

Education Committee

Oral evidence: [Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance, HC 54](#)

Tuesday 14 March 2023

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Members present: Mr Robin Walker (Chair); Miriam Cates; Mrs Flick Drummond; Anna Firth; Nick Fletcher; Andrew Lewer; Ian Mearns.

Questions 321-372

Witnesses

I: Rt Hon Robert Halfon MP, Minister of State for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education, Department for Education; and Roger Cotes, Director of Careers and Further Education, Department for Education.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Robert Halfon and Roger Cotes.

Q321 **Chair:** I am delighted to welcome back the former Chair of the Committee, Minister Robert Halfon, who is going to be responding to our inquiry into Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance. You are very welcome, Minister. I believe you wanted to give some opening remarks. Perhaps you could introduce your fellow guest as well.

Robert Halfon: Thank you very much. It is an honour to be here again. I am very happy that you as Chair and the Committee have continued this inquiry. I will allow my colleague to introduce himself.

Roger Cotes: I am Roger Cotes. I am the director for careers and further education in the DfE.

Robert Halfon: And of course, I am Robert Halfon, Minister for skills, apprenticeships, careers and higher education.

Thank you for allowing me to open with a few remarks, which I think is quite important, given my record on careers and some of the things that I have said in the past. No doubt some of that will be quoted to me through this morning—I look forward to that. No doubt Ian in particular will quote some of those words to me.

I have three clear priorities for careers. We are doing some very good things and we will discuss those during the Committee, but I also think that we need some change. My overall vision is for a clear and unified careers system that can be accessed by everyone. Of course, that starts with high-quality careers advice in all schools and colleges around the country. So my first pillar is a single unified system.

We have the foundations in place with Gatsby benchmarks and the Careers and Enterprise Company, which is now working with 90% of schools and colleges, but I want to go further and bring careers and skills-related services together, across Government, to create a one-stop shop, so that people can compare the full range of occupations, training and education opportunities available to them. That begins with the development of a single, digital careers information service. I am very worried about duplication and the array of different websites that people can use to access careers.

Added to that, we are working with the Unit of Future Skills to create a taxonomy on skills, qualifications and employment, providing up-to-date labour market information and a common language around skills and occupations, to improve consistency of careers information.

Much of this has been identified by Sir John Holman in his review. He said there was an overlap between the CEC, the National Careers Service and the Department for Work and Pensions. That is why I am looking at a



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common strategic framework, and branding. I want to ensure a clear distinction between the National Careers Service for careers progression and training and re-training and skills, and Jobcentre Plus, to get people into jobs.

The second pillar is about ensuring skills training and work experience. That means putting technical, vocational education on an equal footing with academic routes. Going back to the Baker clause, we now have the opportunity to hear directly from at least six providers of technical education and apprenticeships in key school years. We are putting £3.2 million into the apprenticeship support and knowledge programme.

The CEC is going to deliver 1,000 teacher-industry encounters in 2022-23, but I want the CEC to ensure that career hubs increase young people's exposure both to work experience, and the workplace. We are working on that. I visited the Cumbria careers hub recently to see some of that in action.

I want the NCS, as I say, to focus on career routes, including apprenticeships, traineeships, university and other technical routes. And I want a much stronger focus on dynamic and high-quality careers and skills.

So the first pillar is a unified system of careers; the second is giving skills parity of esteem with academic. The third pillar is social justice. It is a unified system, skills and social justice. We want to start career learning early. We will no doubt talk this morning about this, but we are targeting 2,250 primary schools at the moment with proper careers and work experience and work encounters.

We want to ensure that provision for older children targets and is inclusive of disadvantage. We now have 78% of careers hubs in AP and 76% of SEND institutions in a careers hub. We want to ensure that schools are serving the highest proportion of disadvantaged students. We want higher-quality work experience focusing on coldspots, and we want to intensify the support for those who need it most.

There are good examples of so-called NEET-prevention projects in Luton, for example, which resulted in 90% of those participants going into positive destinations. There are others, such as employment and skills pathfinder trials—I do not invent the language, unfortunately—in Walsall, Dagenham and Barking. True social justice is closing the skills gap but ensuring that the most disadvantaged have a chance to climb that careers ladder of opportunity.

That is all I wanted to say as an opening remark. Those are the three priorities: a unified, cohesive system; a system that promotes skills; and a system that ensures there is social justice as well.

Q322 Chair: Thank you very much, Minister. That is a helpful introduction to some of the key priorities from your perspective. You described the Gatsby benchmarks as the foundations put in place. They were developed



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almost 10 years ago, yet we have heard that about 12% of schools are meeting them in full. Should the benchmarks be more rigorously enforced—through Ofsted inspections or statutory guidance, for example?

Robert Halfon: My first point is that 85% of schools are meeting or progressing against some of the Gatsby benchmarks. Many more schools are meeting half of the Gatsby benchmarks. The Gatsby benchmarks are very important. Of course, we are looking at ways in which we might need to change some—some of them may need to adapt—but they are absolutely essential.

The reason why is that for example, if you achieve most of the Gatsby benchmarks, you increase apprenticeship uptake by 17%. That is huge. You know that if you achieve most of the Gatsby benchmarks, you are most likely to ensure that you reduce a young person's chance of being not in employment or training by 20%. You know that schools that have a high achievement of Gatsby benchmarks score 3.9% higher in career readiness.

Q323 **Chair:** Given that, surely there is a case for making the challenge more strenuous.

Robert Halfon: There is. I am absolutely clear that Ofsted need to ensure that careers are being properly followed. If you look at what Ofsted do at the moment, inspectors consider the quality of careers education, information and guidance. The grade descriptors for a good judgment in Ofsted make specific reference to using Gatsby benchmarks to develop and improve career provision. There is quite a bit that Ofsted are doing.

With the school inspection handbook, in terms of provider access, which is related to Gatsby in terms of whether or not they are meeting their Baker clause, inspectors state that in the inspection report and take it into account when arriving at a judgment about personal development, so absolutely.

Ofsted have a very important role. I have had discussions with the chief inspector about this, and I want her to absolutely place a lot of emphasis on ensuring that careers are properly looked at. To be fair to them, they are doing a fair bit already.

Q324 **Chair:** I promise you that there will not be too many of these questions, but when you were Chair of this Committee you expressed concerns that no evaluation was being done on whether the Gatsby benchmarks are working. We talked a bit about the numbers and the quantitative evaluation, but does the Department plan to do more in terms of a qualitative evaluation of the benchmarks?

Robert Halfon: I mentioned some of the qualitative analysis being done on the benchmarks. If you have excellence in Gatsby benchmarks, it shows that the odds of a young person from a disadvantaged community being a NEET reduce by 20%. That saves the taxpayer £150 million a year. For year 11 leavers, for example, achieving each of the eight Gatsby benchmarks reduces the odds of a young person being NEET or in an



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unknown destination by 1.1%. I mentioned that the achievement of all benchmarks is associated with a 17% increase in apprenticeship uptake.

Q325 Chair: You mentioned these points in terms of why they are important. You also mentioned that some of them might need to be changed. We have heard evidence that some of them might need to be tweaked—for primary, for instance—if they are going to be applied. What work is the Department doing on that?

