

DFM Q&A Transcript (20/09/2020)

Joanna Murphy (JM): Hello everybody. I'm Joanna Murphy and I'm the chair of the National Parent Forum of Scotland (NPFs). I'd like to welcome Mr Swinney to this online Q&A and also say thanks to all of you for coming along this evening. Perhaps some of you joined us for the Q&A that we had in June, but we're really pleased to have another opportunity to ask your questions to the Deputy First Minister (DFM). I don't want to take up too much time, and you can find out more about us on our website, but the National Parent Forum of Scotland is an independent body of volunteers from across Scotland. We're all parents of school age children, and we are doing our best to make sure the voice of parents is heard. As a parent myself, I know how the last few months have been difficult. There are still difficult times, and many things are not likely to be back to normal in our schools and in our lives for some time. But thanks to everyone who's sent in questions in advance. Unfortunately, it may not be possible to cover everything in an hour and a half, but I'll do my best. Before I start I would like to go over some of the housekeeping for this evening. Everyone will be muted and all cameras will be switched off, so you will only see and hear from myself or Mr Swinney. If you have a question or comment please use the Q&A chatbox, members of the NPFs team are monitoring this, so I'll try to add in wider comments or further questions if we have time, but remember that there are a lot of you so please bear with me. Tonight our questions are varied over a number of topics: public health, the SQA and the examination diet, curriculum and extra-curricular activities, mental health and well-being and ASN, parental engagement, and contingency planning and blended learning. If we can't get to your question tonight it won't be lost. We're taking a note of topics and issues so we can provide links to relevant information and advice on our website, and we will also send any unanswered questions to Mr Swinney if we run out of time. As with the previous Q&A a recording of this will be also available on YouTube, and a linked to this will be posted on our website tomorrow morning. Now, before we start Mr Swinney would you like to see a few words before we get started on all the questions.

Deputy First Minister John Swinney (DFM): Thank you Joanna, and I'll say a few words at the outset so we can keep most of the time for questions. I'm obviously conscious that throughout lockdown, since March, it's been a really tough time for everybody, for families, for parents, for children and young people, and there have been things that have happened that, individually in people's lives, that will have caused enormous distress over that period, and there have been challenges that all of us have had to wrestle with to navigate our way through these difficult circumstances. We found ourselves in a position where we made exceptionally good progress in suppressing the virus in May and June, which enabled us to get to a position of reopening schools in August. We managed to reopen schools full-time, and I think generally that approach has gone well. We see attendance at schools started off really strongly, it dipped a bit with a circulation of infections and a lot of worry, and we now see attendance rising and yesterday's statistics indicated that over 92% of pupils were in attendance in Scottish schools, which when you bear in mind that the average position over

the year is about 93%, that's really quite strong performance. So we're working very closely in the education recovery group to support the delivery of education for children and young people, to meet all of their needs, and the education recovery group brings together the voices of parents, of our local authority partners, and of professional associations to make sure we put in place the guidance and the support that is necessary to run Scottish education safely and effectively. So I think we find ourselves in that position now, in the fifth week of schools being back with strengthening attendance, but with a lot of worries about the fact that the first minister set out in parliament today, about a rising presence of coronavirus within our society again, and regrettably we've had to take some steps today to tighten up the restrictions again to try to avoid the re-circulation of the virus, and those are difficult decisions, but ones that the government felt had to be taken to make sure that we protected public health, and we will continue to take all necessary actions to make sure that we act in that fashion. So, I'm very happy to answer all the questions that are raised tonight, and I look forward to conversation we have.

JM: Thank you very much, we'll carry on with that theme of public health if you don't mind Mr Swinney. We've received a range of questions relating to the different measures in schools including the use of face coverings, physical distancing, and break times outside. Firstly we've heard from a number of parents who would like to know why the use of face coverings in children aged 5 plus has been mandated, and if you could share the scientific advice which led to that decision? Similarly parents would like to understand how the use of face coverings in schools will be monitored and reviewed?

DFM: Okay, the scientific advice underpins the decision. It comes from the advisory group which is made up of a combination of clinicians and educationalists, but ultimately is signed off by the government scientific advisory group on all issues in relation to covid chaired by professor Andrew Morris. That scientific advice essentially draws its authority from the material that was published by the World Health Organisation, if we go back to when we published the guidance at the end of July, we did not include in that guidance the obligation for young people in secondary schools for example to be wearing face coverings in communal areas and corridors, nor for young people from the age of five to be wearing face coverings on school transport. A couple of weeks into the school year the advice that we got from the World Health Organisation changed, and that influenced the advice from our scientific advisers, which had always on this question been quite nuanced, it recognised that there was a role for face coverings, but it didn't it just didn't go as far as recommending that. When the World Health Organisation moved its position, and remember that we are learning more and more about this virus as every day goes past, advisers believed it was prudent for us to take that step. But what it is, is one extra mitigation in the process of making our school safe. There's a whole variety of other mitigation strategies that are in place that are required in our schools and contained within our guidance, whether that's about physical distancing between teachers and pupils, whether that's about hand hygiene regime and the cough etiquette regimes and the extra cleaning regimes that are to be in place in schools as a whole variety of measures and the wearing of face coverings in communal areas is one additional element in that process which adds further reassurance. Now on the question of monitoring, we obviously keep all of this under review, and what we are looking at in the education recovery group, we look at this material on a weekly basis, is feedback from schools and local authorities about implementation of the guidance, about the issues

that are emerging, then obviously that gets fed into the government's review, which of course we announced today the three weekly review of the regulations, to make sure we're taking all the appropriate steps. Now that obviously involves looking in to whether we need to add in measures or whether we can relax measures and any questions about monitoring of the effectiveness of face covering will be part of that process.

JM: Thank you very much. We've also heard from parents with concerns about the guidance for children and young people to spend all breaks and lunch times outside. They'd like to know if you could reconsider this guidance could, it be amended in cases of extreme weather for example, and particularly now that pupils are wearing face coverings in the school building?

