

## SUMMARY OF PRIVATE MEETING BETWEEN THE EDUCATION COMMITTEE AND THE DEPARTMENT

**Wednesday, 25 March 2020, 09.30-10.30am**

Private virtual (Skype) meeting between Members of the Education Select Committee and the Rt Hon Nick Gibb MP, Minister for School Standards, and Gillian Keegan MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Apprenticeships and Skills

### Committee Members in attendance via remote participation

Robert Halfon (Chair), Fleur Anderson, Apsana Begum, Jonathan Gullis, Tom Hunt, Dr Caroline Johnson, David Johnston, Ian Mearns, Lucy Powell, David Simmonds, Christian Wakeford.

### Objectives of the session

The session was an opportunity for the Committee to question the Department for Education on their response to the Covid-19 crisis and the implications for education and children's services. Initially intended to be a public evidence session, the format was changed on 23 March to an informal private Skype meeting in light of the strengthening of Government advice in respect of the Covid-19 crisis and the need for social distancing.

### Schools, families and children's services

#### Disadvantaged and Free School Meal (FSM) eligible pupils

**The Committee raised concerns about the impact of school closures on the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their wealthier peers. The Committee asked questions about progress on the FSM voucher scheme.**

The Department said that the Government's overall priority is to delay the spread of Covid-19. The Department emphasized that they are expecting schools to do all they can to ensure lessons continue online or via other means, and that learning should continue. The Department expects schools to remain open for the most vulnerable but acknowledged that the effect of school closures on vulnerable and disadvantaged pupils was a concern.

The Department confirmed they expect a national FSM voucher scheme to be operational by the end of the month. In the short term, some schools are operating their own voucher system until the national scheme is up and running.

In response to a question about the discrepancy of purchasing power on an individual versus wholesale basis, the DfE confirmed that vouchers will be of higher value than £2.30 per day, the current value of per meal FSM funding.

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## Vulnerable children, children in Alternative Provision, and children at risk of exploitation and abuse

**The Committee raised concern about the oversight of vulnerable children who remain at home, and support for children attending Alternative Provision. The Committee asked the Department what work it is doing with the voluntary sector and Local Authorities to safeguard children at risk of exploitation, for example county lines activity, and abuse.**

The Department expect the system to act flexibly to support vulnerable children. Local Authorities should work with schools and the sector to ensure children with an education, health and care (EHC) plan or social worker are supported and there is appropriate oversight of children remaining at home.

The Department confirmed they expect most Alternative Provision to remain open because many of these children have an EHC plan or are otherwise vulnerable. The Department will follow up with a letter to the Committee on what action they are taking to safeguard children at risk of exploitation and abuse during this period of school closures.

The Department said that they expect children to be at home if not in school and not on the streets. Children are expected to continue with their studies.

## Children's services and children with an EHCP

**The Committee questioned the Department on whether children's services, already under significant financial pressures, will be given additional resources. The Committee expressed concern that Local Authority duties to implement ECHPs could be replaced by 'reasonable endeavours', highlighting that this is causing considerable anxiety for parents and young people.**

The Department confirmed an additional non-ringfenced £1.6 billion has been allocated to support councils on areas including social care. The Department said that Clause 5 of the Coronavirus Bill would allow the emergency registration of social workers, to tackle the strain on social care.

The Department highlighted that the Bill provides emergency power for exceptional circumstances. It allows for greater flexibility, but the expectation is that EHC plans will still be implemented. The Department stated that the priority is for health and care needs to be met, if these can be met at home this is encouraged.

## 'Key Worker' status

**The Committee raised concern that Key Worker status is being interpreted differently by schools, parents and employers. Members asked for clarity on how schools should interpret and enforce this.**

The Department confirmed they have issued detailed guidance about key workers but there is flexibility for schools to interpret this as appropriate. If key workers are able to keep their children home, the Department encourages this, as it will help reduce the spread of the virus.

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The Department said that if a school refuses to take a child of a key worker as defined by the Department, the parent should raise this with their local authority in the first instance. Initial feedback from schools is that the number of key workers sending children to school is lower than expected.