Robert Halfon: As I say, we are reviewing the Gatsby benchmarks.

Q326 Chair: Over what sort of period of time do you expect that review to take place?

Robert Halfon: It is happening as we speak, so I am happy to write to you with further details. I don't know if you want to add anything about that, Roger.

Roger Cotes: Gatsby are looking and refining the benchmarks. As the Minister said, there is evidence that, as they are, they are correlated with significantly improved outcomes, so we think that they are a good thing. Yes, we absolutely need to keep looking and refining them. We do not have a timeline set currently for saying there will be a new set of benchmarks, but we are absolutely talking to Gatsby about that.

I suppose the other point I would make is that there is a really positive trend. Obviously, we would like all schools and colleges to meet all the benchmarks—you should always aspire to that—but five years ago, on average, schools and colleges were meeting two benchmarks, and now it is five. Those who have been in the careers hubs for longest are now hitting six, so we are really moving in the direction towards hitting all of them. This is a support infrastructure that has been rolled out to the whole country only very recently, so we have only just got to 90% of schools being part of a hub. We are expecting that number to keep on going higher, so I would hope that those positive outcomes should continue to flow through and continue to improve.

Robert Halfon: Just to say, I mentioned that 85% of schools are progressing against the benchmarks, but 100% of schools are meeting at least half of the Gatsby benchmarks, and they are very difficult things. They are very high standards. It is not just a line; there are subsections to each clause. You asked about the review. It is a full consultation and a qualitative evaluation, and hopefully we will publish the results in 2024.

Q327 Chair: Okay, so it is quite a long-term process. You have said you are reviewing this, and it has been three years since the previous careers strategy came to an end. Why has that been allowed to lapse, and does the Department have plans to put in place a new strategy? If so, when? Given what you just said about the review, does that imply that, if there is going to be a new strategy, it will be after 2024?

Robert Halfon: The 2017 careers strategy set some early foundations. As you say, it was for 2017 to 2020, and there is a detailed timetable of things that were promised in that strategy, which the Government



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achieved for the most part. I am very happy to send that to you in detail, because it is quite a long table. I could go through it all with you now, but we would be here too long.

Q328 Chair: Perhaps the more interesting question is: what was in that strategy that has not been achieved?

Robert Halfon: What I would say is that it built the foundations. I will write to you with the details, but if you look at what that strategy was talking about, it talked about infrastructure and careers hubs—but a relatively small number of careers hubs. We now have 90% of schools involved with careers hubs.

There was a commitment to the Baker clause. That has happened, and there were problems with implementation, but we have changed that from the skills Bill and other measures that we are taking and no doubt will talk about. There was digital development. That has been transformed, but the skills Bill and skills law build on the careers strategy. What I am saying to you today about those three pillars is that those are my priorities.

Q329 Chair: Perhaps you could write to us with what elements of the strategy have not been achieved, because I guess that that is the more interesting question for the Committee in terms of what needs to be taken forward from that.

Robert Halfon: Yes. For the most part, that strategy was achieved. I will send you the timetable of what happened and what was missed.

Roger Cotes: As the Minister was saying, although that was the strategy that was set then, we have since built on that. We have had the “Skills for Jobs” White Paper and the schools White Paper that both picked up on things that had been initially tested and developed through that careers strategy, but then expanded and taken further. A lot of the things developed through that strategy were testing new approaches about how we could raise standards and improve practice. We learned from that and that was then used to say, “Right, we are going to roll out careers hubs across the country, because we can see that they have had an impact.”

Chair: I will go over to Flick, and then come back later on work experience, if that’s alright.

Q330 Mrs Drummond: I am quite interested in your point about the unified system, but just digging into how that might work, you have been quite an outspoken critic of the Careers and Enterprise Company, saying that there was a low awareness of its work and not a lot of people knew about it; I think 10% of young people had heard about it. What improvements do you intend to put into place?

Robert Halfon: This is quite important. I have had a number of meetings with the Careers and Enterprise Company and with Oli de Botton, who I know has appeared before the Committee.

I have three focuses for the CEC. One is to bring employers and educational providers together in terms of the careers hubs. The second is



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training and supporting careers leaders. The third is ensuring those practical digital tools and resources, so that schools and colleges are able to track performance in terms of their career programmes.

Those who were with me at the time—Ian in particular will know about this—will know that I had real problems with what was going on in the past with the Careers and Enterprise Company. It was spending £900,000 on “research”; it is now spending 0.5% of its budget on research, which is a dramatic improvement. It was spending hundreds of thousands of pounds on conferences, including £50,000 going to KidZania in Stratford for a couple of days. That has all stopped.

I don’t want to get hung up on the name “Careers and Enterprise Company”; what I want to get hung up on is what it is doing. I think there has been a dramatic improvement, and let me tell you why. For example, we now have 90% of schools involved with careers hubs. That is incredibly important because it brings the employers and providers together. We know that 88% of the careers company’s budget is now spent on these career hubs.

Why are the career hubs important? Because of what they are doing. By the way, they have 419 cornerstone businesses—big and small—involved with them, and I met some of those when I went on a visit to Loughborough College last week. What do those careers hubs do? They ensure that young people are becoming much more careers ready, having the knowledge, skills and behaviour, so 74% in year 13 versus 45% from year 7.

In terms of apprenticeships, awareness of apprenticeships by students between year 7 and year 11 has gone up from 39% to over 80%. That is helping to close the disadvantage gap. If you have a careers hub, you are much more likely, by the way, to succeed on the Gatsby benchmarks, and recent stats show that. If you want any more details, I am happy to write to you.

I mentioned the incredible statistic of a 20% reduction in NEET for the most disadvantaged schools where they excel against Gatsby benchmarks. We have had 93% of students having employer encounters and 81% of institutions in careers hubs involving 10 or more businesses in careers activities. There is one beautiful statistic, which I think is genuinely incredible: two thirds of students who have done work experience with one of the 419 cornerstone businesses have gone on to get jobs with those employers.

This is not the same careers company that I saw when I was honoured to do the Chair’s job, but a completely different organisation. I think Oli de Botton is transforming it. I asked him about pay. He has cut the number on high pay by one third. The rest of the salaries are benchmarked against DfE. In my view, they were talking about a much better Careers and Enterprise Company than there was in the past.

Q331 Mrs Drummond: You have talked previously about funding schools



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directly for their own careers. Have you changed your mind on that as well? Is the Careers and Enterprise Company the way to go?

Robert Halfon: I have to deal with the world as it is, as well as the world one would like it to be. What I mean by that is that we have £100 million in funding for careers overall and we have £30 million currently from the Treasury for the Careers and Enterprise Company—the careers hubs and all the things that I have just talked about. That £30 million translates to about £5,000 per school. That is why a careers premium under the current funding model would not be so easy. The other point to make is that not every school has the capacity to do that. We might have some schools in rural areas, for example, that would have issues. So, there is funding, but that is a separate argument, and you can make it—though I will always fight for more resources—but, as I say, I have to deal with the world as it is.

Q332 **Mrs Drummond:** You mentioned Sir John Holman and his recommendations. You have said that you were going to publish more information on what you were thinking about his recommendations. Has that happened yet?