DFM: Obviously there's a set of pragmatic judgments I think that have got to be arrived at in individual schools about weather conditions, and I've obviously seen media reports about individual examples where there has been, you know, really harsh weather and young people had been outside. So a pragmatic judgement has got to be applied in the implementation and delivery of the guidance within individual schools, and I think some sensitivity has got to be applied. I'm very happy to look at what the guidance says about break times, as I said in my first answer, we keep all of the elements of the guidance under active review and consideration, and I'll certainly make sure that we look at that particular point.

JM: That would be helpful thank you. We've also received questions relating to COVID-19 symptoms and testing. One parents would like to know why, when a pupil is found positive for COVID-19 are their contacts in school not tested rather than forced to self isolate at home for two weeks? They are concerned that with this current system many pupils will spend most of the winter at home quarantining due to one classmate or another testing positive. So just to see, to make sure that there is clarity about what you do when you hear of children testing positive and so that, again, that the school's details are consistent across Scotland.

DFM: This is actually one of the issues that we were discussing at the education recovery group today, the need to make sure that schools have got access to the clearest guidance about what happens in particular circumstances where a positive cases is identified. I think there's a couple of important points here. The first is that in almost all cases where Covid has been, where a positive case of Covid has emerged within a school, when the contact tracers have looked at that, it has become apparent that in virtually all cases, not absolutely all of them but almost all of them, it has not been transmission within the school that has resulted in the positive case. It's been community transmission which has then been identified of the presence of covid within a school aged pupil. So it's really important that we try to keep covid as far away from our schools as we possibly can do. So, it's for that reason that we would require cases that test positively to self isolate and for contacts to do likewise, to essentially remove the bridges through which the virus can then crossover and circulate. So there is a clinical necessity for that self isolation, because currently there's no alternative means to interrupt the spread of the virus other than to remove the bridges through which the virus can be passed from one person to another. And so what we then have to make sure is that young people who are in an educational sense having to self

isolate, we've got to make sure that they are supported in their education so that they are not experiencing interruption to their learning, and that, obviously a lot of work is going into making sure that there is the capacity in place to make sure that young people are supported in their learning by schools and also by the external interventions that we can make available through the E-School that we have which enables young people to get access to distance learning. So there is no easy alternative to self isolation because that's proven to be the most effective way of interrupting the spread of the virus. Of course what we can see from the experience of lockdown, prior to lockdown in mid March the virus was spreading exponentially within our society, when we looked down spread the virus literally collapsed because it didn't have the ability to move from one household to another or from one individual to another so, we know that that's a reliable means of a stopping the spread of the virus. What we have to make sure is that we support the education of young people should they have to self isolate and that's obviously a very important priority for us on an ongoing basis.

JM: Some questions will come up later about you know the different offers for young people so I'll leave that just there just now. Moving on to some questions surrounding the SQA, we've heard from a number of parents with, you know, questions relating to the SQA examinations. Firstly parents would like to know what is the current situation regarding examinations in 2021, and how will local lockdowns affect any decisions that are made?

DFM: Where we've reached so far, is that our objective as things stand just now is to run a full 2021 examination diet, that's the plan just now, and the SQA have consulted about what steps they could take to try to reduce the burden of assessment to maximise the time available for learning and teaching before we get to the exam diet. And they have consulted on a range of points about what elements of courses could be removed, and not requiring examination later on in the year, they've looked at the questions around the timetabling of exams, do they need to start in late April could they start later on to give more time for learning and teaching, if we didn't start the exams at the end of April but we started them in May, that would give us an extra month of time for learning and teaching that we wouldn't ordinarily have. And so we've looked at those questions in this and are currently considering the response that they've had, they've had a really big response to that consultation exercise, and they're looking at feedback just now, and I expect them to set out some of their thinking very shortly on that question, but their response has been a little bit delayed because of the volume of responses that they've had. Now obviously we have to make sure, one of the key elements of the requirements on the SQA is that we've got to be fair to all learners, and what I don't know for certain is what the degree of interruption to education is going to be over the course of the next few months between where we are in September and the period of the normal exam diet from April onwards, and I don't know yet how much impact that will have on individuals or classes or even schools as a consequence of Covid. So, we're developing the plans that will enable us to react to those difficulties and those challenges in the period going forward, but as things stand just now the plan is to run an exam diet in the spring of 2021. I suppose, I don't know what other questions you have on the SQA, but let me just at the outset of this point say a couple of things about the exam diet. First of all when the SQA, working in very extreme circumstances this year, delivered that essentially they had been commissioned to deliver, which was a set of exam results, or set of results, that reflected the maintenance of

standards within Scottish education, so essentially an increase in the pass rate at National 5 higher and advanced higher that was within the scope of previous increases in the pass rate, but not as high as the teacher estimates that had been submitted by the teaching profession around the country, and also an approach which showed greater progress for young people from deprived backgrounds and from least deprived backgrounds. When it became apparent to me that within those results, whilst at global level they represented a maintenance of standards within them, there were examples, and I think it became clear to me quite a number of examples, of unfair outcomes that were received by young people, I took the decision to direct the SQA to reward on the basis of teacher estimates to essentially recognise the challenges that young people had faced. Now in the process of doing that I appreciate there was a lot of stress and worry and anxiety caused to families and to young people, and I went to parliament to express my apology for that. I reiterate my apology to you tonight for that, because at no stage in the process did anybody want to cause distress to young people, we were just trying to navigate our way through a really tricky and difficult situation, but in the process we caused anxiety for young people and for that I unreservedly apologised, and do so again tonight.

JM: Thank you for that, you're right there was a lot of unhappy young people at the time, but many people are grateful to you for that and for changing it and just accepting it. taking it on the chin as it were. Moving forward, I suppose we don't want to revisit all of that conversation at present because we're waiting for the outcome of the priestly review for example and the decision for moving forward for next year, but, you did answer a few of my SQA questions in in your first answer, so I'm just kind of looking for ones you've not answered. I mean we did hear from a parent council for example who'd like to query the inconsistencies of workload reduction across subject areas at the senior phase, and they wanted to ask will you ask the SQA to look again at the exams plan for 2021? And also to be able to inform us of the backup plan, if any, if the 2021 SQAexams are cancelled again?

