

*David Proctor: Obviously we have the OECD review out today and recommendations regarding SQA and obviously Education Scotland. The First Minister said earlier that she had a lot of confidence in SQA. What's changed since then and is this the essential scrapping of SQA? What's happened in that time?*

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Well, I do have faith in the SQA and that's very important because we have young people going through qualifications this year and indeed they will be doing so next year as well, and it's very important that the work that's being undertaken by the SQA in conjunction with stakeholders to develop the model for this year is supportive and goes successfully. So we have absolute confidence in the SQA to be able to deliver that and to deliver that well. But we do have an OECD report which has looked at Scotland's curriculum. I'm very pleased to say that it has said that this is absolutely the right foundation for our curriculum as it goes ahead, but it comes as no surprise that as this has been in place for 10 years, that there is obviously room for improvement and that's the reason why we should endeavour to improve as always to ensure we're getting the best delivery for young people, and the reform of Education Scotland and the replacement of the SQA is an important part of that.

*David Proctor: The exam system, COVID aside was described as 19th century, a bit old-fashioned. Do you think that that will be the end of exams as the majority of know them? How will you proceed with that recommendation?*

Shirley-Anne Somerville: So the OECD has another report that's coming in by the end of August that will look specifically at qualifications. I have, of course, listened very carefully to what they've said so far and I'm really looking forward to their second report and I'm open for change on this. If they come back and, as might be expected so far from what has been said so far, they are suggesting change, then I absolutely want to work, very importantly with young people, who are the people who have to go through this process, but importantly teachers and with other stakeholders to see what can be done. So let's wait to see what the report that specifically looks at qualifications says, but I'm certainly hoping to have those discussions with people once we have that report.

*David Proctor: OK. Obviously, I touched on it a little bit in my last question. It's never far away. The COVID pandemic and I suppose the impact of it on especially on young people in the last couple of years. It's been very tough. What lessons do I suppose yourself and obviously the Deputy First Minister who was in post before - what sort of lessons can you take from the last couple of years and the impact on young people's education?*

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Well I think young people have gone through an exceptionally difficult couple of years, beyond what many of us could have imagined when we were young and I pay absolute tribute to their resilience and to their hard work as we've gone through this process and absolutely to teachers and support staff who have guided and supported them through this. None of this has been easy for anyone and many people will have been affected by it. We've learned, I think very importantly, to work collegiately right across different parts of government, whether that's national, local government, with the unions, with young people, to come up with our education recovery and how we deal with COVID and that's certainly

something that I'm determined to continue as we move forward. How can we work together to get the best out of policies out of it? There undoubtedly will be lessons to learn from this. I hope many of them we're already putting in place, so for example, the importance that we're putting on children and young people's health and wellbeing, for example the summer programme, which is being funded for £20 million of expenditure over the summer to support children and young people as they re-connect over this summer. We're also very much looking to seeing what we need to do to support them as they move forward. That's exactly why we've got the commitments within the 100 days programme to bring in further teachers and support staff into schools to be able to support children and young people. So some lessons that we're learning about how to support children and young people we're already acting on, but I'm keen to work over the summer to make sure we're doing everything's we can for education recovery.

*David Proctor: This programme, post-COVID. Is there anything that you would maybe do differently now that we're quite far into the pandemic, anything you would have changed or anything even from John Swinney's time?*

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I think it's important that we've attempted to learn lessons as we've gone along. So, for example, there were lessons that we had to learn following on from last year's exams. Those lessons were learned. There's a new system in place this year and that's been developed by the SQA with a range of stakeholders, very importantly including young people and teachers and parents, as well as others to determine the best way forward for what's called the Alternative Certification Model. So that's a key lesson that we learned – to ensure that what happens this year is it's a young person's demonstrated attainment that will be then decided upon by the teachers and what grade they'll get. So that's a very important lesson that's learned, that young people this year can be assured that we've learned that and that's already in place for the assessments they've just gone through and for the provisional results that they should be getting this week.

*David Proctor: Yes, obviously a busy time for teachers and for people sitting assessments, Friday's the deadline, I think for getting those results in. Yeah, I guess the thing about the pandemic, it's turned the world upside down. Do you think it'll be a stigma with the kids who have gone through exams or assessments in obviously 2020 and 2021. Do you think there will be a stigma when they move on and get jobs and things like that or go to university?*

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Well, of course, we've already seen the young people who finished school last year moving into education, further education and higher education and we're looking at positive destinations and we're seeing good results for that. Obviously the number going into employment, as we would expect, was impacted by what was going on with COVID and the wider economy. But certainly young people that have left school are succeeding. What we have always ensured all along is that the process is fair and it's credible so that young people have faith in the qualifications they are receiving. Colleges, universities and employers absolutely have that as well and I would like to thank particularly colleges and universities for making sure that they have worked with young people during this difficult time as they've moved on to their courses and I think that the way that that's been done with an understanding of the difficult time that young people have gone

through is a real testimony to how you can have a fair and credible system but also a system that can support young people as they go through what was obviously a really challenging time for them.