Robert Halfon: I have always felt this and, as I mentioned at the beginning, basically Sir John Holman said that his key point was about the overlap between the CEC, the National Careers Service and the Department for Work and Pensions. I completely accept that. I have argued it for some time. I want the National Careers Service to be focused predominantly on getting people's skills—training and retraining. I do not want to speak for the DWP, but its role is to get people into jobs. That is why I want a common strategic framework and branding—I want a one-stop shop. What I mean by that is, we bring all the websites together. If you want to do an FE course in a particular area, you would be able to find it on that website, or you would be able to find the apprenticeship, the institute of technology or the careers advice that you need on that website. We would bring them all together as one particular branding. I am starting on this with officials. We are not ready yet, but I hope very much to be able to write to the Committee with how this is developing over the coming weeks and months.

Q333 **Mrs Drummond:** Does that mean that you will merge the CEC and the National Careers Service?

Robert Halfon: I see it more like an umbrella, perhaps called a national careers and skills service. It is a bit like HSBC owning a load of financial products—I am a member of First Direct, which is one of its branches, so to speak. They will be brought together and be a lot simpler and easier for people to use.

Q334 **Mrs Drummond:** What you are talking about will all be digital—

Robert Halfon: The first step of it. By the way, some of this is happening already. One of the first things I did as a Minister—I had huge support from the Secretary of State, who completely gets this—was to talk to UCAS about UCAS for apprenticeships. It was announced in National



Apprenticeship Week, and it is going to bring in a system where you apply for apprenticeships on the UCAS website. That is something that I pushed, and I am very happy that UCAS agreed to do it. I hope, one day, for UCAS to be called the universities, colleges and apprenticeships service, to bring the skills together. So that is happening, but I want to push it along, to stop the overlap and the confusion about who does what and where to access, and where there is duplication to get rid of it.

Chair: That is a very important step for the esteem in which apprenticeships are held. I think that is something you have pressed over a long period. It is welcome.

Q335 **Ian Mearns:** Rob, you were talking earlier about trying to develop a single digital access point. Two years ago, the “Skills for Jobs” White Paper said that it was an ambition to improve the National Careers Service website, and yet we have heard consistently that young people do not use it and do not find it accessible or engaging. Why is that? When will the improvements that you have talked about be made?

Robert Halfon: If I may gently challenge you on that, we are looking at the website to make it easier and more accessible. Things have improved over the years. Let me give you some recent data that we have had. This is an Ipsos survey, in 2021-22: of 18 to 24-year-olds, 92% were satisfied with the service—that is higher than average. Importantly, just under 69% who get involved with the National Careers Service achieve learning progression. That is my key aim for the NCS: training and retraining. Some 56% achieve employment progression. That is entirely from work with the National Careers Service. I was going to come here and say it was 45%, but I was given the updated figures this morning.

In terms of satisfaction, some of the figures that you have are quite old. We know, for example, that something like 97% of people from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to say that they have been happy with the National Careers Service. I mentioned the figures on learning and guidance. Some 71% of customers aged 16 to 24 report being satisfied with the online service, 78% of customers aged 16 to 19 rated the ease with which they were able to find information as good, and 85% said the website was easy to use.

Q336 **Ian Mearns:** That’s fine, Rob, but that is people who have used the website. We have heard consistently that young people are not using it. The young people who aren’t using it cannot express satisfaction or otherwise with the service, because they have not used it.

Robert Halfon: It isn’t just websites; some of these figures are face to face. The key thing is the result. Those who are 18 to 24-year-old NEETs are more likely to progress into employment after working with a careers adviser—54% compared with the average of 44%. The crucial thing is whether the NCS is working. Of course there is more to do—absolutely—and we are looking at the website to make it more accessible, but there have been 1 million more learning and job outcomes achieved by customers of the National Careers Service since 2015.



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Roger Cotes: If I could add a little bit to that, we would say that it is important that the National Careers Service is there for people who need it and that it provides them with a really good service. I do not think it will ever be the case that every young person feels that they need to use the National Careers Service, and that is okay. If you are at school, clearly, schools have the lead in providing good careers education to young people, supported by the Careers and Enterprise Company. Many young people will go through university and use their university careers services. That is fine. People get careers information from a variety of sources.

I do not think we would ever say for every person that their first port of call will be the National Careers Service, but we know that for some people it is very effective. We have had 3 million people who use the National Careers Service, and we have had the “Get the Jump” campaign, which has been targeted at young people as well, with 1.8 million going to the landing page for that campaign. We see that those people who do use it have good satisfaction and good outcomes.

Robert Halfon: I think it is 2.6 million homepage views of the “Get the Jump” campaign. If you come to my office in the DfE—if I am allowed to say this, Chair, I hope you do come over for a drink at some point—you will see “Get the Jump” posters all over my wall.

Chair: Invitation noted.

Robert Halfon: Yes—to all the Committee. The campaign is advertised on the radio and TV, and the whole purpose of it is to get people on to the pages of the National Careers Service website.

Ian Mearns: We would welcome that. In previous iterations, the Committee used to visit Sanctuary Buildings every couple of years—sorry, twice a year.

Robert Halfon: I thought you were about to say every couple of weeks.

Q337 **Ian Mearns:** No, no. Obviously, it is lovely over there—but you know.

The Department’s written evidence states that young people aged 13 to 18 can use the National Careers Service, but the permanent secretary told the Committee recently that the service is “not meant to provide services” to school-age children. Can you clarify whether the National Careers Service is aimed at school-age pupils?

Robert Halfon: Students from 13 can use the National Careers Service, predominantly online, but the core service for schools and colleges and young people is the Careers and Enterprise Company.

Q338 **Ian Mearns:** Part of the problem that we have come across during the inquiry is that some young people do not choose to use that type of online access because they have their own social capital and personal connections through their family, friends and so on, but many other youngsters do not have those connections. It is a question of how we best meet the needs of the youngsters who do not have that social

capital and those connections.

Robert Halfon: You are absolutely right. I gave you some stats at the beginning of the sitting that showed that the Careers and Enterprise Company has more hubs in disadvantaged areas than in the least disadvantaged areas. That is very important. They are doing a lot of work with various different projects around the country to ensure that those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds can access what they are doing. We may talk about SEND later, but there is a lot of work in respect of NEET prevention and with employers. I mentioned the Loughborough visit that I did the other day; I met employers who are working with SEND students to make sure that they have a chance to get work experience.

I am absolutely clear, because it is my priority, that the CEC should be doing these things. It is already testing various work and materials to reach vulnerable young people, including those who are not in school and who have very little social capital at all, for one reason or another. Those who are NEET are one of the six priority groups for face-to-face support—this is those who are aged 18 to 24—from the National Careers Service.

Q339 **Miriam Cates:** Quite a lot of our guests have said that starting careers provision in primary schools is the best way to go. You just mentioned social capital, particularly in respect of children who may not have experience in their social world of people doing particular jobs and careers. There is currently no requirement for schools to provide careers services in primary school. Does the Department have any plans to make that a requirement? What work are you doing in that area?