DFM: On the last part of that question Joanna, that's something that I'm I'm actively looking at just now, and we had a discussion at the education recovery group again about some of these questions. As you mentioned in the question there, we commissioned professor Mark Priestley at the University of Stirling to look at the experience of this year and to give us some insight into what we should avoid about next year, and Professor Priestly will be reporting to me by the end of this month. And I think it's important that I listen carefully to what, having commissioned professor Priestley to do this work, I think it's important I listen to him in terms of the recommendations that he's got to make to inform our discussions.

In relation to the first part of your question and the feedback from the parent council about the approach taken in individual subjects, I think it's difficult for exactly the same approach to be taken in every subject, because we don't start off from the same starting point. The exams and assessment processes are very different subject by subject. Some of them have a certain element of coursework and practical work some of them do not and there's therefore not a uniform approach you can take. What the SQA has done is put forward a number of suggestions and put that challenge out to the education system, and as I said earlier on they've had a very substantial response which they are working through to try to come to the best position, but I think what I can say tonight is it's impossible for them to

take a uniform approach across all subject areas because the subjects have very different starting points in the analysis that comes forward.

JM: Thank you, we look forward to hearing the results of the priestly interview and what the SQA say when it's published I suppose in the next few weeks. Just another question, slightly to do with the SQA but also for ASN children. A parent is asking if there's any budget or if you would consider putting a budget together for children who have ASN or are in the shielding category studying for exams, so in the senior phase, and have to stay off school on the advice of their clinical team?

DFM: What I would hope would meet their needs would be the online education platform that we're offering through the e-school and that's essentially, it's a delivery of a whole range of different subjects in the senior phase, it's also been broadened out into the broad general education, and it's designed essentially to provide an access point for learning for young people whose education is interrupted by Covid, for whatever reason, whether that's a temporary period of two weeks isolation or whether that's a younger person who may be in the shielding category and therefore it's more difficult for them to attend school on a full time basis. So, essentially that offer is available to any pupil in the country who requires, and I was hearing today an example in the education recovery group, that an entire class in one of our local authority areas is having to self isolate because of cases where they're getting their education delivered digitally through the e-school, so that's happened today, and there are various ways in which that can be done. The government are putting in place resource to make sure that young people who don't have access to digital technology, whether that's a device or an Internet connection, can get access to that through the provision of a device and in some circumstances with digital connectivity built into it if you don't have broadband at home so that young people are not, by nature of their circumstances, excluded from being able to access digital learning if that happens to be the model they've got to operate within. In that sense the answer I suppose Joanna is yes, that we are providing that, we're providing the support for devices and we're also providing the online learning platform that should be available to fill in any of the gaps that young people experience as a consequence of disruption to their learning due to Covid.

JM: Thank you, I think we'll move on for for the time being to another section because we've received a broad range of questions from parents relating to the curriculum. Lots of parents have been in touch with questions relating to their child's progression and the support that is in place to help them to catch up with the learning that was missed during lockdown. Numerous parents have expressed that they have not seen any evidence of any programme for example to help catch up with missed learning, and they would like to know, is there a plan in place to help children and young people catch up, and frankly if not why not?

DFM: Fundamentally, this is, we rely on schools to determine the pace at which they are able to deliver learning to young people. Now I think the system and the feedback I get from head teachers is that they have had to spend quite a bit of time at the start of the year making sure that they addressed quite a number of the issues arising out of lockdown that would be experienced by children and young people to make sure that they could properly access the learning, you know, we've done a lot of work over the years on the whole

concept of barriers to learning and the importance of understanding, and addressing, and removing any barriers to learning that young people may have as a consequence of whatever experience that they may have had. The research evidence that was available suggested that that would be a priority after the resumption of full time schooling. So there was an element of guidance that indicated that we had to take time to make sure we properly supported the well being of children young people and as they returned to school. Now, schools will be able to determine what progress young people have made, I suspect a lot of that work has been going on since the schools resumed five weeks ago, but also the government has put in place resources, new resources to local authorities, to enable them to recruit extra teachers, and principally amongst the newly qualified and recently qualified teacher population. But, we are also working with the General Teaching Council to identify teachers who are, or what we call lapsed teachers, these are people who may have recently retired or they may have taken a break out of education, they may have gone off to some other form of work, but that work may not be working out for them now, and to identify who would be prepared to come back into the profession supplement that delivery of learning and to deal with some of the work that's being undertaken. So, I think there's a variety of measures in place to support the education system to do that, but fundamentally the operational decisions on that will be taken classroom by classroom around the country.

JM: Thank you. Another parent has been in touch with the following question and I'm just going to read it verbatim to keep it accurate: " In your statement, Mr Swinney, to parliament announcing the Scottish schools would prepare for a full time return to face to face teaching after the summer break, you were asked whether you would commit to a national education equality audit to ensure that gaps in learning can be addressed for all children across Scotland, and you said you'd be happy to do so." They would like to know how and when this process will take place, and what additional support will the Scottish Government be providing to help school remedy those gaps in learning?

DFM: Well, the work on the audit is under way already looking at the data that is available to us on the circumstances being experienced by young people, and some of the new data that will emerge out of the impact of lockdown on the circumstances that will affect young people and some of it in relation to the progress that young people have made or have not made in the course of the period of lockdown. Now, obviously I've taken early decisions to increase the resources that are available to schools. So for example, I've put in place about £80,000,000 to support the recruitment of new staff, then after that I distributed to local authorities £20,000,000 to support some of the mitigation measures to make schools safer, and that's to make sure that local authorities get new money so that there's no pressure on individual school budgets as a consequence of Covid. I've also said to local authorities as they work their way through the delivery of the new school year the government will be prepared to meet additional costs, and we've earmarked about £30,000,000 to support that providing local authorities demonstrate that this has been real new costs that's arisen out of the resumption of full time schooling. So, we've not waited for the equity order to put in new resources, we've put in the new resources up front to support young people, and that's just the cash resources I'm talking about, there's a variety of other support: Education Scotland for example are working closely with schools to support all the strategies to assist learning and teaching, and local authorities are obviously working as part of that approach

as well. So, there is as a variety of different ways in which we're working to support the acquisition of learning and there's obviously new resources to assist in that respect as well.

