



OFFICIAL REPORT  
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

# COVID-19 Recovery Committee

Thursday 25 November 2021

Session 6



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**Thursday 25 November 2021**

**CONTENTS**

**Col.**

**BASELINE HEALTH PROTECTION MEASURES..... 1**

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**COVID-19 RECOVERY COMMITTEE**  
**12<sup>th</sup> Meeting 2021, Session 6**

**CONVENER**

\*Siobhian Brown (Ayr) (SNP)

**DEPUTY CONVENER**

\*Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

**COMMITTEE MEMBERS**

\*Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)

\*John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)

\*Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)

\*Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con)

\*attended

**THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:**

Larry Flanagan (Educational Institute of Scotland)

Gary Greenhorn (Association of Directors of Education in Scotland)

Jim Thewliss (School Leaders Scotland)

Margaret Wilson (National Parent Forum of Scotland)

**CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE**

Sigrid Robinson

**LOCATION**

The David Livingstone Room (CR6)



# Scottish Parliament

## COVID-19 Recovery Committee

Thursday 25 November 2021

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:00]

### Baseline Health Protection Measures

**The Convener (Siobhian Brown):** Good morning and welcome to the 12th meeting in 2021 of the COVID-19 Recovery Committee. We continue our inquiry into baseline health protection measures; today, we will focus on schools. I welcome to the meeting Gary Greenhorn, who is co-chair of the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland resources network; Larry Flanagan, who is the general secretary of the Educational Institute of Scotland; Margaret Wilson, who is the chair of the National Parent Forum of Scotland; and Jim Thewliss, who is the general secretary of School Leaders Scotland.

The evidence session forms part of our short inquiry into baseline health protection measures, including ventilation, face coverings, social distancing and vaccination, which are the main tools that we are using to respond to Covid-19. This is the final evidence session on the measures that we have planned. The committee will lead a debate next Thursday, when we plan to highlight to the whole Parliament the evidence that we have heard during the inquiry. The committee will provide a copy of the *Official Report* of today's evidence session to the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee to inform its inquiry on the health and wellbeing of children and young people. We very much value our witnesses' contribution to the inquiry and thank them for giving us their time this morning.

Each member will have approximately 12 minutes to speak to the panel of witnesses and ask their questions. We are tight for time and have a number of witnesses, so please keep responses as brief as possible and do not feel that you must all answer every question. I apologise in advance because, if time runs on too much, I might have to interrupt members or witnesses in the interest of brevity. I turn to questions.

I thank the members of the Scottish Youth Parliament who have provided insightful evidence on their general thoughts about Covid restrictions and challenges through the pandemic. The young people who gave evidence had mixed feelings about the current restrictions, and I was surprised to learn that, in general, young people are happy to wear face coverings because they feel safer.

The evidence shows that there is still hesitancy and, although we all want life to be back to normal, there is an element of our young people continuing to be quite cautious about Covid.

That leads me to my first question. What feedback have you received about the requirement to wear face coverings in school? Is there demonstrable evidence that that is having an impact on pupils and their behaviour? I will start with Gary Greenhorn.

**Gary Greenhorn (Association of Directors of Education in Scotland):** The committee papers highlighted that, although pupils accept the wearing of face masks in schools, they would like the mitigation to be reduced in so far as wearing face masks in class is concerned. There are some challenges with communication in classes with the wearing of face masks. In addition, as we get to the good old Scottish winter weather, pupils and staff have the problem of glasses steaming up, which presents a hazard.

Overall, behaviour has been okay, and pupils accepted the requirement once we got over the initial challenge at the very start. It has been well embedded into school management procedures. School staff—teachers and ancillary school staff—are all challenged with ensuring that we adapt to the requirements of the mitigations in the day-to-day operation of schools.

**The Convener:** I totally agree; we did not realise how much we relied on lip reading when listening to people before we all had to wear masks. I will move on to Larry Flanagan.

**Larry Flanagan (Educational Institute of Scotland):** We should be mindful of the current circumstances, in that we have record high levels of pupil infection in schools and record levels of teacher absence. The issue with all the mitigations, but specifically face coverings, is whether they are contributing to keeping schools open and safe. In that regard, we are in favour of the continued use of face coverings in class in secondary schools. There is not much debate about the use of face coverings when moving around schools; the consensus is that that is appropriate.

We are currently surveying our members and will issue the findings next week. As a preview, I can tell you that, while accepting that face coverings are an inconvenience in teaching and learning—teachers would love to be finished with them just as much as pupils would—the majority of our members feel that face coverings should be in place across the winter period, given the higher risks that are associated with winter. At the very least, they feel that the measure should be in place until we have pupil vaccination coverage of more than 90 per cent, because that is a critical

issue. We have already seen in the data the impact on pupil infection levels of the vaccination of 12 to 17-year-olds. Pupil infection levels are lower in secondary school than in primary school and the key factor is the vaccination roll-out. We would have wished for the student vaccination programme to have started much earlier; we might then have been in a better place, but we are where we are.

At the moment, we support the more cautious approach that the Government is taking, because it is critical to try to keep schools open, with young people in class being taught by their teachers.

**Margaret Wilson (National Parent Forum of Scotland):** There is no clear consensus among parents about the use of face masks. Ultimately, parents want our schools to be open and safe, but our children and young people have to follow much stricter mitigation measures than any other members of society. We get feedback from parents with a broad range of views. Some parents are scared and want the mitigations to continue, and other parents do not want any mitigations in school. Parents are concerned that wearing face coverings affects learning and teaching while sitting in class in senior school. They have asked me to ask the Covid-19 education recovery group to consider that face coverings could be removed while sitting in class. I can only put forward the wide range of views.

**Jim Thewliss (School Leaders Scotland):** I will not rehearse anything that colleagues have already said on the issue, but I have one or two points to make from a school leadership point of view. We are broadly comfortable, if not altogether happy, with where we are on the wearing of face masks in school. It does not create the most optimal of learning conditions but we understand entirely and we are prepared to live with it, particularly into the winter.