*David Proctor: One of the other things we found here in the north and the north-east, actually Aberdeen sites, largely rural areas, a few in Aberdeenshire and obviously in the Western Highlands as well. Do you think there will be more remote learning to try and connect those rural areas. Do you think there will be a mix if there is to be a third wave or any kind of next lockdown? Hopefully that wouldn't happen. If it was to happen, do you think the remote learning would kick in again? How do you see that going in the future?*

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Well, we've got a group that's always been looking into how the education system should respond. The Education Recovery Group, CERG, and that's looking at all these aspects as we move forward, about what contingencies there might have to be in place, but what we've reassured schools about is that as they come back to the next academic year, the guidance that will be in place is the guidance as it stands at the moment. If there's any changes that we think can be made over the summer, we'll be sure that we inform schools ahead of when they go back if at all possible so that they can act quickly upon that so what we've tried very much to do is to give staff the reassurance about what they know they're coming back to for the next academic year. We're also have reassurance that we'll keep looking at this over the summer and if there are changes that can be made because of improvements in numbers, if the vaccination programme continues to be the success that it is, if we can take away mitigation measures, then we'll absolutely do that as quickly as possible. So that gives some reassurance about what they're coming back to but also an absolute reassurance that we're keeping a close eye on this over the summer to see what can be done. I'd certainly hope that we wouldn't get into a position where children have to be learning from home again, given where we are with the vaccination programme. But obviously importantly all the way through this, what we've had is this Education Recovery Group, which, as I say, has trade unions, has parents and young people and other educationalists on it, to be able to advise Ministers on the decisions that we should be taking and we will absolutely continue to keep listening to them about what's right for children and young people and the staff as we move forward for the next academic year.

*David Proctor: I wasn't sure if you heard this story but there was an incident over in Oban High school – girls being forced to wear tights even though the weather was warmer. I just wanted your thoughts on that. Why do you the school forced them to wear tights – what's your view on that?*

Shirley-Anne Somerville: It certainly shouldn't be the place of the Education Secretary to tell any school or indeed any pupils about what they should or shouldn't be wearing. That's certainly a matter for decisions locally. We are as a Government working with local authorities to develop national guidance on school uniforms within the lifetime of this Parliament so that work will be under way. But certainly any school that is undertaking uniform policy, there's an expectation that they work with the young people in the school and parents so there's an understanding about the policy that any school will put in place.

*David Proctor: Would the Government have a uniform policy for example, COVID and some of the schools that went back after the lockdown was a bit more relaxed, kids could wear pretty much wear what they wanted just to get back into the feel of things. Do you think the Government would have an approach where they'd want uniforms to be brought in, or would that boil down to school decisions?*

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Certainly decisions that were taken on COVID were for public health reasons so, for example, in primary schools to perhaps allow children to come in in casual clothing so they didn't have to get changed. So there were examples of aspects that were put in for specific public health measures. When it comes to what would happen in general for individual uniforms policies, we are working on the guidance on the school uniforms so this, for example, will look at the cost of school uniforms to ensure that there's no challenges to families to being able to afford parts of the uniform that might be expensive. But there always has to be a role for schools to develop policies at a local level, and, as I said, they should very much do that with consultation with children and young people and their parents to be able to develop that policy and bring the forward.

*David Proctor: Do you think that the school should have gone down that road? I mean I guess parents would be a bit unhappy if their children are a bit uncomfortable in school and they're being forced to wear tights, despite it being really hot and not very good for them, I suppose.*

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Well I'm sure the parents who have been anxious about this have been in touch directly with the school and it's certainly at a school level that that should be undertaken rather than someone in Edinburgh that's the Education Secretary or elsewhere, telling pupils in a school what to do for a specific uniform policy.

*David Proctor: OK. You mentioned positive destinations. I was looking at positive destination figures for Aberdeen. They are all obviously grouped with COVID and things, in fact, they are down for 2018-2020 so the start of the pandemic. There were 89% of school leavers went on to positive destinations, which I think is a four or five per cent drop from the previous year. What makes that happen in Aberdeen? Do you think the council needs help to make sure that pupils are getting into positive destinations once they leave school or is this just down to COVID. What are your thoughts on that one?*

Shirley-Anne Somerville: There clearly has been an impact from COVID, given the fact that we've often seen higher rates of children and young people going into further and higher education but perhaps a lower rate going into direct employment. But that's why the Government policies around the Young Person's Guarantee is so important. So that's to ensure that every young person has the ability to move on to further education, higher education, apprenticeship, or employment and that's available in a guarantee up to the age of 24. That's really important for us. We recognise that young people have been badly affected often by COVID and we don't want that to be a long-term challenge for that young person or indeed for any part of the economy. That's exactly why, as I say, we've got that Young Person's Guarantee in and there is support flowing from that and to local authorities about how they can support young people and how they can support young people through

that process. I can perhaps send you more information about what's specifically happening with that if that would help. But that's the really important part is that we absolutely have a policy to ensure that any young people that have been going through difficulties are supported through this process.