JM: Thank you. We've heard from parents with questions about particular subject areas. Some of these relate to guidance in certain subjects such as music, and a parent would like to know, why have music lessons in school stopped, and what is being done to allow music to start again as soon as possible? Another parent of a child in ELC has asked why can the children not sing as in early years they are already in bubbles with no social distancing? Can the advice be reconsidered for children in the early years or about music in general.

DFM: I completely understand the anxiety here and the concern. The difficulty is quite simply the public health advice on singing and music, and the ability for a droplets to be produced, the answer is as blunt as that I'm afraid. The act of singing and the act of participating in music can increase the likelihood of producing droplets, and that is one of the principal ways in which the virus is spread, and the public health advice essentially mitigates against it. So the same type of advice that stops a choirs from meeting, or people singing in church as part of a church service, is also relevant in relation to music lessons. Now, there are ways in which we will try to make progress on all of these questions but fundamentally I have to listen to the public health advice and the clinical advice that we're getting on that question.

JM: Thanks. Moving on to, you know, PE and active schools and active learning. We've heard from parents questions about PE: one parent has told us that since their school resumed their child's primary school have been told that there will be 1 long PE lesson every three weeks. This parent has told us that they don't believe that this ongoing Covid-19 pandemic do should be allowed to be used as an excuse for a school to fail to deliver the target hours for PE per week for primary schools and secondary schools. Are schools still expected to meet their targets for PE and active learning under the circumstances just now?

DFM: Within reason, yes. One of my problems in life is remembering whether information that I've seen is actually yet publicly available, and I've seen the most up to date statistics on PE, and I can't quite remember if they've been publicly available, and if I say they are publically available and say what they are I might get myself in trouble, so let me just say that the PE participation is very good in Scottish schools, and is at a very acceptable level as a starting point, so that's a really good thing for us to have, and obviously I want to make sure that PE is is an integral part of young people's education, we have to have healthy active lifestyles and PE helps young people to take that interest and to acquire those capacities. I can't, you know, the scenario you put to me, I I think well, I I don't understand why that would be required by the guidance to be honest. I've got a nine year old old son in in my house here, and he's going out with his PE kit on twice a week to school, two days out of five, he's wearing his PE kit to school, which of course is a great pleasure to him because he's wearing his trackie bottoms and not his school trousers which is always a source of joy for him, so that's his school taking forward is the guidance so I think I'm a bit surprised to hear that, so that's the type of issue that I'd encourage to be discussed with the school. Education Scotland has been developing the guidance for PE which I'm now pretty sure is with schools, and it sets out all the details of what can and cannot be done.

JM: I suppose the difficulty for your average parent is that it's difficult for them to find all the guidance as you saying is coming out, so if a school says to them a particular thing they only have the school's word for it, and it's again, consistency across schools is sometimes a difficult thing to to manage.

DFM: It's one of the points I'll look at and let you know, it's just how we present that guidance and I'll just check to make sure that we are assembling that guidance on the government's website in a really clear accessible fashion, so that it's readily available for parents. The work of parent club for example, which is a government supported website, it's really good at sharing information for parents, and of course the national parent forum for Scotland is also a very good and reliable source of information and accessible information in parent friendly language, so I think that there is a lot that can be achieved through those channels.

JM: Thank you. So moving on to digital, another question, local authority bans for using video conferencing platforms such as zoom are presenting a barrier for some school's partnership learning with colleges. We are hearing that some schools are unable to allow senior pupils to access courses because some colleges are using zoom to deliver them. Can you give reassurance to parents and carers that you will address this matter nationally to remove any of these kind of barriers?

DFM: The takeaway from that question, as it is really quite specific about the interaction between pupils accessing college facilities and the use of digital technology there, I'll take that away and make sure that we have got, we've got all of that lined up properly, because one of the things I'm really keen to try to protect is access for school pupils to college. It's been one of the marvellous innovations of the last few years that's really delivered great learning journeys for young people, where they've been able to split their time between schools and colleges, and it's really stretched a lot of young people, it's given them much better pathways to success than they had before, but obviously moving around from location to location is a bit more difficult in a covid environment, so I want to make sure that we don't have any impediments in the way of that, so I'll take that point away to make sure that there's no issues with that. There's obviously quite a number of issues, and there have been quite a number of issues about the decisions of individual local authorities about whether the video services of glow for example are used or activated and that's very much an issue for local authorities to take forward as the data controllers, because obviously there's a lot a lot of things we've got to make sure are handled properly in relation to the use of video technology, but that opportunity is there for it to be taken forward at local level. But I'll check specifically that point about the interaction with colleges.

JM: Thank you. Lots of parents whose children receive Gaelic Medium Education have identified that they are concerned that their child has lost language skills during the lockdown and school closures, and they'd like to know, will there be additional language support in those schools to support pupils?

DFM: Well, the E-Sgoil, E-Sgoil originates from a project in the Western Isles, and the Western Isles council a developed a modern digital platform to make sure they could sustainably deliver the curriculum in four secondary schools, which were 100 miles apart

and separated by a number of water channels in between. So, it was really difficult for them to deliver education across all these areas, so they developed the e-Sgoil concept, and as we worked with them in the development, as Education Scotland worked with them, we began to see the potential for this as having much greater reach, now this is a number of years ago, and we began to work with the local authorities in the North of Scotland where we had some staff shortages to essentially deliver digital learning with the benefit of this platform across all of that geography. We're now building that into, and have been doing so for some months, into a national platform that essentially enables us to deliver a whole range of different courses to anybody around the country, and that's why I have been talking about it quite a bit tonight, but fundamentally its roots are in the delivery of many aspects of Gaelic Medium Education, so there should be the ability through the E-Sgoil to enable that to be the case and any parent of a child, and I appreciate one of the the absolutely fundamental necessities of Gaelic medium education is immersion education, it's about making sure that young people are immersed in talking the language and thinking and expressing themselves in the language, and then obviously if you got put in a lot down and a child is at home and they are not living in a Gaelic speaking household, that becomes very difficult. So, I totally accept the necessity, but the e-Sgoil I think provides an opportunity to reinforce some of that gap that young people may have experienced, and I would encourage any parents of pupils who are involved in Gaelic Medium Education to talk to the school about what might be available through e-Sgoil to address the issues about which they are concerned.