It should be noted that all the mitigations in schools are set in the context of the four Covid harms. The priority for us is to have young people learning in the school environment, and we see the wearing of face masks as an important mitigation to sustain that.

Mr Flanagan's point about the level of infection in secondary schools and primary schools is an important one to note; we might pick up on that later.

It is very difficult to unravel misbehaviour and base it on one aspect such as wearing face masks. There are other issues with young people's behaviour in school, not least of which is that secondary 1 and 2 young people have missed out on the induction experience when moving into secondary school. Behaviour is not a major issue but, if we were to investigate it, we would have to

look at much more than just face masks. It is not a major problem but it is perhaps worth exploring.

**The Convener:** Thank you for all your comments on that. Gary Greenhorn, what are your concerns about maintaining appropriate ventilation and temperatures in schools over the winter months?

**Gary Greenhorn:** We are already experiencing challenges with that; the winter may result in more challenges, depending on its severity. Many councils are already taking steps with school heating controls to make sure that the heating temperature is increased to compensate for windows and doors being open. The challenge will always be whether heating systems can cope with external temperatures if we have a severe winter. That remains to be seen but, so far, schools have coped well. It pushes energy consumption up, the additional cost of which will be challenging for many schools, but it is working well so far. I am not being complacent, as there are and will be challenges, particularly if we face a severe winter. The capacity of heating systems in some schools has not been sufficient to maintain temperatures, which is down to the age of heating systems in schools. We are looking at that through a number of networks.

**The Convener:** Would any other witnesses like to comment on that? I do not know whether they can raise their hand in the chat function.

**Larry Flanagan:** I could not find my artificial hand so I just used my physical hand—sorry about that.

Ventilation is critical as we go into the winter. We have made good progress recently and there is stronger consensus on the importance of ventilation. We discussed that last December because, at that stage, aerosol transmission had been identified as the main vector for the spread of infection. It has not been an easy journey to get primacy on the issue of ventilation. There was even resistance, for example, to the use of CO<sub>2</sub> monitors to do the necessary checks.

Without totally spoiling next week's press release on our survey, I note that, in the majority of schools, our members feel that ventilation issues have been addressed. It then goes back to the appropriate balance between heating and ventilation, which Gary Greenhorn mentioned. School buildings are required to be overheated to allow for the impact of increased ventilation, which means really basic things such as reorganising the settings for when the heating comes on, because a boost is required after breaks, which is when air is purged from classrooms. All those mechanisms are important.

Our bigger concern is not so much about where local authorities have taken effective action; it is

about the pockets where our members feel that ventilation issues have not been adequately addressed—about a third of our members have said that they feel that way. We are happy to raise that with individual local authorities. ADES and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities are keen to ensure that we have a common approach to maximum ventilation best practice, but there will be individual challenges.

The Scottish Government must be clear that there will be a guarantee when additional finance is required to facilitate the improvements that are needed. We cannot have local authorities or schools holding back on making progress on ventilation because they are not sure whether it will be funded. There has to be a strong green light and a cast-iron guarantee on the table pre-winter, before we face the real challenges, on funding for whatever is required to ensure that our schools are well ventilated and, therefore, safer places.

09:15

**The Convener:** Thank you very much for that. I am conscious of time and my time limit is up. I know that Jim Thewliss wants to respond on the ventilation issue—perhaps you can come in on that as we go around members.

**Murdo Fraser (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** I want to raise a slightly different issue: events in school, which are particularly relevant at this time of year. I am sure that you will have seen some of the commentary in the media about nativity plays taking place in schools with parents present. I am sure that all parents are aware of what an important rite of passage it is to have your children in a nativity play and to be able to watch them. As a parent, I can take my children to a crowded theatre or cinema, with lots of other people, who may or may not be vaccinated, yet the current guidance says that I cannot go as a parent into a school setting to watch children take part in a nativity play.

Do you have any thoughts on that? In particular, do you think that it is appropriate for the matter to be dealt with through a single piece of national guidance? Given that the Covid rates in schools are quite varied, should there be local discretion, with decisions being taken at school level or with local authorities, based on the situation on the ground, rather than having a blanket approach? We will start with Margaret Wilson on that one.

**Margaret Wilson:** Thank you for your question. I think that that comes down to transparency. Ultimately, parents want to know what evidence is looked at when such decisions are made. I have received a number of communications about the issue. Parents want clear communication on why

the decisions are made and the thought process behind them.

It is frustrating for parents—there is national guidance and 32 local authorities and head teachers are interpreting that guidance. We are getting communications from very frustrated parents because some schools are doing events and some are not. Where is the fairness in that? Your question about whether the matter could be subject to local discretion or decision making is a very good one—maybe we should put that to the education recovery group.

**Gary Greenhorn:** It is a very good question—it is one on which many authorities are being challenged by parents, as Margaret Wilson quite rightly said. We take the point. However, the primary concern must be to keep schools safe and a number of schools are experiencing high levels of staff absence, as my colleague Larry Flanagan outlined earlier. There is a fine balance to be had. An increase in footfall in schools could lead to an increase in exposure to risk, which we are trying to minimise where we possibly can, as the current guidance calls for. As Margaret Wilson said, it is all about how we communicate with parents, but the national guidance is quite clear on the issue.

Do you allow local authorities or schools to have autonomy in decision making? That is a difficult question to answer. If autonomy is given to local authorities, an authority can make a decision. However, if autonomy is given to schools, that can be problematic because, in a local setting, one school could do it one way and another school could do it differently.

We have national guidance and all local authorities are adhering to it. However, there are certain aspects of the guidance that local authorities could interpret differently. It is a challenge that a lot of authorities are vexing with now.

I think that the main concern is that, as has been mentioned, we must do everything that we can to ensure that we have enough staff to keep schools open as far as we possibly can. The point should be made that a number of challenges have been highlighted in that regard and that some authorities have had to close schools because of staff shortages.

