

Education Committee

Oral evidence: [Persistent absence and support for disadvantaged pupils](#), HC 970

Tuesday 6 June 2023

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[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Robin Walker (Chair); Caroline Ansell; Miriam Cates; Mrs Flick Drummond; Anna Firth; Kim Johnson; Andrew Lewer; Ian Mearns; Mohammad Yasin.

Questions 116 to 186

Witnesses

[I](#): David Holmes CBE, CEO, Family Action; Declan Barker, HAF Manager, Nottingham City Council; and Leigh Middleton, CEO, National Youth Agency.

[II](#): Nathan Persaud, Programmes Director for England, School of Hard Knocks; and Jonathan Pauley, 11+ Education Manager, City Inspires.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: David Holmes, Declan Barker and Leigh Middleton.

Q116 Chair: Welcome to the third session of the Committee's inquiry into persistent absence and support for disadvantaged pupils. We will be hearing evidence today from two panels, in the first of which I am pleased to welcome David Holmes CBE, CEO of Family Action; Declan Barker, the holiday activities and food manager for Nottingham City Council; and Leigh Middleton, CEO of the National Youth Agency. You are all very welcome.

David, could I start by asking you to give a brief overview of the national school breakfast club programme?

David Holmes: Good morning, everyone. I am very pleased to be here. The national school breakfast club programme, funded by the Department for Education, has been in operation since 2018. It is a national programme that currently reaches up to 2,700 schools in England. The whole purpose of the programme is to provide a free nutritious breakfast to children living in areas of income deprivation. Currently, there are more than 2,500 schools on the programme. The DfE recently extended the programme to 2,700, so we are recruiting those additional schools now.

The programme has existed in different phases over the last five and a half years. Originally, there were 1,800 schools on the programme. The focus of the initial phase was sustainable breakfast provision. Then, of course, we came into the pandemic and the programme transformed into one that was providing a new form of breakfast provision, often using take-home packs for children who were unable to have breakfast at school. Since July 2021, the programme has been focusing on a larger group of schools, but is requiring schools to pay 25% of the price of the food that is supplied.

I have been responsible for the programme since it began in 2018, and we have conducted lots of surveys of schools to see the impact. What has been really interesting is how positive schools have been about the programme, but also how wide the impact is. I know that this Committee is particularly interested in the impact on attendance, and I would certainly say that a lot of schools do talk positively about the impact of attendance, but we can also see the difference it makes to children's wellbeing, to their ability to concentrate and to improving behaviour in class, but particularly to readiness to start the school day. The impacts of the programme are wide-ranging.

Q117 Chair: Thank you. I absolutely recognise that all the programmes we are hearing from today will have benefits beyond attendance, but what we are keen to establish is what the evidence base is for what works for attendance and for tackling both persistent and severe absence. Can you talk us through what the evidence is so far on the impact that breakfast



clubs can have on those issues?

David Holmes: Yes. I want to talk about punctuality as well, because that is certainly linked. In the first phase of the programme, we conducted an exercise with schools to look at the number of children with late marks in the term before the programme began and then in the term after the programme had begun. We saw a 28% reduction in late marks once the national school breakfast programme was present in schools.

In phase one of the programme we did not specifically look at the impact on attendance, but we are doing so in this phase of the programme. We already have some data on attendance; it is currently with DfE analysts for checking, but we will be able to provide that data to the Committee in time for your final report, which I understand will be after the summer. What I can say is that a majority of schools are reporting at least some impact on improving attendance, but it is really important not to overstate that and to recognise that there is a spectrum of attendance. We are looking at improving the punctuality of children, where providing a school breakfast provision may encourage those children to get into school on time or may encourage their families to ensure the children get to school on time. The impact of breakfast clubs on persistent and severe attendance merits further analysis.

I would be really keen for us to segment different groups of children who may have poor attendance at school and to take a really intelligent approach to that. School breakfast can make a difference there. For example, if a child has anxiety issues, working really proactively with that child and giving them a role in a school breakfast club may encourage them to come in. For children who are worried about lining up with a big group of children and entering school with them, going straight into a breakfast club may be an easier start to the day. For children with special educational needs and disabilities who find it difficult to make that transition from home into the classroom, a breakfast club may be a softer start to the day. There are a range of different situations where sensitively provided breakfast provision could at least have some impact on attendance.

Q118 **Chair:** That absolutely makes sense. We would certainly be grateful if, when that evidence has been through the DfE analysts, you could share it with the Committee; that would be very useful. As you say, any segmentation that looks at persistent and severe absence will be particularly useful for the purposes of this Committee. We know in general, and from the published figures from the Government, that persistent absence has increased very substantially since the pandemic. That is obviously a concern. Is that trend reflected in the schools for which you provide breakfast clubs, or are you seeing some of them buck that trend?