JM: It's too good an opportunity to miss, I've just had a message from Stornoway Primary Parent Council, and they'd like to ask about the levels of support and funding available to help schools pay for online platforms to support parental engagement and online learning, so would that be available during the e-sgoil platform or would that need to be something else?

DFM: I'm not sure, if it's about access to digital devices, if a family for example doesn't have a digital device and doesn't have access to connectivity, the government's made available about 25,000 digital devices already, and we've also made available resources to local authorities to essentially buy additional devices and connection packages for people who don't have that access, so lots and lots of people have got digital devices, lots and lots, but not everybody has, and we completely understand the nature of digital deprivation within our society. So we're trying to do all that we can to try to address that, by making available the devices that support connectivity, so if that's the issue that's being probed, then yes I think there will be resource available, and again schools in the local authority should be able to assist in that respect, but if there's other issues then again I'm happy to try to explore to find solutions to those.

JM: Thank you. Another comment that's just come in this evening is about broadband in, for example, the Highlands and islands and they're saying, you know, E-Sgoil without bandwidth doesn't lead to much schooling, so that's obviously a national infrastructure issue, but what would happen if you were in that situation in a school somewhere or in a house that's quite remote?

DFM: Well there's a couple of things that are possible there. One is that the government have obviously, we've rolled out super fast broadband and we've put in about £600 million

of government money to get to a position whereby 96% of properties in Scotland are connected to super fast broadband. Now that obviously means that there's 4% that are not. In the 4% that are not, we are, we've got two contracts that are now active just now to take super fast broadband to the hard to reach properties, which are, the sort of, predominantly the rural properties that you talking about Joanna. We've got a third contract which is unfortunately being challenged legally by one of the unsuccessful bidders which is slowing that up a bit, and that's the one in the North of Scotland unfortunately, and we just can't progress with that until that legal challenge is sorted out, which you know, the sooner that happens the better. But what we do know from that process is that some properties will not be able to be reached by super fast broadband, so what they can do is apply to receive a voucher which would enable them to be connected to satellite broadband or something like that, or possibly mobile broadband, because mobile broadband is now a practical solution in many parts of the country. So that's in the space of policy that my colleague takes forward around digital connectivity at an infrastructure level, and then within the education sphere we've got money and devices to be rolled out to families that can't quite access these financially, and in some circumstances that will involve connectivity packages that will enable individuals to be able to gain access to super fast broadband.

JM: Lovely thank you very much. Finally in this topic, we've heard from a range of parents with questions about outdoor education, and they would like to know how are schools being supported to enable outdoor play and education, which are so important for young people? And many have also been in touch to express concern about the support outdoor education centres are receiving, and they'd like to know what support and financial assistance are is being provided to outdoor education and these centres, so that these vital opportunities and services can continue?

DFM: There's a lot, over the years we've been building up the capacity for outdoor learning within Scottish education and it's now, you know, a very fundamental part of our education system, it is a very significant part of early learning and childcare, to enable young people to acquire that interest and enthusiasm for playing outdoors, and obviously that has enabled a lot of the restart within early learning and childcare because of the ability to be outdoors for such a sustained period of time. In relation to education centres and the first minister answered a question about this today, we are aware of the challenges, and outdoor education centres have been able to gain access to funding through the the third sector continuity funds that we've had available, or to apply for that, and then also to apply for support through the job retention scheme that the UK government has put forward. The public health advice makes it currently very difficult for schools to undertake trips that involve staying overnight in outdoor education centres, of the type that I know would be enormously valuable to young people, but there has been a range of support in place for the outdoor education centres could apply for, to try to obtain that necessary support and assistance.

JM: Thank you. Again, lots of parents have been in touch with questions relating to children and young people's mental health and wellbeing. Many have identified that over the summer they have heard from the Scottish Government, local authorities, and schools that mental health and well being would be a priority, and so therefore they'd like to know what

guidance is in place for schools to prioritise nurture in the wake of the lockdown and amidst these challenging times of living in a pandemic?

DFM: One of my answers to the earlier question was about the guidance that we gave to schools at the very outset of this term, and one of the fundamental points in that guidance, for which I might add we were criticised, was the attention that had to be paid to the well being of children young people, and I make no apology for making that such a central priority of the resumption of full time schooling, because I completely accept the points being made by parents in the question that you're putting to me: that young people would, we would have to attend to the well being, the mental well being of children young people, some of whom may have experienced terrible trauma over the period of lockdown. Some of them may have experience bereavement in their own families, and so it could well have been an extremely tough time for children young people so we obviously have a very heavy emphasis within our education system already on the creation of a nurturing ethos, so that's not a new concept within Scottish education, but what we did say in our curriculum guidance for this term was the importance of focusing very much on the well-being of children young people to make sure that we addressed any barriers to learning that they experienced as a consequence of lockdown.

JM: Many parents welcomed the publication of the ASL review by Angela Morgan in June, but post lockdown implementation of additional support needs are at an all time low within schools. We have heard from parents with concerns about their child's needs not being met in school, and families feel abandoned since this pandemic and forgotten. What are the obligations of the government and local authorities to educate children with additional support needs, and how should parents be involved with any decisions being made about their children?

DFM: Well in this respect the situation we're in now is no different to the situation that we were in before lockdown in terms of the obligations. The obligations are very clear. The obligations on Scottish education is that we get it right for every child, which means that in in every circumstance we've got to be satisfied that we are meeting the needs of every child and if a child or young person has additional support needs we have got to do all that we can to try to meet their needs, and that fundamentally involves dialogue between and schools and parents about the provision of support for children and young people in that respect. So, the obligations are really unaltered pre and post lockdown. What I accept is that there may be some challenges in the way in which that is delivered in a lockdown, and in the current environment where we are wrestling with so many more constraints on our system, but that should not stop us from delivering on the educational needs of children young people with additional support needs.

JM: I mean, I've been careful to use as much of the original language from the questions coming in, and so people don't use the words abandoned or, you know, all time low lightly. So again people are asking, they're concerned that the ASL review is going to be lost amongst Covid, and we are urging you to keep that alive and to make sure that the many recommendations that formed that are answered and kept moving throughout the rest of this term.