**Jim Thewliss:** I have two points to make. In putting together the national guidance during the past year and more, we have tried to align what is happening in schools with what is happening in society. At times, that has caused some rather fraught discussions, but the line has very much been to make sure that schools and society are aligned, and you have made that point.

However, where we have got to with discussions on the national guidance is very much

in relation to schools being slightly different to cinemas, football grounds and whatever else. If we close down a cinema, we close down a cinema. If we close down schools, we are disrupting young people's education. We see in the four Covid harms the difficulties that that causes. I do not wish to be in a position in which we close a school on account of a spread of the virus that has arisen through something that did not need to happen.

During the past year, schools have been adept in devising ways of communicating with parents and putting on events in a virtual forum. I know that many schools have, for example, put on Christmas concerts in the virtual domain. That is not ideal—how we are conducting this meeting now is perhaps not ideal—but it is a way of making sure that parents are engaged, that young people are involved in putting on a performance and that we get some sort of move back towards normality in what happens in the school calendar during the year.

**Larry Flanagan:** I think that we should recognise that not all schools run nativity plays—schools celebrate the festive period with their students in a range of ways. In most secondary schools, for example, that would be through a Christmas concert or a winter concert. The application of the guidance is just that—it is the application of the general guidance, rather than guidance that is specifically aimed at Christmas. There has been clarification about Christmas because questions were asked about that, but the general guidance is about minimising the amount of adult mixing in the school environment. That is why we do not have face-to-face parents evenings at the moment.

The guidance is in place to try to keep schools open. If we have outbreaks among staff, schools will have to close because of a staffing shortage. We are told constantly by the scientists in CERG that in-house transmission is not the key issue; it is pupils mixing with adults and adults mixing with adults. Why would you run an event that could increase the infection level in your school community—particularly in the run-up to Christmas when it could impact your family celebrations over the Christmas period—when alternatives are in place?

I agree with Murdo Fraser's sentiment that, as a parent, you would love to be on site watching your children taking part in a Christmas celebration. However, we are in the middle of a pandemic. In primary schools, the infection rate for five to 11-year-olds is the highest that it has ever been.

I live next door to a nursery. Each morning, I still see parents lining up outside the gate and the child being collected by nursery staff and taken into the building so that the nursery can be as infection-free as possible. They are minimising the

adult mixing in the building, so that the nursery can stay open and provide the teaching and learning for the young person.

I think that we have to prioritise. At the moment, our priority is to try to keep schools open and safe for as long as possible and not take what would be the risk—it might be a calculated risk, but it would be a risk—of raising infection levels. We are comfortable with the guidance as it stands because we are still in the middle of the pandemic.

**John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP):** As Mr Flanagan is still on screen, I will carry on with him. Earlier in the pandemic, the accusation came to me through emails and so on from some parents that we were overemphasising the wellbeing of the staff and underemphasising the wellbeing of the children. How do you respond to that?

**Larry Flanagan:** I am not sure that you can separate the two as cleanly as that. If you do not have staff in schools, the education process does not take place. If you are referring back to the period when we were discussing remote learning versus in-person learning, the EIS has always recognised the importance of trying to keep pupils in school, because that is clearly more beneficial for the relationship between teachers and pupils. Online learning is more challenging in that regard.

We made online learning work, and we made it work much more effectively in the second lockdown than we did in the first. However, it is second best because, certainly for younger children, the relationship aspect is key to the learning process.

The idea that it is just about teachers versus pupils does not ring true for me. I think that the issue is about schools being safe environments for the whole school community. You have to address both those concerns equally, otherwise you have an imbalance that leads to poor decision making. I do not accept the characterisation. I think the wellbeing of staff is important—it is critical to operational issues—but I do not counterpose that to the wellbeing of young pupils.

**John Mason:** That is helpful—thank you very much. I will put the same question to Margaret Wilson. Is that your reading of the situation from a parents and young people's angle?

**Margaret Wilson:** I do not know what period you are referring to, but the National Parent Forum has attended the meetings every week—I think that there have been more than 70 of them—and has always had a chance to contribute during them. There is always a broad range of views. We have a young person on the group. Usually, the young person and I share the same views.



Larry Flanagan is completely right that you cannot separate the two. You need staff in the school to have it open. Ultimately, parents do not want to ever go back to remote learning. We want our schools to be open and safe places for our children and young people.

A process is in place for parents to get in touch with me and I can give their feedback at the weekly meetings. Ultimately, it does not come down to that group—the clinicians advise the ministers and the ministers make the decisions. My job as the parent representative is to get as many of those views heard in front of the group.

**John Mason:** I think that it is helpful to hear that there is a variety of views on those issues.

I will move on to vaccination, and put the question to Mr Greenhorn in the first instance. What is the general feeling of teachers and pupils on vaccine uptake?

**Gary Greenhorn:** First, the ADES point of view is that we would wish for uptake to be higher than it is currently. Communication is key in that regard. I think that there is an acceptance of the vaccines generally. However, there has been widespread reporting of negative comments about it in the press from various sectors.

Overall, our aim is to support the public health ambitions and the Government ambitions to promote good communication to all staff and pupils, to get the vaccination rates up as high as they possibly can be. That can protect all schools so that they are a safe place for pupils and staff.

**John Mason:** We assume that the uptake among teachers is just the same as that of the wider population.

**Gary Greenhorn:** I cannot comment on that just now—I have not seen the current figures to compare teachers with the general population.

**John Mason:** I have a feeling that those figures may not be available. I just wondered whether you had a feeling for that. What about the uptake among pupils? Is there resistance there? The uptake seems to be encouraging, but I do not know whether it is tailing off a bit.

09:30

**Gary Greenhorn:** The most recent statistics show that there is variation in uptake by pupils across the 32 local authorities. There could be a variety of reasons for that. The island authorities seem to be at one end of the spectrum, with some of the central belt authorities at the other end. Again, our emphasis at ADES is to provide support through good and fair communication and, if we can, to influence staff and pupils in order to get the uptake of vaccinations up to a higher level.