Robert Halfon: I am a believer that careers advice, work encounters and, where possible, work experience should come as early as possible, from primary school all the way through the system. The evidence suggests that very young children are influenced very early on, and if you give them the right influences, they will then access the right careers when they leave school. At the moment, we have the problem that kids are more likely to say they want to be sportsmen than to do medical work or be care workers or whatever it may be.

We have instituted a primary programme delivered by the Careers and Enterprise Company—in the past it was called the Primary Futures programme—that is going to more than 2,000 schools, predominantly in coldspots, in 55 education investment areas. It will reach more than 600,000 primary school pupils from when it started in November last year—I agreed to it straight away when I came into post—right up to 2025. It is going to be very important to see how that project works. Once we have looked at how successful it is, we can look at other things we can do. As I say, that is being done by the Careers and Enterprise Company and is going to more than 2,000 schools.

Q340 **Miriam Cates:** Brilliant. Moving on to secondary, I remember when I was a teacher teaching sixth form, and students would often ask for advice about careers but I had only my own experience, which was school, university and back to school. That is the case for a lot of teachers. It is



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really difficult for teachers to know what other pathways are out there. Obviously, teachers are not wholly responsible for careers education, but they are a really useful first point for students to go to, so what training is there currently in teacher training colleges around careers, and what are the plans to improve it?

Robert Halfon: This is why the careers hubs are so important: they are training more than 2,700 careers leaders, and I think over 700-odd are going to be coming up over the coming year. A couple of hundred of those have done special SEN training courses. There is a pilot that we will be launching over the coming year with 1,000 teachers to engage them with business and work experience. That is incredibly important, because they will have the interaction with businesses and then go back to schools and be able to promote those work experience opportunities for their students.

Q341 **Ian Mearns:** On that, Rob, one thing that we have come across is that for youngsters to engage with learning, teachers need to be able to impart to the young people that they are teaching—not just in careers, but in any subject—the practical, real-world uses of what they are being taught. I am just wondering how we can influence that. You have talked about the number of teachers who are going to be trained, particularly in careers. It is a question of how we then engender them to say to their colleagues within their own workplaces, in their own schools, “One way you can help youngsters to learn is to give them, from your experience, real-world examples of how the knowledge that you are imparting can be used out there in the real world.”

Robert Halfon: I have a lot of sympathy with what you say. Obviously, curriculum is a matter for the schools Minister—

Ian Mearns: And thereby hangs a tale.

Robert Halfon: One of the eight Gatsby benchmarks is embedding careers into the curriculum. This is why what Miriam asked me is so important. The training enables career leaders, teachers and support staff in schools to bring careers into their lessons, so that when students learn about maths, they learn that this could give them a job in STEM, in engineering or whatever it may be. I mentioned my visit to a school in Cumbria, and they were doing exactly that in the way that you describe. You are absolutely right that it cannot be a silo thing. It is not that you go into a room and suddenly start learning about careers. I believe that it is organic and should be in almost every part of the work that is done in a school, and that includes primary pupils.

Q342 **Chair:** I think you recognise that there is quite a long way to go on that for many schools. Certainly, when we had our group of teenagers in front of us, the evidence that we heard from them was that most of them felt that they had not really got any careers advice from school, and some of them felt that they had then gone on to get much better careers advice and a much better range of opportunities put in front of them at college. I think that probably reflects the situation a couple of years back when those people were going through. It is good to hear all the things you have said about progress made but, particularly with that issue of



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embedding support for careers in the curriculum, it feels like there is still a lot of work to be done.

I was talking just last weekend to the Office for Environmental Protection, which has recently opened up in my constituency. They were talking about their desire to go out and talk in schools about the type of skills that will be needed for a world in which we are hitting net zero and achieving nature net gain. One thing they said was that a lot of it is maths, and a lot of it is data. It is not necessarily the sorts of green and cuddly skills you might think of when you first think about these skills. Given how fired up young people are about the environment and how excited they are, as you all know, to go and talk to MPs about the environment, taking advantage of those opportunities feels very important.

I want to come on to work experience. You have already said that you are a big fan of work experience and making that work. When we had that panel of teenagers from up and down the country talking to us, there was a common theme of concerns about the difficulty of accessing high quality work experience from outside the south-east and outside the big cities. What work is the Department currently doing to support pupils in those areas to access work experience, and how do you think that can be improved?

Robert Halfon: You are talking about, in essence, in non-urban areas and rural areas. Is that correct?

Q343 **Chair:** We had one example with a teenager from a small town in Lancashire who felt that all the opportunities were in Greater Manchester, but not coming out to the small towns.

Robert Halfon: First, I mentioned that we are focusing career hubs on coldspots and the most disadvantaged. Some of those are in the communities that you mention. I think about 624 institutions are in rural and non-urban areas—schools and colleges. We have a careers hub in 90% of those areas now, and that is important. I mentioned Cumbria, where I went on a visit only a few weeks ago to see this stuff in action. We have projects in Cornwall, Dorset and the south-west, for example.

Interestingly—I have asked the Careers and Enterprise Company this—more schools in rural careers hubs are achieving “experience of the workplace” benchmarks. There are big examples of cornerstone employers providing local leadership in rural areas. Many of you will, no doubt, be familiar with Thatchers cider—it is actually delicious—and Thatchers is working with the West of England careers hub and others in Somerset schools.

Other things can be done as well, because where there are difficulties in finding work opportunities, the CEC is working to do online events and virtual work experiences. It has involved companies like BAE or Burberry and NHS trusts, so people can learn about those businesses and do virtual work tasks. That is not ideal, but if you have both going on hand in hand, I think it will make a difference.



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Q344 Chair: We heard directly from BAE, which was very strong on the benefits. We also heard from Speakers for Schools on some of its work in this space. I had not realised before it gave us evidence how involved it was in work experience, as well as in providing speakers to go into schools. I was at the launch of its new policy paper—I do not know whether you have had the chance to read that yet—which suggested that there would be about a £75 million cost to bringing back universal work experience for students. Is that something the Department is considering?

Robert Halfon: I will say first that Speakers for Schools is an incredible organisation, and the Social Market Foundation—which did this report with it—with James Kirkup, does so much to support vocational education and skills education. It is an incredibly important think-tank in this policy area. I have a lot of sympathy with what they argued for.

Let me say two things. First, they have a price tag of £75 million, which is not cheap, especially in our current circumstances, and I mentioned that the overall careers budget is £100 million—for the NCS, the Careers and Enterprise Company, the WorldSkills UK organisation.

I also want to be clear that we should not make it too prescriptive. I absolutely want work experience, but we need to give the schools some autonomy in how they do it. Some schools may want to do it some days, and some may want to do it in a block of two weeks, but the principles of what they are saying in that report are absolutely the right ones. Do not forget: this is universal, because schools adopt the Gatsby guidelines and, of all the eight, the key Gatsby guideline for me or, rather, the two I care about the most, are work experience and work encounters. That is how I respond to your question.

Q345 Chair: That is very helpful. I think the report itself sets out some of the pitfalls of taking a cookie-cutter approach to work experience; it is important that it something that can be tailored to the local circumstances. That reflects on the previous question.