### Provision of school work, EdTech products, and broadband quality

**The Committee asked the Department whether it is taking steps to monitor the consistency, quality and quantity of schoolwork being provided. The Committee asked the Department to set up a dedicated webpage with EdTech product recommendations. The Committee asked questions about ensuring rural broadband quality, and what the Department is doing to ensure hard copy resources are provided to homes with no or poor broadband.**

The Department confirmed they are working with schools and the BBC on what resources can be provided for education at home, and whether this can be provided through television programmes.

The Department is aware of concerns about EdTech companies approaching schools and parents and are working on preparing guidance to schools on navigating this. However, the Department said that there are complications around giving Government endorsement to private sector products. The Department confirmed they are working on guidance for households with no or poor broadband access.

### Mental health of parents/carers, and longer-term public health implications

**The Committee asked about support for the mental health of parents and asked for clearer guidance about expectations of parents. The Committee asked whether the Department will undertake longer-term work on the public health implications of exam cancellations on young people (for example, the possibility of increased rates of drug and alcohol abuse).**

The Department will ensure that information about supporting the mental health of parents and carers is covered in guidance. The Department reiterated that they expect young people not at school to continue their education at home and did not commit to undertaking work on public health implications.

### Skills and Apprenticeships

#### Support for further education (FE) colleges and their students

**The Committee asked for an update on what is being done to support this phase.**

The Department stated that guidance on FE has been now been issued, and this is consistent with guidance for schools. The number of eligible students taking advantage of provision is very low, and there was already substantial online learning in place for 16-18-year-olds.

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The Department said it was working with exam boards on advice and guidance on qualifications. They said this was complicated because of the number of types of qualifications there are for this phase.

The Department added that colleges perform a range of functions, and will continue to receive support for the classroom-based learning they deliver and to allow them to open for vulnerable children and children of critical workers.

### Support for apprentices

#### **The Committee challenged the Department on how it is supporting apprentices, highlighting concerns that Members have heard from the sector.**

The Department acknowledged concerns about the impact of Covid-19 on the apprentice pipeline. The Department has already added flexibilities such as:

- Allowing for online learning
- Extending the break in learning rule for apprenticeships from 4 weeks to 3 months
- Allowing apprenticeships to be extended by the same duration they are paused

The Department said they are also considering flexibilities on end-point assessments, including removing face-to-face assessment where appropriate. The Department expect employers to develop and support their employee pipeline, and stated that retaining apprentices during this time should not be a hugely costly decision for them.

The Department will soon publish March data on apprenticeship statistics, and will continue to closely monitor the situation.

#### **The Committee asked what the Department was doing about the number of apprentices being made redundant.**

The Department said that they were looking at getting those made redundant another employment option within a 12-week period.

### Support for Independent Training Providers (ITPs)

#### **The Committee challenged the Department on the support that is available to ITPs. Members highlighted concerns from the sector and pointed out that colleges have their funding guaranteed while ITPs are reliant on Treasury support for businesses.**

The Department said that employers have access to loans from the Treasury, and business are protected in terms of the Government 80% salary guarantee. The Government has also set up a business interruption loan scheme for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and larger providers should be covered by the support liquidity scheme which will help bridge disruption to cashflow by making loans available.

The Department said that as ITPs operate as businesses, they can access the support for businesses that the Treasury has announced. The Department explained that they will not pay



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for training activity that is not taking place, and encouraged providers to consider greater use of online and remote learning to allow their business activities to continue.

The Department said it is setting up a roundtable to listen to sector concerns.

### Non-levy payers

**The Committee asked whether the Department will extend non-levy contracts and consider time-limited relaxation of co-investment fees for non-levy payers.**

The Department stated that if there was any delivery in March, the Department will pay the full month's payment to allow providers time to adjust. The Department have not taken a firm decision about increasing the sunset period.

The Department is aware that there is likely to be a downturn in apprenticeship provision and said they are looking at a package of measures for recovery. They are trying to give employers confidence that they can use apprentices on the job, furlough them, or deploy them in other parts of the business.

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