**John Mason:** Mr Thewliss, do schools have a role in encouraging both teachers and pupils to get vaccinated?

**Jim Thewliss:** The general context is that we are fully behind the notion that vaccination is important, given its power to fight the virus and keep schools open.

In response to one or two of the specific questions that you asked earlier, I note that the statistics that I saw at the tail end of last week showed the vaccination level for 14 to 18-year-olds running at above 80 per cent. For 11 to 14-year-olds, it is verging on 60 per cent. I think that that is the current figure.

Gary Greenhorn picked up on the recent issue of variation across the country. Perhaps more worrying is the fact that take-up is plateauing a wee bit. We are trying to make sure that we get the message out there that vaccination is important and that it is having a positive impact.

When we compare the primary and secondary sectors, we see that the virus is now at its highest level in the primary sector. That picture has changed, because it was previously at a higher level in the secondary sector. We think that that is very much to do with the vaccination programme.

We are very keen on young people being vaccinated and keeping the school environment safe, and we are more than happy to engage with the Government on that. We have raised through CERG the notion of using schools and enabling vaccination teams to come in, pick up the slack and get young people vaccinated in the school environment. I believe that discussions are continuing on the optimal way of using vaccination teams and the school environment to take that forward.

My general answer to your question is that we are fully behind vaccination and we support it as a way of keeping schools safe.

**John Mason:** That is helpful. We have heard that there has been lower uptake of vaccination among adults in poorer areas and among some ethnic minorities. Is that your understanding of the position among school pupils as well?

**Jim Thewliss:** I am not certain about that. I do not have detailed statistics to be able to back that up.

**John Mason:** It is useful to know that we do not have those figures. Does anyone else on the panel want to comment on vaccination among young people? To widen the issue out, should we be vaccinating under-12s as well?

**Margaret Wilson:** What I am hearing from parents is a consensus that vaccination should come down to personal choice. I would say that,

unfortunately, they probably do not want the teams going into schools. Parents want to be able to have a conversation with their children. Obviously, we all see what is going on on television, and we can have conversations with our young people, but what I am hearing from parents is that it should come down to personal choice. We feel that it is not up to the schools; it is up to the parents and the children.

We have not really discussed the vaccination of under-12s but, again, it should be down to personal choice. We would have to hear the clinicians' advice. I suppose that the National Parent Forum of Scotland's role would be to have that clearly communicated.

We were lucky in that, when the vaccination of 12 to 15-year-olds was announced, we already had a question-and-answer session for parents—on Zoom—arranged with Jason Leitch and Marion Bain. We were able to have parents put their questions directly to the people who are advising on the decisions that are made, with Public Health Scotland coming along. Sessions such as that have been extremely useful for parents and I see a drop in the number of communications that come in to me from parents once we have held them. We have had nine or 10 sessions for parents since February, with bodies such as Public Health Scotland and people such as Jason and Marion giving evidence that is clear, concise and not politicised. Parents ask their questions and they get the answers. Those sessions have been very useful and they are very well received by parents.

**Brian Whittle (South Scotland) (Con):** This is the COVID-19 Recovery Committee, and in my questions I want to look ahead. Despite the best efforts of teachers, pupils and parents, education has been affected to varying degrees. I spoke recently to an English teacher who said that even the wearing of face masks makes teaching difficult. As was said earlier, we all lip-read at some level, so communication and learning ability are impaired. As we go forward and start to live with Covid, how will pupils catch up? Will they catch up? What is the ask in that regard from the Scottish Government?

**Jim Thewliss:** Your point is well made. It is important that we begin to understand the damage that has been caused to learning. I suggest that there is now an obligation on Government to start looking in detail at the way in which young people's learning has been interrupted and whether it has been damaged. As you suggest, that is part of the longer-term move out of Covid. Once we get past the stage of making sure that we are keeping schools open, it is important to ensure that we are providing learning to the best of our ability.

There is a cohort of young people—I touched on this in talking about secondary 1 and 2 pupils coming into school—whose school experience has been disrupted. We need to look at the ways in which we can start to supplement and augment anything that we discover has been missed in their education journey.

**Brian Whittle:** I should probably have noted that my eldest is a secondary school teacher and that my youngest, during Covid, moved on from primary 7 and is now in S2, which you mentioned. Would anybody else on the panel like to comment on the issue?

**Larry Flanagan:** I am slightly nervous about your use of the words “catch up”, as they could suggest that there is a quick fix to this. I do not think that there is one. We need to understand the damage that has been caused in the learning process and the learning journey of young people, and the approach to that will vary depending on which age group we are talking about and the time that they have left in education.

One of the key issues from the EIS perspective is not so much about learning content and knowledge per se; it is about the social side of being in school—the building of relationships, the building of empathy, and the wellbeing aspect. That is quite labour intensive. Where remote learning created some isolation for young people, schools have a big task in trying to reconnect young people with their peers and their teachers.

I would not disagree with anything in the Scottish Government education recovery plan in terms of ambition, but I was left underwhelmed by it in terms of the resource and recognition of the scale of what is required.

We need more teacher-pupil interaction time on all fronts. You mentioned that one of your children has transitioned from primary to secondary. That transition has clearly been impacted by the arrangements around Covid. Some local authorities are looking at having smaller class sizes in the first year so that pupils get a more personalised approach from teachers. That approach is missing from some of the work on education recovery. There is not enough focus on groups of pupils who need extra attention in order to overcome some of the disadvantage that the pandemic experience has produced.

The Government will say that it is looking to employ more teachers and that there are big ambitions around that, but there are not enough teachers in Scotland to meet the scale of the challenge that schools are facing at the moment. The Parliament needs to up its ambition for what we need to do to support our children so that the impact of the pandemic is not a lifelong experience

but is something that we can address across their learning journey.