We have heard and continue to hear that there are significant administrative barriers to schools providing work experience, and that there is some confusion and misinformation about the requirements on schools. What can the Department do to help with that? What administrative requirements do schools actually have to fulfil in practice? How could you make the requirements clearer to schools?

Robert Halfon: I am very happy, working with the Schools Minister, to work with schools if they have any barriers to overcoming that, but it should be the job of the careers hubs. If there are issues, of course I will look at them. We want to make it as easy as possible. I am not a great believer in burdensome regulation—I have a phrase that I use in the Department for all kinds of regulations in my area: Operation Machete. If there are obstacles to schools and they present them to me or the Schools Minister, where we can reduce those issues I would of course be happy to do so.



Q346 Ian Mearns: I have a supplementary question. One of the problems is that it is not just an administrative barrier; it is about having the connections with companies that employ people in order to get work experience places in the first instance. The trouble is, the workforce base in different parts of the country, or even in different areas within regions, is very different. How are we going to engage more employers to be ready to accept young people to do work experience? I think we could say the same thing about employers training their own future workforce via apprenticeships. We have to drive a cultural change among many businesses. Some businesses are already engaged in this—great: I congratulate them and thank them for what they do—but far too many businesses are not engaged in this process in any way, shape or form. How do we change that? It needs a cultural shift, I believe.

Mrs Drummond: May I follow on? You have to make it easier for employers to be able to do that. They think with absolute horror about all the paperwork, the health and safety, and everything else they have to do. You have to make it easier for employers to take on work experience.

Robert Halfon: Of course, we need to get as many employers as possible, but it is not all bleak—

Ian Mearns: I understand that.

Robert Halfon: There are 419 cornerstone employers—big and small businesses up and down the country working with schools and colleges to get people work experience. We know that 70% of schools and colleges have access to business advisers. We know that four in five employers—82%—are now running in-person workplace visits, with three in five or 61% running one or two-week in-person work placements. Work experience for students has gone right up from pre-pandemic levels: it was 47% in 2018-19, and it is now 65%. To give you a value, the business advisers advising the schools in the careers hubs are worth the equivalent of £15 million in terms of business time.

Yes, we need to do more, and I will always look at things. The answer to this is, literally, careers hubs, careers hubs, careers hubs. The more we have them or the more that schools have access to them means more employers, more Gatsby benchmarks being met, more work experience, more work encounters—that is absolutely the way forward. But I completely get the point you make.

Q347 Chair: To your point about 419 cornerstone employees, it is worth bearing in mind that there are about 5 million SMEs in the country, so it is important to reach out beyond those cornerstone employers.

Robert Halfon: Those are the key blue-chip type—I don't mean blue chip as in *Financial Times* blue chip—but there are lots of small businesses working with schools.

May I go back to something you said about the rural thing? I mentioned all the things that the CEC is doing, but the local authorities also have a role. My colleague Anna—my friend, I should say—knows that Essex, for



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example, does a huge amount on careers. Essex is a mixture of towns, rural areas and a city—now, as she knows—and they produce important communication materials and work with the schools. It is not just the national Government; the local authorities have an important role. We need to look at local authorities that do a lot in this space and at those that might not do as much, and spread best practice as much as we can.

Q348 Andrew Lewer: Moving from employers to other education providers, the new provider access legislation came into force—the Baker clause and so on—aiming to increase the number of encounters that pupils have with vocational education and training providers, as well as strengthening some enforcement. How is the Department monitoring the impact of that legislation now that it is in place? Are you picking up evidence that schools are complying and getting to grips with it?

Robert Halfon: I have mentioned already how apprenticeship awareness has gone up quite a bit in schools. I want to start with that: it has almost doubled from 39% to over 80% for year 11.

I have also talked about increasing work experience and work placements, but I am absolutely with you on the Baker clause. My maiden speech in the House of Commons in 2010 was about that very subject, although it was not called the Baker clause in those days. I basically said that schools were not doing enough to encourage people to do apprenticeships and skills. It has been my mission in Parliament. We had the Baker clause initially, which I brought in in my previous incarnation in this role, but we strengthened it through this Committee by negotiating with Nadhim Zahawi, the previous Education Secretary, to have at least six encounters in key years for students.

In terms of monitoring it, I set out earlier what Ofsted does. We have what is called a ladder of intervention—those who know me know that I love ladders—and there are four rungs on that ladder. First, anyone can complain. Too often, I have met apprentices up and down the country who were not only not taught about apprenticeships in their schools but were not even allowed in their old schools to discuss their apprenticeships, including degree apprenticeships. That has to change and I would encourage any person who feels that schools are not meeting the Baker clause requirements to email provideraccess@careersandenterprise.co.uk.

On the first of the four rungs, the CEC reminds the schools about the requirements of the Baker clause and they receive targeted support and guidance; the second rung is that if things do not improve, the careers hub reviews the specific concern with the provider and the school and deploys additional support if required; step three is a Department for Education intervention, so the Department writes to the school reminding it of that duty; and step four is that the Secretary of State has intervention powers under sections 496 and 497 of the Education Act 1996 to require appropriate remedial action. So we are monitoring the schools, Ofsted has a role and I have set out the intervention powers through our ladder of intervention.



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Q349 **Andrew Lewer:** Is that monitoring in some sort of data format, in terms of compliance?

Roger Cotes: There is an Ofsted thematic review, which is happening this year. There are two aspects. On the data, we have the data through Compass+, which is monitoring the Gatsby benchmarks, which include the Baker clause. Obviously, we will be tracking compliance with that and seeing how the figures improve.

In terms of accountability, it is important to note how inspection enforces the new guidance that came into force in January. We are working closely with Ofsted on that. The thematic review will be looking at that in depth, so it will be interesting to see the evidence that comes out of that.

Chair: Sorry to interrupt, but I know Anna needs to leave very shortly and wanted to raise one question in this section before she goes.

Q350 **Anna Firth:** My question should really come after Andrew's next question, but we can put them the other way round.

I know just how passionate you are about apprenticeships, Minister; it is a passion I share. I want to talk about how we can, in practical terms, increase their availability and promote them more. I know you are aware that last week a number of Kent MPs arranged an apprenticeship fair in Maidstone. Around 1,000 year 11 and year 12 schoolchildren attended and 70 companies and organisations took part. An ex-teacher friend of mine attended and asked as many of the children as she could whether their sixth forms were attending en bloc. The answer from a number of them was that only those who had said they were not going to university were attending the apprenticeship fair.

I have three questions. First, were you invited to the fair? Secondly, have you seen other good examples of this model and, if not, should we encourage it to be rolled out? Thirdly, and most importantly, shouldn't all students be invited to such a fair before they have been asked to elect? It seems we are putting the cart before the horse if we do not give them these opportunities. How can the Government encourage schools to be more active in making such opportunities available?

Robert Halfon: That is a very, very important question. First of all, I was absolutely invited to the fair, but I was opening a brand-new hybrid electrical car factory at my local college, Harlow College—they have set it up in our advanced manufacturing centre—at the same time. Otherwise, I would have been delighted to go to that brilliant fair.