DFM: I can give the assurance that first of all, things have and slowed up a bit in relation to the handling of the response to the review by Angela Morgan, just quite simply because of the volume of other issues we've been dealing with, so it's been, the response has been slower, local authorities have been operating in an emergency situation for some months, so has the government, so things are a bit slower than I would have liked them to have been. But I do give the assurance that there is absolutely no question that this review will be responded to and we will take forward the issues that Angela Morgan has fairly put in front of us, which I acknowledge are significant issues first to address.

JM: So, how can you reassure then, moving on, young people with ASN and their parents, that their transitions through senior phase can be fully supported, as under Covid again many faced the removal of vital wider achievement areas of learning that would otherwise have delivered a new pathway for them, for example an apprenticeship or college work?

DFM: In a sense that goes back to my point earlier on about the access to colleges, because many of these opportunities will arise out of making sure the needs of young people were most effectively addressed by focusing on their needs and their circumstances and how we could put that in place in a way that was appropriate for them. So, I'm very keen to make sure that we we maintain those opportunities for these young people and that we fulfil, in every respect, the need to make sure that every learners needs and aspirations are met through our education system and I think that's a crucial part of the commitment we have to put in place to make sure that every individual is well served by our education system.

JM: Can you clarify, what is the guidance in relation to parents, particularly of children with additional support needs or complex needs, entering their children's school buildings. Is it entirely banned for all of these parents, or again is at the discretion of the individual school?

DFM: I think, generally, we are trying to minimise the number of people that go into schools that are not there for the whole time. So, there's particular issues, for example, about peripatetic teachers where they are having to really restructure how they go about their work, because they can't go from one school to another, even actually from one school to another in the course of a school day. And you can think about how many schools where a peripatetic teacher could be in in one week. So we're trying to minimise the number of people that go into schools that are not that not there on an absolutely constant basis. Now I appreciate that's quite difficult for parents of pupils with additional support needs, but I would ask people to understand exactly why that's been put in places to try to minimise the opportunities for the circulation of the virus, bluntly that's what it's all about.

JM: You just, kind of, touched on my next question, which is about peripatetic services. As you were saying different teachers, but also, you know, vision, hearing, EAL support, is there a legal requirement for them to be provided, is there a way, scrambling to try and get them online for example. Is this likely to come back into our schools, all be it digitally, soon?

DFM: I think we should be trying to find ways of making sure that services that are needed can be provided. So I think there's a, I think there is a, there will be some services that are absolutely essential and critical, and that we should be doing everything possible to think about ways in which they can be delivered, but delivered consistent with the public health

guidance. And I appreciate the public health guidance is a constraint and a limitation, but it's, we are trying our very best to reduce the scope for transmission of the virus, and it's, you know, those are those are quite difficult questions with which we are trying to wrestle. JM: Just moving away from that there, the next question relates to dyslexia. Onne parent's been in touch to highlight obviously the the earlier the intervention the better outcome for dyslexic students. They'd like to know, given the links between dyslexia and mental health outcomes, what priority status does early identification about dyslexia, and then subsequent interventions, have within the Scottish Government plans?

DFM: Essentially we come to all of these questions from the perspective of it being beneficial to have the earliest possible diagnosis and intervention, because the sooner we can identify, the sooner we can put in place the support that individual children need, then the quicker we can address these particular issues. So there's a real imperative on that early diagnosis to make sure that we are properly meeting the needs of children and young people.

JM: And again, similarly we've received some questions relating to an English as additional language, and we've heard from a parent who reports that year on year secondary schools, particularly in Scotland, they see pupils who speak no English or not enough to be properly engaged in the academic content offered to them in each lesson, and so currently many local authorities and EAL services are only able to deliver one hour a week of targeted English support. When will the Scottish Government be able to make you, know bolster that up, to make it so that they fully benefit from education in Scotland, and to tap into the great resource that the young people are to all of us?

DFM: I would have thought that the provision of English as an additional language should be able to be sustainably delivered within the current context, but if there are particular concerns about that, please give me some detail about it and I'll have that explored. I can't really think of, you know, that is I can understand how there may be some services that are difficult to provide in a digital fashionable if you're trying to minimise the number of visiting professionals into a school, I can't really see why English as an additional language would be such an impediment to that, but if there's detail to that please let me know and I'll have to explore that.

JM: Certainly, we will go back to, we've got the questions obviously, so we will find that and come back to you on that. Finally then, we've also received some questions today in relation to the upcoming school guidance on supporting transgender children and young people in school, and whether or not there would be any impact on any other children or young people, such as in relation to spaces separated by gender. How can schools create an environment that works for everyone and recognises the needs and rights of all young people?

DFM: I think the answer lies in the question. Schools must provide opportunities for, must respect the rights of everyone, so that's crucial, and the guidance that my colleague Shirley Anne Somerville committed to providing to the education system, which we are involved in developing, has to address the needs of protecting the rights of everyone involved. So that

involves taking very sensitive and distinctive steps to make sure that everybody's rights are respected in their entirety.

JM: Thank you. I firmly believe myself that by giving young people rights doesn't take away the rights of other young people, and I'm pleased to hear your answer just there.

Moving on to parental engagement, obviously that's the big topic for the NPFS, we're just thinking the lockdown and the school closures have resulted in a greater degree of parental involvement in our children's education than ever before. I mean, this is a great and positive step and can be, you know, it's a positive achievement that can be taken from the challenges of this year. As we know parental involvement and engagement improves attainment levels for our children and young people. How are you able to ensure, or support, or engage with schools to make sure that this level of potential engagement continues?

DFM: There's an interesting point here Joanna about what is the lasting legacy of Covid? Because I see lots of things about society that have changed as a consequence of Covid, one of them is about parental engagement in learning, and there's been a massive upsurge in parental engagement in the learning of young people. So, I'm keen that we maintain that as much as possible, because that will help phenomenally in improving performance within the education system, the more that parents are part of that learning process. So that should be, I hope parents will hold on to that sentiment that has been present. I know, because it went on in this household, that sometimes home learning was a bit of a challenge. I certainly was trying not to teach my son how to do sums the way I did them, when his teacher had taught him a different way, and that's, you know, it's quite a tensions attention to think, you know, 'I do that differently' so you know, so that's the kind of thing that is sometimes tough. That engagement is really valuable, I think schools have obviously got to encourage it and nurture it, and schools have got to, I think, work with parents to find out the extent to which they can maintain that degree of engagement in the learning of young people, which I think is something of enormous value and benefit to keep young people and their attainment.