The key focus must be on ensuring the wellbeing and the resilience of young people. If we can establish that, then the knowledge and understanding around skills and assessments will flow from that. The bedrock must be to ensure that young people are well adjusted and reintegrated back into school learning communities.

**Brian Whittle:** Before I ask the rest of the panel to comment, can I widen the question out slightly, given the point that Mr Flanagan made about teacher numbers? The impact of Covid has exacerbated staff shortages, with a higher number of teachers being absent from school. That must also impair our ability to give a more rounded education over the piece. I ask Margaret Wilson to say how she feels from a National Parent Forum perspective.

**Margaret Wilson:** Sorry, but I do not understand what you are asking.

**Brian Whittle:** Sometimes I do not understand what I am asking either. [*Laughter.*]

My concern is about the fact that our children's learning has been impaired. We need to have a plan in place to try to backfill that, and over and above what I said earlier, we have the issue of more teacher absence as well.

**Margaret Wilson:** There is no doubt that there has been huge disruption to learning and teaching. Larry Flanagan spoke about a certain year group, but there are fifth and sixth year pupils who have never sat exams, and current S4 pupils were left at home for longer because the senior phase was prioritised last year. Young people have had to make subject choices without parents meeting the teachers. As you said, we have had children move from primary up to secondary, and we have the transition from nurseries to primaries. It is just unbelievable, when we think about it. Every pupil has been impacted by it all. I agree with Larry Flanagan that there need to be strong resolutions.

I do not know how we can increase teacher numbers. As a parent, I do not think that I can answer that question. There may also be a need for more support staff. I have certainly seen the difference that they make. My children have had more support staff coming in, rather than teachers, but that is all that I can say as a parent—sorry.

09:45

**Brian Whittle:** Thank you. I will throw in a final point that might confuse the picture even further. A rise in poor mental health has been highlighted among pupils and teachers alike. I have read that something like one in 10 pupils have now been referred for poor mental health. In looking at our

overall recovery from Covid, that is a very difficult situation. Gary, what direction are you looking for from Government? What has to happen to improve the situation?

**Gary Greenhorn:** As Jim Thewliss said, there is no quick fix. As the education sector overall in Scotland, we welcome the additional moneys that have been put in for Covid recovery. We also welcome the roll-out of the Government's 100-day commitment that has already put 1,000 extra teachers into the system. However, we have challenges in supporting young people to recover from the gap in education. There is a challenge in relation to mental health and wellbeing recovery, and numbers of absences are still high among both teachers and support staff. We are providing additionality into the system, but at present it has probably been negated by the high absence levels. That is a challenge.

Larry Flanagan touched on the need for extra resource. That will certainly be needed once we do the gap assessment that was mentioned earlier in order to work out how much of a gap young people have suffered in their learning during the pandemic.

On mental health and wellbeing, the feedback is that there has certainly been an increase in the number of young people who have been referred. We broadly welcome the additional money that has been put in for school counselling, which has certainly helped, but we are probably just looking at the tip of the iceberg. Once young people's mental health and wellbeing needs are fully assessed, there will be a demand for further support and extra resources.

**Jim Thewliss:** I want to link the subject to a question that John Mason posed. The impacts of the pandemic, with loss of learning and mental health and wellbeing issues, have not been uniform across the country. There is now firm evidence that those in the most deprived communities have been hit the hardest in a great many ways. Further to the discussions earlier this week about pupil equity funding and attainment funding, it is important that, under the education recovery plan that the Government has introduced, the inequitable impact of Covid on young people across Scotland is addressed and funding is targeted to those who have been hardest hit.

The notion of school empowerment and enabling schools to respond to specific circumstances in their local communities—through funding and access to staffing and support—will be critical. We need to target resources to meet specific needs and ensure that they get to young people quickly, in a way that is accessible to them, and in a form that compensates for what has happened with the disruption to their learning and

the health and wellbeing issues that they live with on account of Covid. My cry is that we must let schools have access to the resources in such a way that they can address the front-line problems as quickly as possible.

**Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP):** I thank the witnesses for coming along today. I want to go back to vaccinations for a second. Ultimately, we all know that that is the road out of our current situation, or, at least, the road to our being able to manage our lives in future.

Gary Greenhorn, you said earlier that you do not know how many members of staff are not vaccinated. Do you think that we should know how many staff have been vaccinated?

**Gary Greenhorn:** There is regular dialogue with all local authorities and the local public health departments. That is one of the positives that has come out of this: the way that there is a collective ambition to try to tackle these challenges head on. It certainly would be helpful to know the information that you mention. It might be that different local authorities get different information from public health. I am just not party to that information in the role I have with ADES right now. However, it would be helpful to have that information, so local authorities could look at how they compare with others. That is a matter of trying to strengthen the communication at both local authority and local school level to try to increase the number of staff who have been vaccinated. Certainly, any information or statistics that help increase the mitigation would always be helpful in this instance.

**Jim Fairlie:** I ask Larry Flanagan the same question.

**Larry Flanagan:** I think that we have the figures for teachers because the monitoring process with teachers is linked to General Teaching Council for Scotland registration. From memory, the figure for those who are vaccinated is somewhere broadly around 95 per cent, which is higher than the figure for the general population. The figure for support staff is less precise because they are not registered with the GTCS, although there is a proxy taken in terms of the age profile.

That data is presented to CERG, so I can certainly reassure the committee that there is a high level of teacher vaccination, with most teachers who are not vaccinated having medical reasons why that would be the case. I think that the general point on vaccination is important.

I want to make the point that Scotland has been poorly served by the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation, which has dithered around the issue of vaccinations. We would have prioritised school staff right from the start and we

certainly would have moved much quicker on 16 and 17-year-olds. However, the JCVI did not make a decision until the UK Government eventually pressed it on English schools reopening. If we had had a decision around vaccinating 16 and 17-year-olds—around 80 per cent of whom are now vaccinated—we would have had less disruption. I hope that they make a quicker decision on 5 to 11-year-olds because I think that vaccinations should be offered to the families of those young people.