I go all over the country trying to meet apprentices and colleges—I am hopefully going to Stroud on Thursday. At my own apprentice fair, we had 60 to 70 companies and 4,000 people—not just students but would-be apprentices—came through the doors. I absolutely encourage colleagues. I have spoken to the APPG on apprenticeships about how to set up apprentice fairs. No doubt you have had one, Anna; knowing you, you have probably had five of them.

Anna Firth: I am working on it.



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Robert Halfon: I have been to your local T-level college and will try to come to your apprentice fair if I can.

I am very upset to hear that a section of students were told to go to an apprenticeship fair and some were not. That is completely wrong. By the way, the ones who were going to be university students should have been going there and learning about degree apprenticeships, for example. It is absolutely wrong.

We have to stamp out bad practice. One way we are doing that is through a thing called the apprenticeship support and knowledge network—I would prefer it to be called the apprenticeship, skills and knowledge network—on which we are spending £3.2 million. That is going to 2,000 schools, reaching more than 680,000 pupils. The whole purpose of that is to spread the good word about apprenticeships, spread best practice and explain it to the students and teachers. Since 2016, that programme has worked with 2 million students and 4,500 schools. The more we have that success, the better.

If schools are doing what you described, please write to me. I mentioned the careers enterprise email address earlier—they should be telling the Careers and Enterprise Company as well, and the careers hubs, to stop this going on.

Q351 **Anna Firth:** To give you the full picture, on the other side of the coin the employers and organisations reported that there was much more interest from young people looking at level 7 degree apprenticeship, which is a good thing. But of course we need level 2 and level 3 apprenticeships for the UK economy to be successful.

Robert Halfon: Some 70% of the apprenticeships starts over the past year were in level 2 and level 3.

Q352 **Anna Firth:** Is there anything more you feel you need to do in terms of level 2 and level 3 apprenticeships?

Robert Halfon: There is always more that we need to do. I want everyone to do all levels of apprenticeships, but if they do level 2 and level 3, my dream is that they always progress and go higher and higher, so that we are supporting progression.

Q353 **Chair:** Progression is excellent and we all want to see it, but can I ask one thing before I hand back to Andrew? We had recent reports in *The Independent* newspaper, I think, of companies using their apprenticeship levy to support MBAs for senior executives. Given the need to get young people into work and build the ladder of opportunity, do you think that is the right use of the apprenticeship levy?

Robert Halfon: There are some myths and facts. I strongly recommend a very good blog on the Department for Education website—I have shared it on my Twitter feed. First of all, we got rid of the MBA element to this in 2021. Secondly, the leadership apprenticeship thing accounts for less than 1% of all apprenticeship starts. You have more than 600 apprenticeship standards in all walks of life. I am absolutely passionate about degree



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apprenticeships. I went to Manchester to see degree apprenticeships in policing. We have degree apprenticeships for doctors now and in nursing. We have degree apprenticeships in engineering.

I was asked to go back to my old university, Exeter, to make a speech when they were having the graduation for their degree apprentices, who were in all walks of life. Some leadership and management courses—level 7—are important. If we are telling people they are going to have a levy, we have to give them some autonomy as to how they spend that levy, but of course there mustn't be any gaming of the system. That is why we took the MBA element out of this.

Q354 Chair: You would want to see the focus, then, on opportunities for progression rather than necessarily for some of the most senior people in the businesses.

Robert Halfon: I want to see as many apprenticeships as possible. If apprenticeships are quality apprenticeships and needed—some leadership apprenticeships are needed—they must be a good thing. But of course, if people are starting off at level 2 or 3, I always encourage them; we are doing all we can, as a Department, to encourage people to work their way up that ladder, the skills ladder of opportunity.

Q355 Mrs Drummond: Cranfield University still do MBA apprenticeships.

Robert Halfon: But they fund the MBA part themselves. If you add the MBA bit, that is not funded by the DfE or by the levy.

Mrs Drummond: Well, I had an issue recently and they said that was what they used it for.

Robert Halfon: All I can tell you is that the MBA element was taken out in 2021. If they want to do the MBA element, they fund that themselves—the businesses.

Mrs Drummond: They actually advertise level 7 apprenticeships on their website.

Robert Halfon: There's nothing wrong with that; I don't have a problem with level 7 apprenticeships. There was a problem. We dealt with it in 2021.

Chair: Andrew, apologies for interrupting you.

Andrew Lewer: That's fine.

Robert Halfon: Sorry.

Andrew Lewer: It's okay.

Robert Halfon: This happened last time I was here, Andrew. You were asking questions and then another colleague came in, so I apologise.

Andrew Lewer: As I think I said before, I am on two Select Committees and I would much rather that they flow around and are genuine questions



rather than people reading from a script, so as long as you're happy with a bit of knocking around, I am as well.

Robert Halfon: Always happy.

Q356 **Andrew Lewer:** That point about progression is important, but obviously, at the other end, there are some concerns about BTECs, in terms of providing enough ability for people to get going with all this—to start from a point from which progression can happen. I am sure we will talk about that some more.

However, I really want to go back to the issue of ensuring that vocational training and providers and colleges get access, and to the financial incentives for schools to hold on to people in the sixth form when other routes may be more suitable for them; indeed, it may also be more suitable for the people staying in the school for IB or A-level to have other people going to more suitable places. Is there any way the current financial incentive for school sixth forms to hold on to people who may be better placed elsewhere could be changed or ameliorated?

Robert Halfon: First of all, on the BTECs thing, we talked about it last time, with your question, but do you want me to answer it specifically or do you want to refer back to what I said?

Andrew Lewer: I want to highlight that there is still an issue. It is something that we do need to talk about in more detail, but it's not today's focus.

Robert Halfon: I am very happy to write to you on the BTEC programme. I could talk to you now; I am just thinking of time.

On the financial incentives issue, I don't think it is just about financial incentives; I think it is about access. That is why the strengthened Baker clause and the level of intervention that I set out to you are really important in encouraging people to do apprenticeship take-up. We know that, for example—I think I gave you some figures—there has been a big movement towards apprenticeship awareness; 61%, I think, of students have had encounters with independent providers of skills as well. Those are the things that will change this. It will be the interventions. If people have genuine work experience, work encounters, access to—the Gatsby benchmarks are basically the things that will change this. Are they going to have access to proper FE organisations and knowledge about university technical schools, for example? I think those are the things that will make a difference.

Andrew Lewer: Thank you.

Q357 **Chair:** Just on that point, I remember that many years ago when I was working as Nicky Morgan's PPS, we introduced changes to the destination data for schools, to try to incentivise looking at a wider array of opportunities. Where has that got to now? It doesn't necessarily seem to have led to the cultural change that was anticipated at the time. Where are we with destination data? How much weight is put on employment



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opportunities or people going into FE, apprenticeships and other routes?

Roger Cotes: It is interesting. You talk about financial incentives—clearly, that is one side of it and there will always be an incentive for schools that want sustainable sixth forms, which we have to manage—but this is also about quality and accountability, and Ofsted looking at the outcomes data for schools. So yes, the data that you described will be one thing that Ofsted will look at when it inspects. That is important where schools have a high drop-out rate, for example, because students are perhaps on the wrong programmes. That can clearly be an indication that they are not getting it right in terms of the choices that young people are making at 16. You are right to focus on that data and the outcomes. We need to make sure, through Ofsted inspections, that schools are held to account on that.

