.

Measures to mitigate the transmission of the virus meant that children and young people had less access to external routes for support and help, this information and multiagency approach was critical in providing effective support to families. Given the changes in child protection referrals and Inter-agency Referral Discussions during the pandemic there was a focus on immediate situations of risk, but restrictions impacted on ability to pick up need, and respond. The level of demand now being seen indicates the hidden harm during the pandemic and the extent to which the reduction in 'sight' of children has impacted on their wellbeing, The knowledge, skills, experiences and relationships of our children's sector workforce were stretched, but the circumstances resulted in development of new approaches which mitigated the impact for some children, for example use of technology, and visits where appropriate with suitable safety mitigations.

Local Government is committed to Keeping Scotland's Promise that children will grow up loved, safe and respected. COSLA is working closely with partners to progress [Plan 21-24](#) and the Children and Young People Board receive regular updates on the priority areas identified within it:

- A Good Childhood
- Whole Family Support
- Supporting the Workforce
- Planning

- Building Capacity

Plan 21-24 and Change Programme ONE identifies what was known in March 2021 about the impacts of the pandemic on children and families in and on the edges of care. This was a key publication which provided Local Government with not only those insights but a renewed sense of urgency in considering the necessary steps in recovery from COVID 19 to support children and families. The plan highlights that the rapid adaptations to the public service landscape in response to the pandemic provides hope, with the identification and response to need in a compassionate, nimble, reflective way throughout 2020 demonstrating that change can happen at pace and that it is possible to achieve the aims of the Promise within the ambitious ten-year timescale.

That being said, the challenges facing Local Government in #KeepingThePromise are significant. The possible inclusion of Children's Services in a National Care Service risks derailing the aforementioned progress and transformational change already underway. COSLA was clear in its [response](#) to the National Care Service consultation, that with The Promise as our guiding light to ensuring that children in Scotland 'grow up loved, safe and respected' then the focus should be on investing in achieving this through collaborative leadership and innovative partnerships, at the local level.

Similarly, a report by [UNISON's Social Work Issues Group](#) highlighted that realistic additional resource needs to be committed by Scottish Government to enable Scotland to #KeepThePromise and significant investment is required to expand the capacity of statutory children and families social work services.

Engagement with Learning

Despite the restrictions, many foster carers noted that for a small number of children removal of the pressures of managing school resulted in a reduction in stress and anxiety and an increase in engagement with learning via remote routes. For those children, time in the security of a closed and nurturing environment was a positive factor, though it should be noted that for many other young people this was not the case and some placements disrupted due to the risks resulting from young people ignoring the COVID-19 rules.

Committee requested information on how many children who engaged better with learning during lock down remained engaged following the return to school. Information in this area is largely anecdotal, and reflects a small number of individual situations. Those working with foster carers have reported a range of responses. For some children, the recognition of the pressure resulting from aspects of school based learning led to positive discussion with schools and a managed re-introduction of school based learning and additional support that maintained engagement with learning. For other young people, the return to school, and ongoing disruption of school-based education has caused continued stress which has not been a positive factor.

Children with additional needs were given priority access to Hubs. While some were unable to take up this offer for health reasons for others this was a positive experience which allowed them to remain engaged with learning, and which mitigated some of the social consequences of isolation

Children and young people from socio-economic disadvantaged backgrounds

Local Government is committed to the national mission to end child poverty. The [Local Government Blueprint](#) highlights the role councils are playing in local recovery and renewal work. Importantly, this involves investing in and supporting children, young people, and families – particularly those who are at greater risk of experiencing child poverty and inequalities.