**Jim Fairlie:** What a segue—you are good at this, Larry.

You will all have received an email this morning from a parent called Laura, who is clearly concerned about young people's health and raises the issue that primary school children have not been vaccinated. Do you feel that five-year-olds should be given the option of getting the vaccine? I would like all the witnesses to answer, but I will start with Larry Flanagan, as he is on the screen.

**Larry Flanagan:** We are in favour of young people being offered that vaccine and we have said so at CERG meetings. I was surprised to discover through CERG that, apparently, there is no licensed vaccine for that age group in the UK at the moment, although the USA has started vaccinating that particular group. I hope that there is some work going on to make sure that if a decision is taken to allow that age group to be vaccinated there will be a licensed product available to them.

Ultimately, we think that, often, the vaccination is a quicker and safer route than just allowing for herd immunity to develop over a longer period of time, because that would be more disruptive to school education. However, we absolutely accept that people should make informed decisions about it, and that it will be for young people and their families to decide whether they want to access the vaccine if it is made available.

**Jim Fairlie:** I ask Margaret Wilson the same question.

Margaret, you are on mute. Try again.

**Margaret Wilson:** For once, that was not my own fault.

There is no clear consensus from parents about even the vaccination that is on-going just now. We are hearing quite huge concerns from parents but, again, luckily, we are working in partnership with Public Health Scotland to answer them. As Larry Flanagan has just said, the issue will be down to personal choice. As a forum, we will try to get clear communication for parents on their behalf, but I cannot say that there will be any right answer to that.

**Jim Fairlie:** What I can say is that Devi Sridhar has quite publicly stated that she feels that it is

essential that five-year-olds are given the option to get vaccinated, but I fully understand that parents may have a different view.

Jim Thewliss, you talked earlier about areas of deprivation and differences in the levels of infection. On the back of that, I have a question for you and also for Gary Greenhorn. In terms of the baseline measures, is it harder to maintain compliance with the rules in schools in areas of deprivation? If we do not do something about that, will that ultimately make it even harder to close the attainment gap?

**Jim Thewliss:** To answer your first question, there is no evidence that compliance is driven or influenced in any way by deprivation, if you want to look at it in that very crude way. Compliance varies across the country but for different reasons in different places. There might be a connection to levels of deprivation, but I am not aware of any evidence that suggests that it is harder to impose restrictions in areas of deprivation. It is a challenge across the country.

Sorry, what was your second question?

**Jim Fairlie:** Earlier, you said that areas of deprivation have been hit harder. Will that make it harder for us to close the attainment gap?

**Jim Thewliss:** Absolutely, yes. The challenges that young people in those areas were facing before Covid have only been amplified by what has happened during the pandemic. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and the Government's international advisers make it quite clear that learning at home was a significant challenge for young people in deprived areas. They did not have access to the hardware, they did not have access to broadband and they did not have access to the level of parental support and encouragement that less deprived children had. It will very definitely increase the challenge presented in closing the attainment gap, there is no doubt about that.

**Jim Fairlie:** I ask Gary Greenhorn the same questions.

**Gary Greenhorn:** I echo exactly Jim Thewliss's comments. With regard to baseline compliance, there is no evidence to suggest that the areas of deprivation are suffering in that regard.

On the question about closing the attainment gap, there is a definite increased challenge associated with those areas of deprivation. With regard to the point that Jim Thewliss made earlier around the attainment Scotland fund, new ways to distribute that will certainly give schools autonomy in how they want to address the issues around the attainment challenge. Devolution of that fund to schools is welcome in that regard.

**Jim Fairlie:** Larry Flanagan or Margaret Wilson, do either of you want to add anything to that?

**Larry Flanagan:** Last night, as an accreditor, I attended a presentation from four primary school leadership teams in Glasgow on their learning journey during the pandemic. It was genuinely inspiring to hear how schools had coped, from physically distributing food parcels to families in the early part of lockdown to maintaining a high level of professional development and focus. One of the things that they all highlighted in their presentations was the benefit of having some autonomy around how they addressed the issues because they knew their school community better than anyone at a higher level, and that autonomy being matched, as we have just heard, to the funding that allowed them to do things.

One of the big challenges that we are facing is that the crisis around additional support needs has been deepened by the pandemic. Before the pandemic, one in four pupils in Scotland was recorded as having additional support needs, and I am sure that that figure has intensified during the pandemic. If a majority of the pupils in your school community are from poorer backgrounds and have additional support needs, you will be facing a challenging scenario. Unless you have staffing resource—in terms of teachers and support staff—to address the needs of those children, you will fail those children and the attainment gap will widen.

10:00

We have talked about additional support needs and the challenge around that for some time. I think that we need to recognise that the pandemic has deepened that challenge and that we need to focus on addressing that quite specifically if we are going to make progress on it. Generalities do not work. If 15 out of the 30 kids in your class need additional support and all you have is one support assistant, that is a micro issue that we need to make sure that we are addressing and supporting schools to tackle.

**Jim Fairlie:** I have one last, quick question about Murdo Fraser's earlier question about allowing parents to get into schools to see nativity plays or whatever else it is that the children are doing. I absolutely take on board that the purpose of the measure is to keep people safe, but would you have confidence in allowing parents into the school if they had a Covid passport or a negative lateral flow test? Larry Flanagan, I will ask you to answer first.

**Larry Flanagan:** That is an interesting question.

**Jim Fairlie:** I left the best until last.

**Larry Flanagan:** Outside of schools, I am in favour of Covid passports. I understand that if I

want to go into a pub or to a Celtic game, I have to show my vaccination passport. I understand that. However, what would a school do if some parents objected to not being allowed into the nativity play because they object to getting the vaccine? Would the school have to become the gatekeeper for who is and is not allowed in? That would place schools in quite an invidious position. A school is not the Theatre Royal. It is not a commercial enterprise that has to operate under the rules to make its profits.