Q358 **Chair:** It would be interesting to know what weighting is given to different outcomes in that respect and to what extent a school is still thinking that it is marked according to sending people to university, rather than on other outcomes—if that has changed.

Robert Halfon: I am happy to look at the data and write to you, but actually, I think this is much more a cultural thing, because the whole system has been geared up—although I am not making a party political point—from the Blair years, when it was “University, university, university”. I have this mantra that it should have been “Skills, skills, skills”. Everyone was pushed to university. It saddens me when I go to schools that—although it is a wonderful thing that you see all the pictures and names of the kids who have gone to university—you very rarely see kids who have done apprenticeships. That has to change. You can have all the destination dates you like until you change the culture. One thing that might change the culture is that we are looking at teaching degree apprenticeships. We already have postgraduate teaching degree apprenticeships and we have support staff or learning assistant teaching apprenticeships. If that does come through, it will have a big culture change in terms of encouraging students to do skills.

Chair: That is very interesting. We might turn our thoughts to that as and when we look at the issue of teacher retention and recruitment, which I think will be of interest to the Committee over the coming months.

Q359 **Miriam Cates:** In the 2017 careers strategy, the Department provided funding to the CEC through the disadvantage fund to support careers and programmes for disadvantaged groups of young people. Has there been any assessment of the impact of that, and are there any plans to put new funding in place?

Robert Halfon: The funding that exists is the £30 million that I have set out. Perhaps I can set out to you what the Department is doing on disadvantage, because a lot is going on—let me just check my notes on this.

For example, the CEC has set up what I call an ICI—that is, again, a bit of jargon, but it is an inclusion practice improvement network—for schools to develop SEND teachers, for professional development and to support



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SEND pupils. We also have the provision for older children and targets are inclusive of disadvantage. I mentioned the 78% figure of alternative provision in terms of careers hubs, and 76% of SEND institutions are in careers hubs.

The CEC works very closely with employers to encourage inclusion for disadvantaged groups. We have trained over 290 enterprise co-ordinators to attend SEND foundation classes. There is also the “My Skills My Future” programme, which is a collaboration between careers hubs, employers, providers and voluntary organisations to support career leaders to prepare young people for SEND.

The National Careers Service also does a lot of work with SEND pupils—special mentoring, one-to-one support, working with them on digital content and making sure that subcontractors who work with the NCS work very closely with the customers who need it most.

Miriam Cates: Thank you.

Q360 **Mrs Drummond:** Going on to SEND now, a 2021 DfE report found that young people with a statement of SEN were more than twice as likely as those without to say that they had received no careers guidance in the past 12 months. One of the things that may help is training of SENCOS, so I was wondering whether the Department has any views on how you're going to train SENCOS to help pupils.

Robert Halfon: I mentioned some of the work that the NCS is doing. The CEC works with special schools across the country. It has developed SEND awareness training for enterprise co-ordinators and enterprise advisers and provides SEN careers training to SENCOS in schools and to careers leaders. We make sure that careers leaders work with the SEND co-ordinators, the inclusion teams and the careers advisers to put in place personalised support as well. We have a strategic partner called Talentino! and a SEND advisory group with representatives from Mencap, Leonard Cheshire Disability UK and heads of schools specialising in supporting pupils with SEN. I could also mention projects in Leicester, such as the Leicestershire careers hub, which does a special amount of work.

There is a programme called Unbox Your Future, a hybrid workplace experience for SEND young people spread over multiple weeks. I'm very happy to send you details of the programme rather than just going on, but there is a lot happening. I mentioned Loughborough last week, where one of the cornerstone employers was working with the CEC to make sure that they employed people with special educational needs.

Q361 **Mrs Drummond:** It is also about providing a wide range of employers. For instance, young people with Down's syndrome are very much put in a category of only being able to do this employment and this employment. It would be great if SENCOS could look more widely at what their pupils could do as opposed to putting them in boxes, basically.



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Robert Halfon: Absolutely. One of the gaps we benchmark is tailored career support. That is very important. To me, that is what that means. It is not the only thing, of course, but that is—

Mrs Drummond: It is about expectations, I think.

Robert Halfon: We are doing a lot of work with the CEC in order to ensure that. I have set out some of the things that are happening to try and make sure the things you want to happen are happening.

Q362 **Mrs Drummond:** Looked-after children are another category. I think you launched a £3 million pilot extending the pupil premium to provide career support. How has that gone?

Robert Halfon: The same work that goes on with SEND pupils is happening with looked-after children. By the way, if I could just mention one thing, Chair, I am very proud of something we got agreed by the Secretary of State. We did a report, as you know, on the education and skills of children in care, and there was an issue about the bursary if they wanted apprenticeships. We have now increased that from £1,000 to £3,000. That was one of the first things I was able to do with the Secretary of State and to get Treasury agreement for, so they will get a £3,000 bursary. Do not forget that the employer and the provider get £1,000 each as well. We are talking about £5,000 to encourage care leavers to do apprenticeships. What I want—I have talked with the Children's Minister about this—is a lot more work, some of which is happening with the careers hub and the co-ordinators and so on, and for us to work very closely with the virtual heads and the personal advisers to make sure that those young people have a career. Some of it is going on, but to me that has to be a priority because the virtual heads and personal advisers are closest to that student.

Q363 **Mrs Drummond:** Is that £5,000 per year, or just at the beginning, up front?

Robert Halfon: It is just at the beginning. It is for their whole apprenticeship. They used to get only £1,000 but we have just announced—literally two or three weeks ago during National Apprenticeship Week—that they will now get £3,000. That is a bursary to do their apprenticeship and the apprenticeship will be for a minimum of 12 months.

Q364 **Chair:** It is a very good announcement. I was talking to John Lewis a few weeks before that and they were saying they want to do this big programme. They are obviously running a big campaign on supporting people from care and they were saying that their costs were roughly three times what they were getting. When you made the announcement that the bursary was trebling, it seemed to tick a big box.

I think there is one category of children affected by care that it would be worth looking at for additional support in this space, and that is young carers. I have come across a lot of young carers in my constituency. These people are eminently employable, because they show great



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maturity in taking on great responsibility at an early age, but of course because of their caring responsibilities they have very few opportunities to look at the world of work and engage in extracurricular activities. Targeted support of the sort you have been able to provide elsewhere would be very useful in this space.

Robert Halfon: Will you allow me to take that back? I am guessing that this point might be in your report; it is very important.

Chair: That would be welcome. Thank you.

Q365 **Ian Mearns:** We have heard that children outside mainstream education have been one of the biggest casualties of the abolition of Connexions. When you were Chair of this Committee, Rob, you were particularly concerned about the number of youngsters being taken off schools' rolls; some of them were then home educated—that is a euphemism in some cases. Thirteen years on from the abolition of Connexions, it seems that not much has been done to close the gap. When will it be addressed? The Department has told us it is helping the Careers and Enterprise Company on how to support careers provision for home educated children. Can you provide any updates on that work?

Robert Halfon: Very gently, Ian, I would say that Connexions had a mixed record. Alan Milburn of your parish expressed some reservations in 2009—

Ian Mearns: Wasn't he MP for Darlington? That's miles away!