Local authorities and their partners are committed to working together to end child poverty. Children experience poverty as a consequence of the circumstances that their families and communities live in, and the updated Tackling Child Poverty Delivery plan must acknowledge the need for whole system, cross policy approaches going forward. Poverty cannot be tackled in individual settings such as schools or ELC centres alone – although these can have a significant contribution in mitigating the impacts of poverty. That is why, following the closure of schools, local authorities took a range of steps to ensure that children and young people eligible for free school meals would continue to receive either food packages, vouchers or a cash payment. This was delivered at pace, and 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. The flexible funding that local authorities received to address financial insecurity during 2020-21 meant measures could be put in place dependent on local need, supporting families with low incomes. This approach, trusting and empowering those closest to the communities they serve to provide the support children and families needed, should be the default way of working.

In terms of the Scottish Attainment Challenge (SAC), COSLA has been maintained the position that all local authorities have an important strategic role in ensuring that education tackles the impact of poverty on children and young people and closing the poverty-related attainment gap. Importantly, Local Government has been clear that this work will require strengthening support both within schools, and in communities, making vital links with the range of services for children and young people beyond the school gates, and in the areas which impact on their home and family life. We have welcomed the recognition of this point by the Scottish Government in the refreshed SAC programme.

COSLA officers worked with Scottish Government and partners on funding for local authorities through the SAC, and agreed a needs-based distribution across all 32 councils in Scotland. This is based on the available data on children and young people living in low-income households. Transition measures have also been put in place to ensure there is time for planning.

COSLA engaged openly with the Scottish Government on shared priorities for a new approach to the SAC programme, and as with any negotiation, there were areas that did not meet our goals. COSLA will continue to emphasise the need for greater resources to councils and schools so that we can work collectively to improve outcomes for children and young people as we continue on the journey towards COVID Recovery.

Recovery

With the disruption of the past 20 months, the health and wellbeing of children and young people is a priority across the children's sector. In education, line with the Scottish Government's guidance on 'Curriculum for Excellence in the Recovery Phase', local authorities and schools have continued their clear focus on the physical, emotional and mental wellbeing of children and young people.

Local Government is continuing to meet the challenges brought by the pandemic, while also playing a key role in recovery from the impacts of the pandemic. The focus remains on those who are potentially more vulnerable as a result of the pandemic, including children, young people and families with additional support needs, care-experienced young people and those from a background of socio-economic disadvantaged backgrounds. Local Government, and our communities continue to show innovative and creative thinking in responding to the pandemic and the impacts of public health restrictions. The committee will be aware of consider COSLA's "[Live Well Locally](#)" campaign which sets out our shared ambition for everyone in Scotland. In order to support communities to thrive as we recover, Local

Government must be properly funded, or our communities, particularly those who are most reliant on council services, will feel the impacts acutely.

Local Government is working closely with Scottish Government on the COVID Recovery Strategy, focusing on tackling the inequality and disadvantage exposed and exacerbated by the pandemic. The Wellbeing of Children and Young People is one of the strategy's three key outcomes. We will continue to work to further strengthen support for children, young people and their families. The strategy recognises that "local" is key - local leadership, local partnerships, local government, local transport, local children's services planning, local employability partnerships, local resilience, and local service design. Local Government, in collaboration with the Scottish Government, will provide that local leadership to the approach to recovery that is at all times rooted in the needs of the people that we serve.

We jointly note that the impact on children is likely to long term and continually emerging and demand for services has and will continue to increase. The pandemic has increased vulnerability factors for children and families already experiencing adversity and trauma, and the mental health impact is a core area for concern and action. There has been a particular impact on children with disabilities, care experienced young people and the resources that support those groups and wider societal factors such as poverty are critical factors as we move into recovery.

Annex B

School

Staffing

To date, there have been though over 1600 teachers and support assistants brought in using the monies to date Scottish Government. Scottish Government publish Summary Statistics for Schools each year, with the [2021 statistics](#) published earlier this month. There is further information on funding for teachers and school staff on the [Scottish Government website](#). At a local level, councils' base decisions on recruitment on their assessment of local need, including school roll and the wider context of their area. There must be a fair and open recruitment process and as fit and proper employers, local authorities must follow policy and legal requirements in offering contracts, whether temporary or permanent. It is also important to acknowledge that much of the need in schools is for support assistants and other school staff members.