While I can see the validity of your suggestion, it may be quite divisive because some parents would be able to get in and some would have to be turned away. I do not think that school leadership teams need that additional headache at this time of year. The principle sounds inviting but, operationally, it could be very difficult for schools to try to do that.

**Jim Fairlie:** Thanks very much. Does anybody else want to add to that?

**Jim Thewliss:** I emphasise Larry Flanagan's point. Last week, I was at Hampden, where you are supposed to have your Covid passport checked before you go in. It was absolute nonsense. Admittedly, that was a larger number of people, but Larry's point is well made. Imagine a secondary school bringing in 150 to 200 parents, some of whom have Covid passports and some of whom do not. That is an unreasonable and unworkable way of trying to run any event.

A second point is that school leadership teams are hugely under the cosh, just keeping the school working and keeping young people in there and being educated. To try to get them to check Covid passports, which will put them in a very stressful and confrontational situation, is an impractical way of taking things forward. I am saying exactly what Larry Flanagan said.

**Gary Greenhorn:** I could not have put it any better. School management teams are stretched to the max just now. What you suggest would add angst, bureaucracy and additional workload to the system at a time when we are trying to minimise bureaucracy and workload. The challenge of managing parental angst on the issue would add a whole lot of confusion to the system. As Larry Flanagan and Jim Thewliss have both said, we would certainly be against that.

**Alex Rowley (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab):** When we came out of lockdown and schools started up again, there was anecdotal evidence of behaviour change, because youngsters had been locked down for a while. The point was made earlier that primary 7s coming into S1 had spent much of their primary 7 year at home. To get it on the record, could you say what the impact on front-

line staff in schools has been? What pressures are they working under? Could you start, Larry?

**Larry Flanagan:** The impact is slightly different, depending on which age group you are dealing with. The feedback that we have had is that schools are having to work very hard to compensate for the lack of effective transition from P7 into S1. More time and energy has to be spent on wellbeing. A lot of children, particularly younger children, had to relearn how to socialise and integrate. That is a big challenge, because if you do not have those positive relationships working in your classroom, you are up against it to start with, before you get on to the content. Older pupils have had a very strong focus on the next steps in their qualification pathways, and that has been a bit of a catalyst and motivation for them.

I have had anecdotal feedback that the emotional wellbeing of pupils has clearly been set back and that children's behaviour is a bit less mature than you might expect for the stage that they are at. That is just a consequence of their forward pathway being disrupted. It is not all pupils, obviously, but a big enough cohort of pupils needs intensive support in terms of socialisation and being part of the school community. That is a big time stealer of the energy and commitment of staff. It is hard to quantify it, but if you speak to teachers, what you will hear is how hard it is just to make sure that the children are on board and learning effectively.

**Alex Rowley:** Thank you. I will ask Gary Greenhorn the same question. Earlier, Larry Flanagan mentioned a few specifics, such as that where additional funding is needed for ventilation, it should be clear that that will be made available. I think that it was also Larry who talked about the need to increase staffing levels. For the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland, given where we are, what more should Government be doing to support local education authorities or schools directly?

**Gary Greenhorn:** That is a difficult question. Would ADES refuse any extra resources going into schools? No. We talked earlier about a number of challenges. The full impact of the financial implication of increased energy consumption is still not known and it is too early to tell what it will be. Certainly, we would hope and expect that if that were demonstrated, additional funding would be made available.

Two things are important about the point that Larry Flanagan made earlier; I think that Jim Thewliss may have raised it as well. The additional support needs challenge that schools are facing is significant. Larry referred to it as a "micro issue". That is correct in terms of local schools but, notwithstanding, there has been a significant increase in ASN demand in schools. As yet, the

full impact of that has not been quantified, but the rise in demand is significant.

Larry also mentioned the impact of the transition from P7 to S1. Again, it is probably too early to tell, but there is an early recognition that our young people's emotional wellbeing has been affected by that and some steps will need to be taken to address that.

We welcome the additional money that has come in to support counsellors in schools and the additional money that has been put in to provide 1,000 extra teachers and 500 extra school support staff. The feedback that we are getting just now is that although those numbers are slowly being delivered on the ground, given the significant challenges that we have in the areas that I have mentioned, more resources would certainly be welcome.

**Alex Rowley:** Continuing on that theme, councils will now be putting together their budgets and no doubt bringing forward a programme of cuts. Are education directors being asked by finance directors to propose cuts within local authority education budgets?

**Gary Greenhorn:** I certainly cannot speak for every local authority, but most will operate with a programme of asking every individual service within the council area to put forward some options around where cuts could be likely. It is no surprise that, in terms of overall resources, local authority finances are stretched just now. That has been widely reported. It follows that it would be right for every authority to ask every single service director to put forward a range of options for their particular area, and education would be one of them. The local extent of that would be determined by each authority in terms of how that would impact the medium-term financial plans that it may currently have in place, and every authority would be different.

**Alex Rowley:** Thank you. I will move on to Jim Thewliss. It is the same question, but I will pick up on that last point that was made. Given the massive pressure on staff in schools, and given the massive pressure generally in education, is there a case for saying that education budgets should be exempt from local authority cuts? Does it not seem contradictory that although we are talking about all the things that need to happen, education authorities will be carrying out an exercise right now to find out where they can cut even more from their budgets?

**Jim Thewliss:** You are absolutely right on that, Alex, and we will leave Covid to decide, perhaps. I will come back to that in a moment.

Ever since pupil equity funding and attainment funding came into the system, there has been a sleight of hand, in that, as Gary Greenhorn

described, monies are taken away up front and school budgets are top sliced. The schools are then expected to make good anything that is top sliced by using pupil equity fund money and Scottish attainment fund money.

There must be an outing of that practice, given that we are identifying that significant disadvantages are being inequitably visited upon young people across Scotland. We must get away from the notion of top slicing the education budget to make savings and then compensating it through a fund that was designed for something else. That is even more the case now, in that that something else is even more acute, given what has happened to young people on the back of Covid. If power is to be devolved to schools in a way that enables them to be responsive to local need, the financing for that must also be devolved. Do not use sleight of hand to cover up the withdrawal of funding with one hand with the giving of funding with another hand. That leaves schools, at very best, in the same position, but not in a position to proactively identify and target need as it arises within the local community.