JM: And obviously today there was an article in the paper from one of the teachers unions, essentially trying to shut the doors almost completely on parents, so it's difficult for a parent to, particularly at this time when there's no access to the school at all, and we're obviously not at all trying to dispute how much work our staff are doing in in the schools for our young people, but again it's trying encourage schools to be as open to their their parent body as they can be at this time, and one of the questions that's coming back quite a lot at the moment, it must be the time of year that we turn to this, is about parents evenings. Many many schools are saying that there will be no parents evenings at all this year because, obviously, adults are not able to come into the school. But it would be helpful if you can work along with Education Scotland and the CERG group to be able to find some plans to put in place so that parent's evenings don't just disappear with no access to what your children are learning at school at all.

DFM: We will have a particular discussion about that at the education recovery group, because if I look at, in my 23 years a member of parliament, I carry out, kind of, the

equivalent of a weekly parents evening where I set up somewhere, a school, village Hall, office, church Hall, back of a caravan, front of a post office, and people come and sit down in front of me. I've been doing that for 23 years every single week, now that's how my constituents get access to me. Now obviously I've not been able to do that because of lockdown, so after 23 years of never doing a zoom call, a teams call, or a conference call with any single constituent other than the phone, and now, you know, tomorrow my day will be one continuous zoom call speaking face to face with my constituents. I can't sit face to face with them, but it's important to me that they can see me and put their point directly to me. So if I can adapt my working, I've never done a zoom call with a constituent in 23 years until March, and, so I've changed my my working, I've not been in the office since March, but I can still fulfil my functions. Crucial interaction between me and the people who elected me who've got a right to challenge me, I've just changed the way I do it. So, you know, I have taken part in, I took part in the other week there, in a parent council event in my own constituency where I just called in on Microsoft Teams. Again, 23 years, never called in to a parent council meeting on Microsoft teams, and I've done it, and I'm now a dab hand at it. So Covid needs us to change, we must have parental engagement in the education of children individually and collectively as schools, so Covid shouldn't be an excuse to say... I remember a teacher sent to me, I've told you this before Joanna, that there was a sign up in the first school he went to work in, and right at the reception a big sign it said 'parents no further', well we can't have that, that was 40 years ago, I'm not having that. So Covid can't be something that makes that happen, we've got to make sure we open up.

JM: Just briefly then, just because you brought it up, we are hearing again from parent councils about the challenges of having virtual meetings themselves, and parent councils are being in touch, and given that we are on zoom this evening and you've mentioned the other platforms, what would you say about the status of parent councils as independent from the school, and do you recognise, you obviously recognise the detrimental impact of policies that just won't let parents use different platforms, or the head teacher can't come on a particular platform. Parents are already physically isolated from the school buildings at the moment, so surely we should be going with whatever meets the needs of the parents?

DFM: I would think that, I can understand some of the challenges that public authorities feel about some platforms when it comes to children, but, you know, with adults, I'm not sure I understand what that is. But, you know again, if the national parent forum is gathering information about how this is maybe not working out as we would all like it to happen, please put that to me and I'll do all that I can to address that.

JM: Thank you, and a parent's also been in touch with the question about composite classes. They are saying that in their local authority the policy is fairly rigid, it's leaving no room for discussion between the school and parents, and they would like to know if you would agree that other significant factors relating to the child other than age should be considered to inform composites, and that parents should have the opportunity to at least discuss class formations with the school in advance, to ensure that they get it right for every child regardless of the child's age.

DFM: I think we should be attentive as an education system to all of these factors to make sure we are in a position to get it right for every child in so far as we are able to do so.

JM: And then moving into a similar question, it's about deferral and transition policies, this parent would like to ask if children under five years old at the start of the school term regardless of their date of birth will be able to receive that funding, there's been a lot of talk about guaranteed funding and questions about it, so they can access that additional year of nursery?

DFM: Well, the government agreed to legislate for that provision during the course of this parliamentary session and that's what we're prepared to do, but we've got to legislate for it first, which obviously that's, again, that's one of these things that we would have ideally made more progress on but unfortunately has been delayed as a consequence of Covid.

JM: Moving on now to contingency planning and blended learning, many parents would like to know what plans are in place to cope with children, whole classes as you mentioned earlier, being asked to self isolate, school closures, and potential local lockdowns. So what educational support should children, young people, and parents be getting if a child has to self isolate due to waiting for a test as part of test and protect?

DFM: There should be, well there is, available the digital platforms that I talked about through E-School and then obviously individual schools have got adapt to the circumstances they face whether it's individual children that are isolating or perhaps classes that have to do so. Because what we want to do is to maximise the continuity of education for children and young people as best as we can in these circumstances. So obviously we're putting in place extra teaching resources, we are activating teachers who have lapsed in their teaching activity, we are putting in place the digital platform, and teachers are being encouraged to participate within that, with a view to making sure that the educational needs of young people can be fulfilled through any piece of disruption. But obviously, the best thing we can do is try to minimise that disruption for young people by minimising the prevalence of covid within society. So one of the points I have been anxious to get across to people, and it's crucial point in relation to the situation we find ourselves in today, whereby the government has had to essentially reverse some of the relaxation that we put in place because the situations become more serious, that we've all got a role to play as members of society in trying to avoid the spread of the virus, and the more we can minimise the spread of the virus, the more likely it is that young people will not have any interruptions to their education. And one of the other key things that needs to be, and I would be missing a good opportunity if I don't mention it here, is the launch of the government's test and protect app on smart phones which is downloaded. It's called, I'm just going to get in front of me, the title of the app on the App Store is protect Scot and it essentially is a contact tracing app which is available free from NHS Scotland. In the space of today nearly half a million people have downloaded that app which is a huge contribution by residents in Scotland, and if there's anyone on the call tonight who's not done it yet, please do it because we're trying to get to half a million by 10 o'clock.