Robert Halfon: "Your parish" as in your party. He expressed some reservations about Connexions; I have a quote somewhere. Yes, the Committee has been very concerned about home education.

Q366 **Chair:** It continues to be concerned about it, it is fair to say.

Robert Halfon: I think you are rightly looking at absent children in your inquiry. We are working with Youth Employment UK to develop careers resources for use with young people who are electively home educated, such as those in the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities and carers. Local authorities and community groups can support those young people and work with them. The resources will be translated for use by speakers of other languages.

More than 16% of participants in the CEC transition fund belong to a minority ethnic group. We have run projects in London—for example, working with BME, we have had incredible success rates, supporting 62 young black men who have been excluded from mainstream schools. We have interventions delivered through the careers hubs that are targeted at those with free school meals who are at the point of transition. I mentioned the projects supported by JP Morgan. We have projects in Luton mentoring the most disadvantaged; they had a 90% success rate in getting those people into work. I mentioned pathfinder projects in Walsall and other places. There is a lot going on to try to reach the hardest-to-reach groups.

Q367 **Ian Mearns:** It is fine that you mention areas of good practice, Rob, but



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the question is: how do we expand that and have it across the whole country? I am afraid to say that an anecdote about an area that has good practice does not cut the mustard when it comes to the universal service.

Robert Halfon: You are 100% right, Ian. I give the anecdotes because these are pilot projects, so that we can see what works; they are not just stories about a nice little project. I have quoted this a number of times, but we are concentrating careers hubs in the areas of most disadvantage. Everything that I have asked the CEC to do since I have been in post has been focused on the most disadvantaged, and on getting them on the careers ladder, but we have to do the pilots to work out what is succeeding and what is not.

Then, of course, there is the separate National Careers Service work, which is one to one. It is not just online; there is face-to-face support. It works with those not in employment or—I hate the word NEET; I try as much as possible to say, “not in employment, education or training.” There is that work going on, too.

Q368 **Ian Mearns:** To a large extent, I accept what you think about Connexions. I remember it being established following the “Bridging the Gap” report. It was meant to be an all-encompassing, comprehensive service for young people, but it was established with the careers service budget, plus about 10%, so I would say the resource available did not match the ambition at the outset. That was one of the biggest problems from my perspective—a lesson from history, as it were.

Last week the Department published its response to the consultation on the lifelong loan entitlement, which sets out a number of measures to be rolled out from 2025. When do you expect the full roll-out to be completed for beginning in 2025?

Robert Halfon: First of all, I was very pleased to speak to the Committee informally about the LLE a couple of weeks ago, and if you will allow me—as we are in public—I would like to explain it. I am very excited about it. I think it will be transformative, because it will allow any adult to take up a loan equivalent to four years-worth of learning—up to £37,000—to do either a long course, or a short course or module of a course. But more importantly, they will be able to do it at a time of their choosing. If you liken it to a train journey, the end destination is a full qualification, but can get on and off the train at various stations at a time of your choosing.

That will help disadvantaged groups, because often a single parent, for example, might not be able to do a three-year course at a university. You might, let’s say, want to be a social worker, and you might just want to do one module for the time being, in psychology or whatever the components of the course are.

In answer to your specific question about the timetable, we plan to bring in levels 4 and 5 from 2025, predominantly in HTQs and employer-led qualifications in those areas, because that is where we have the biggest weak points—just 10% of the country have level 4 and level 5, and just



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4% under 25. Then, once that is in operation over the next couple of years, we will bring through level 6, but we have to get it right.

Again, I say this very gently, but I remember Gordon Brown trying to do something on adult learning, which in my view was a very interesting and thoughtful policy; the problem was that it happened too quickly and there were lots of problems that resulted. So we have to phase it in and get it right. We also absolutely want to encourage as many people as we can to do a level 4 and 5 and to get the jobs that employers want. By the way, these level 4s and 5s are, as I say, employer-led qualifications.

Q369 Ian Mearns: I agree that it's a really interesting concept, and also about this idea of being on a stop-start journey, because unfortunately, for some people, life gets in the way occasionally. So one of the crucial questions is: how long can you bank your previous learning for, before you need to move on? That is important, because elements of previous learning that you've banked might well become time-expired in some people's view if they are not capitalised on quickly enough.

Robert Halfon: You can do it whenever you want, but it is equivalent to four years-worth of learning, so if you have done a degree for three years, let's say, then you'll only have one year. I did a degree and I didn't have to take out a loan—I was one of the lucky ones—but if I wanted to do some of this, I'd only be allowed a year.

Q370 Ian Mearns: If it is up to four years' learning, will there be a maximum period over which that four years' learning has to be done?

Robert Halfon: You can access a loan up to the age of 60, but you'll be able to do this whenever you want. This is the beauty of it: you do your psychology—

Ian Mearns: Shucks. Too late for me, in that case.

Robert Halfon: Or let's say you want to do construction: you do a bricklaying course now; in five years you might decide to do electricals, or whatever it might be. That's the beauty of it.

Ian Mearns: I've got an ambition to be a hod carrier in a future life.

Robert Halfon: The other important thing is that you will be able to move from institution to institution, subject to the institution agreeing. That is the wonderful thing. So you might do a course at Harlow College; you might then go to Queen Mary University in London, or whatever it might be.

Q371 Ian Mearns: Have you been able to gauge or estimate how many people might have the appetite to take up a loan in the future? Have you done market research on it?

Robert Halfon: It's hard to know, because people's behaviour is going to completely change, because the Bill—the Public Bill Committee is next week—basically changes an academic year into a course year. What that means is that instead of having four starting points, you have 12 starting points, at the beginning of each month. I think in the beginning there will



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be a few thousand and that it will grow, but it is very hard to predict the numbers at this point, because we don't know how behaviour will change.

Q372 Ian Mearns: On Friday, I was with a local provider who are in my constituency but provide services beyond my constituency. They provide services such as careers advice and guidance for adults and some young people in the education system, but also support for businesses. One of the problems they outlined to me was that some of the strands of work they are currently doing are funded by the European social fund, but that time-expires at the end of this year, yet the shared prosperity fund, which is meant to replace some elements of that, will probably not kick in till three months after that. So there is a continuity problem, but they also think there is a funding-gap problem in terms of what is available to them now, what they are currently spending and what might be available even after that gap of three months.

Robert Halfon: If you write to me, I would be very happy to get BIS involvement in this or whatever—

Chair: Or whatever it's called this week.

Robert Halfon: I didn't say that—I should remember the name, which I've forgotten, but it's the new business Department led by Kemi Badenoch. If you write to me, Ian, I will make sure we get a response on that.

Chair: That would be helpful; it is an important issue.

Thank you, Minister, for your evidence. I also want to say thank you for republishing the response to the LLE consultation ahead of Committee stage of the Bill—which I asked you if you could do in the Chamber and which I am very grateful that you have been able to do.

Robert Halfon: I would not dare defy the Chair of the Education Committee, especially as you made such a big thing of it in the Commons and demanded it, which got the message out there.

Chair: I am very grateful, and I am grateful for your evidence today.