*David Proctor: Obviously the grades for assessments have to be in by teachers by the end of this week and obviously results day is August 10th. Are you worried at all that something similar to what happened last year could happen this year? Are you confident there are no issues with the Alternative Certification Model?*

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Certainly this year, we don't have as part of the process what was there last year. There was a great deal of, understandably, concern where there was this algorithm where the grades were submitted by teachers, by schools, and then an algorithm changed that within the Scottish Qualifications agency. That does not happen this year. We absolutely have a system that if a teacher submits a grade that they believe a young person is entitled to because of their demonstrated attainment, that is the grade that a young person will get. Again, I'd like to thank teachers that are going through that model and supporting young people through this to get the results in and wish all the young people all the best of luck as they're getting their provisional results through. I know they've had a difficult year this year.

*David Proctor: Obviously the kids in the north-east and the north are quite keen to get their exams sorted. What's your message to them? It's been an anxious few weeks for them, they'll be worried that they've probably missed a lot of in-class time because of the pandemic. What's your message to them about what their futures hold, I suppose?*

Shirley-Anne Somerville: Every learner will have received a letter with details about the support that is available for them. I fully recognise that young people have gone through a really tough time. That's why we've written to them directly to encourage them to take up the support that's available for them if they have any concerns or if they've got any worries about what might be happening with their grades or where they might want to go in the future. There are agencies out there, whether that's Skills Development Scotland, whether it's local colleges or universities. People are there and are ready and willing to help to be able to support them through that process, so I would very much encourage them to take up that offer and if they're needing further information from that to speak to the schools about what is available locally as well. That's why we were determined to write to young people directly so that they know that there is support out there for them during this time. The assessments time is a worrying time at any year for a young person who has put so much heart and soul into this work and we are determined to do everything we can to support them through that.

*David Proctor: I suppose there will be unique challenges across the country. Do you think there are challenges to schools - there's a teacher recruitment to schools in the north and the north-east, given that they are largely rural areas with a lot of places that are difficult to get to. Is that something that you need to consider? I was speaking to the head of education in Aberdeenshire a few weeks ago. They said that*

*they want their voices to be heard as loud as those in the Central Belt, as loud as Edinburgh or Glasgow, these bigger places to make sure that rural voices are heard. Is that something that's come through loud and clear to you?*

Shirley-Anne Somerville: What's very clear when I speak to organisations that represent all the local authorities is that they are keen to have their voices heard, so COSLA is there to represent local authorities across Scotland. I speak to ADES, the director of education, who represent right across Scotland as well and they are always very keen to engage directly or with specific localised concerns or concerns on a national basis. What I've said all along as I move into this post is I really do want to work collaboratively with local government, with teachers and very much with young people to be able to hear their voices. I'll say a little bit more about that in Parliament tomorrow because I am keen that I do work collaboratively and I'm making sure I hear voices from right across the country and not just from local authorities, important though they are, but directly from head teachers, from teachers, from young people themselves. I think that's one of the ways that we've worked best during COVID and that's something I'm determined to carry on with doing as I move forward with my time in post.

*David Proctor: You've been in post a few weeks. The First Minister aside, yours is going to be one of the toughest briefs, with the Health Secretary, I should say, yours is one of the toughest briefs. In the Government. What are the sorts of challenges, what are the bits about the job that really excite you and what was it you're looking to achieve over the course of the next Parliament?*

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I think the exciting part of the job is the ability to support our young people going forward. I say that as a parent, as well as the Education Secretary. That is one of the things that I'm really looking forward to in this job. I feel the responsibility, particularly at this time as we move forward and try to recover from COVID to make sure that we're supporting young people and teachers through that so, yes, it's a very challenging time to take on the role, but I take great heart from the fact that we've got an OECD report that's come out today that says that the foundations for Scotland's education system are strong and what they've found in our curriculum is strong. They've encouraged us to look for room for improvement and you know within the day of that publication coming out, we've already demonstrated that we're open and ready for that change. So I think that, yes, it's a challenging time but there's a real opportunity to take education forward. We've been told today by international experts that we've got the foundations right. We just need to make sure that we're fit for purpose for the next decade as we move forward. So that's a really exciting time, as well as a challenging time, to take on education.

*David Proctor: One last question. There's a rather important football match happening at Hampden Park. Your thoughts ahead of Scotland and Croatia.*

Shirley-Anne Somerville: I was slightly disappointed to hear on the news this morning about the positive COVID test. I'm really hoping that doesn't affect the rest of the squad but I think I watched the last 10 minutes of the Scotland-England match from behind a cushion, so I'm really hoping that I can actually enjoy the match with the family and look forward, fingers crossed, to a good result despite the fact we've had that news this morning.

*David Proctor: That's perfect thanks.*