JM: Have you got a bet on with somebody?

DFM: No, I've not, but that's our hope, because the last time I looked, and I'm just going to refresh this to find out allow me this distraction, but we're now at 459,000 downloads which

is pretty good for a day, but it's actually something that is a tangible helpful measure in trying to minimise the circulation of the virus.

JM: I've got a few questions that are obviously about the e-school, and bearing in mind when we've been asking questions, most parents maybe have not had the opportunity to see what would be in action as the amount of children and classes etcetera closing has been small thankfully. But parents are anxious about what is almost the inevitable, of taking their turn of their children being off school, and so it's good to hear about e-school and it was also good to hear today at the CERG meeting, you know, the extent of the timetable etcetera, and I'm glad to hear that that will be being publicised on social media through education Scotland the next few days, and I ask parents to look out for that so they can see the extent of that, which should perhaps relieve some of those anxieties. A lot of parents have asked though about inconsistencies about that, and hopefully then e-school will be fewer inconsistencies from school to school about what offer they get if they are absent from school. Is it possible for these lessons, and I'm not quite sure myself, are these lessons going to be more interactive, are they recorded, or any where it's live with the teacher who is actually there, so that if young people have questions to ask that they can actually ask them to somebody who really is at the other side of the screen.

DFM: There will be a variety of interventions. Most of it will be recorded, but there may well be live lessons, and of course if we get into a circumstance where we have classes that are off then obviously the system can, the platform can respond to that by creating opportunities for learning to be delivered online. I would certainly hope that we can muster as much flexibility as we possibly can do, but I do come back to the point I have been making, that we we actually want to try to minimise the amount of disruption to education and we do that most effectively by minimising the circulation of the virus in the community.

JM: I mean obviously, everybody is with you on that, and that's everybody's hope, it's just I suppose, it's good to hope for the best but plan for the worst I suppose. And some people have said, you know, explained as like a postcode lottery in terms of individual teachers abilities to deliver online learning, so will be really keen to see how the e-school starts working, and obviously we can always ask parents on your behalf how it's working when it actually starts going out in the next few weeks. On a similar topic, but it's maybe again to be taken back to the SQA to see if they've got any plans in place to manage the issue of children in the senior phase who might have to self isolate during the exam diet, and therefore not being able to attend the exam at all in, you know, in May?

DFM: I think this is one of the issues that I've got to wrestle with about the whole question of equity for all learners and all candidates for exams. Because we, you know, as I say I can't foresee just how much disruption there will be between now and next spring in relation to the learning and teaching opportunities for young people either at an individual level, at a class level, or a school level. But, I have to think through there might be the possibility of that happening, I have to avoid a situation in April and May of next year with some young people are essentially prejudiced because of the experience that they've had during the year and I've got to think through all of those implications, and again we aired these questions to be at the education recovery group because they're not straight forward questions to answer, when we don't know exactly how much disruption is going to be in

place. But what I do give you the assurance about tonight, is that I want to make sure, I'm determined to make sure, that every learner has got fairness, and a fair crack of the whip when it comes to a certification next year, no matter what they experienced during the year.

JM: That's good to hear thank you. I've got a couple of questions that have come in during the evening and related in different ways, but a bit out of sync now, but it's the issue they're saying is insufficient testing capacity to test pupils and staff. It's not isolation that's needed but more and faster testing, and when will we get that?

DFM: We've got anyone that, anyone that has got covid symptoms should get a test and they should be able to get that in short order because it's vital that that testing is put in place immediately. So anyone that needs a test should be able to get that test, and obviously to get the results quickly and to know what course of action to take. And we have got, we've had growing testing capacity over the summer, and that is going to be continued to be built up towards the winter, so that we are in a position to ensure that all testing requirements are put in place.

JM: Thank you, another random question that's come in about concerns over cleaning in classrooms during the school day, that many parents don't feel it's adequate enough and would you be able to take that away to check with perhaps Unison colleagues to see that, maybe even do a random audit of all the cleaning in classrooms, just to see where we are with it and make sure that no complacency sinks in?

DFM: I'll certainly, you know that the cleanliness of schools is one of the key mitigations in the guidance on safe school reopening, so it's vital that that regime is put in place and it's certainly something we've got to ensure there's no complacency surrounding at all.

JM: Thank you, that would be really helpful to be able to hear back about that. And to finish off Mr. Swinney, I'd like to just say also to many of the parents that are online there's a lot of questions unanswered in the Q&A, that we'll get a copy of those questions and will be able to follow them up, and so if any parents on the line haven't had their their question directly answered then to carry on looking at our social media over the next few days and we will we will strive to answer them and provide information on their question. But just to finish off, we've heard tonight some of your answers, I mean not so many as anticipated perhaps, but there is an all too common and very frustrating situation as a parent of being batted back and forth between national and local government. Again can you leave us with a guarantee that you'll speak to councillor McKee from COSLA to try and avoid these issues that prevent parents, children, and young people from actually benefiting from all the plans that are in place. There's so much going in, so much money being poured into education at the moment, and also and from us falling in between the Scottish Government and local authority, as I say you get battered from one to the next with issues and it would be good to be able to hear from you that you and councillor McCabe will be able to join forces and try to avoid that from happening?

DFM: Well, I think I've tried to evidence that I'm only interested in getting the outcomes that that are good for children and young people, I often, invariably actually, have to work

through local authorities - I don't run a single school in country and so it's invariably dependant on local authorities doing certain things. So, I try my best to get to a point of agreement with local authorities, sometimes it works sometimes it doesn't, but I do give you my assurance that I give it my best endeavour.

JM: Thank you very much, that's all you can do. I'd like to thank you for your attendance tonight and for the opportunity to ask questions again directly. It's been really helpful and I think parents really appreciate the fact that you are your literally taking questions directly from them and asking them to you kind of off the cuff so to speak. I know that we can always approach you in your office too to find out some other answers for us. So I'd like to thank you again, and I'd like to thank all the NPFS reps for their continued pushing of all these events and also the staff at the NPFS office for their hard work to get tonight online again, so again as I'd like to see thank you very much Mr Swinney, and hopefully we'll ,move forward and asks more questions in the fullness of time.

DFM: Thank you.