**Alex Rowley:** This question is for Margaret Wilson. From the point of view of parents and parents' involvement, is there enough transparency around the budgets that the local education authority has and how that finance is distributed within schools? Is there enough parental engagement in those processes? More important, is there more that needs to be done to engage parents in that respect?

10:15

**Margaret Wilson:** Yes, I would say that more needs to be done. I live in Falkirk and, six years ago, I set up the Falkirk area parent forum for that very reason. We wanted parents to be able to engage with local authorities on education issues and to make sure that the process was not open only to parent councils. Although I am chair of the National Parent Forum of Scotland, I have obviously been involved at local level. Where I am—I can speak only for where I am—we have been consulted. Ideas have been asked for, and we have put forward some ideas.

I think that it would be very useful if parents could be more engaged on all issues of education. Parental involvement should not be just a tick-box exercise. It would be really good if parents were empowered. Parents have many skills and attributes that they could bring to a school community, so I would definitely encourage greater parental engagement.

**Alex Rowley:** I want to pick up on a point that Larry Flanagan made earlier. You said that there are not enough teachers available in Scotland. I

understand that, in Fife, for example, there were far more probationary teachers available than there were jobs allocated. When a councillor was asked about that, the answer was that we did not need as many probationary teachers as were available. Could you say a bit more about the availability of probationary teachers to skill up? Do we need to do more around skilling up?

In Fife, for example, there is an unacceptable number of classes of more than 25 pupils and—more important—more than 30 pupils. I was flabbergasted to hear a councillor say that we did not need as many probationary teachers as were available when we have such large class sizes. Is class size an issue, as it is in Fife, which I have the figures for? On the same subject, I have seen a massive drop in the number of pupils who are accessing science classes in S4 in Fife's secondary schools, which will have a knock-on effect in S5 and S6. Teachers tell me that they will get moved out of those schools because there will not be enough kids taking those subjects.

**Larry Flanagan:** There was a lot in that question. I am not sure that the convener will give me enough time to answer all of it.

As far as probationers are concerned, we have a system whereby each local authority takes a certain number of probationers, but authorities can then get additional probationers who are fully funded. Some councils were good at taking additional probationers. It represented a budget saving for them, because the Scottish Government was paying for them and they were filling a post. Those were the councils—I think that Fife Council was one of them—that could not then match the probationers to the existing vacancies. Dumfries and Galloway Council was another council in that position.

A year ago, we cited the figure that 10 per cent of the teachers in Scotland were on temporary contracts. We pushed the issue with the Scottish Government; we said that that was scandalous in the middle of the pandemic, when we needed every teacher. There has been some progress on that and we are looking to create more permanent posts. However, we have another challenge in that the school demographic is changing. We have had quite high pupil numbers in primary. That growth in numbers is now tailing off and is moving into secondary. There will be a demand for more secondary teachers, whereas there is a bit of leeway in primary.

We are arguing that, in primary, we should be looking to cut class sizes in primary 2 and primary 3—a cut in class sizes in primary 1 was delivered by the SNP Government—to focus on smaller class sizes at that early stage. In secondary, we need a big recruitment drive to get more postgraduate students to come in and do the one-

year course so that we have the numbers to ensure that we can offer full timetables.

Teacher numbers are the biggest area of expenditure in education budgets. You asked about budget cuts. We would be in favour of ring fencing the money around teacher numbers so that we get a more direct correlation between the ambition of increasing teacher numbers and delivering in the classroom, but it is quite a complex process. ADES might be in favour of ring fencing education spending, because funding is under pressure across a range of services. We need some stability, and we need to have transparency around ensuring that we have the right number of teachers in place.

In relation to my comment that there are not enough teachers, you cannot get a supply teacher for love nor money at the moment because of the absence levels and because of the additional teacher posts. We need to plan ahead, because there will be a run-in of at least a year before we have the right number of graduates coming out to make sure that we have the right number of staff in place to allow for things such as cutting class sizes, which would be a huge step forward in supporting young people.

**Alex Rowley:** Jim, would you like to come in on that question?

**Jim Thewliss:** Yes, thank you, Alex. You picked Fife as an example. The situation in Fife Council is only one of 32 examples that you could have picked. If you look across the 32 local authorities, you will find that there are 32 different staffing formulas. The way in which schools are staffed in Fife is not the same as the way that it is done in Dundee, Edinburgh or anywhere else.

On top of that, there are 32 different funding formulas in schools. We have discussed issues around equity this morning and how the lack of equity has been further exacerbated by Covid. Is it not about time that we started to look at delivering equity through the way in which we deliver funding to, and organise staffing in, schools? That would involve putting in a national basic minimum staffing formula and a national basic minimum funding formula for schools and thereafter allowing local authorities to fund schools on the basis of need and to top up that funding on the basis of need.

It is not until we get to that position that we will get away from the issues that you are picking up in the first instance in relation to inequity of staffing and the way in which teachers coming into the profession are employed. We need to look at an approach across the country that promotes and drives equity, as opposed to getting in the way of it. We should consider a national basic minimum staffing formula and a national basic minimum



funding formula, which could be supplemented by top-ups through PEF and attainment challenge funding, to make sure that we address need.

**Alex Rowley:** For a committee that is looking at recovery, those are important issues that we will return to, and I am sure that the Education, Children and Young People Committee will also want to look at those issues. Thank you very much.

**The Convener:** I am conscious that we have run well over our time.

I thank the witnesses for their evidence and for giving us their time this morning. If you would like to raise any further evidence with the committee, you can do so in writing. The clerks will be happy to liaise with you about how to do that.

That concludes the public part of our meeting. Once the witnesses have left, we will move into private for the next agenda item.

10:22

*Meeting continued in private until 10:33.*



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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