David Holmes: The impacts of the pandemic are wide-ranging across all aspects of life. What we are seeing is a recognition that a really well-planned breakfast club has a role to play in bringing the whole school



community together and in helping to provide some answers about not only the lingering effects of the pandemic, but the current cost of living crisis that the country faces. We often talk about breakfast clubs as if there were just one type of breakfast club—often people have an idea in their mind of children sitting down around a table in a school hall or something and everybody eating together. One of the beauties of the national school breakfast programme is that we have lots of different models of breakfast provision. We do have that traditional form, but also a breakfast that is provided literally as children come into the playground, or a grab-and-go bar, which is popular in secondary schools. Providing breakfast actually in the school classroom is something we are doing as well. Often schools are providing multiple models of breakfast, depending on what they need. The learning from the national school breakfast programme is that having this bespoke tailored approach that reflects what the school needs makes the schools really enthusiastic about the provision and ensures that it has the intended impact.

Q119 Chair: Obviously breakfast clubs are one among many interventions to support children. You set out some of the circumstances in which they may need support—anxiety, special educational needs and so on. Have you done any analysis of which other measures make a difference alongside breakfast clubs, in terms of the evidence that you have looked at? Have you looked at what is working where there are multiple interventions going on and what the most effective combinations are?

David Holmes: Family Action, the charity of which I am the chief executive, provides the national school breakfast programme, but our core work is family support. We have a very broad experience of working with families experiencing disadvantage in lots of different circumstances. For example, we have specialist young carer services, services working with special educational needs and disability, and lots of family support work. This is not in relation to the national school breakfast programme, but more broadly.

For example, in Cumbria, where we have large family support services, we have now been commissioned to provide a pilot service focusing on school attendance and improving school attendance, which is really important because it recognises that the reasons why a child may not be in school need careful interrogation. They may be down to lots of situations—mental health, wellbeing, being a young carer, special educational needs or disability—and it is specialist work to understand those circumstances and then come up with a plan that is going to work for that child and their family. Having that broad experience and recognising that is important, and I am sure it will go beyond the knowledge base that is in the school to involve other agencies as well.

Chair: Thank you. I will bring in Kim.

Q120 Kim Johnson: Thank you, Chair, and good morning to the panel. David, I just wanted to pick up on the point you raised about schools contributing 25% towards the programme. Given that most of the schools



are operating in disadvantaged areas, and we know that there has been massive inflation of food prices in the last couple of months, I just want to know how schools will survive with that massive food inflation. Also, with the programme due to end in 2024, what are you doing to try to ensure the Government continue with this programme?

David Holmes: Thank you for asking those questions. On the first point, you are absolutely right: food price inflation is much higher than the standard rate of inflation that is reported. That schools have continued to be part of the programme and wanted to be part of it is a mark of how much they value it. It is good to see that even in this high inflation context, we are still able to recruit additional schools to the programme and that the fact that schools have to pay a proportion of the food costs is not deterring them from remaining on it.

The 75% subsidy of food costs is a considerable benefit to the schools, but you are absolutely right that at the moment the programme is scheduled to end in July 2024. It is currently feeding hundreds of thousands of children every school day, and I wonder what is going to happen to those children in terms of receiving a healthy breakfast if the school ends it. We want the Government to continue this programme, but we also want there to be cross-party recognition that providing a healthy, nutritious breakfast without fear or stigma to children who need it is vital because, as I was saying at the very beginning, the knock-on benefits in terms of the wide range of outcomes that are achieved are very good value for public money.

Q121 **Miriam Cates:** I will move on to the eligibility criteria for the national school breakfast club programme. At the moment, as I understand it, for a school to be eligible, 40% of the children must be from low-income backgrounds, but all the children are then eligible for the breakfast if it is provided. Leigh, if I could start with you: do you think that those are good criteria? Would you expand it to more schools? Would you have a mixed economy in terms of paying/not paying? How would you change it if you could?

Leigh Middleton: The obvious answer is to remove all the barriers to access, so it is as cheap as it can be and requires less measures. I would start with the 1.7 million young people who live in poverty but do not meet the free school meals threshold and so do not get counted in the calculations for who should have access to these support services, because that is the group who are struggling, who do not get the help and who are more likely to be missing.

Q122 **Miriam Cates:** There is a clear benefit when the breakfast club is in operation to it being universal, is there not, because it removes stigma and it makes it easier to operate? If you were going to continue the universal model, it would obviously become unaffordable very quickly if you expanded it to all schools, so are you suggesting that the bar for starting a club reduces or that you would have different criteria in different schools?



Leigh Middleton: I would reduce that bar—scrap it entirely, if you could. I am an expert in youth services: when I was running my own youth service we scrapped subs—the quid it used to cost you to come to youth club—and the minute we scrapped that, we doubled the number of young people coming. Even £1 on Tuesday night was a barrier. Schools will have a list of children they are worried about, who they really want through this provision, but they have friends—you need to make sure their peers also get to participate, because that is what brings the one you really want to engage. If you remove the limits and the thresholds as much as you can, you are more likely to get a larger group through, but you are also likely to get the ones you really want to focus on through quicker.

Q123 **Miriam Cates:** David, on Kim's point about the schools paying 25%, is it not also the case that the schools that are eligible for this programme are funded more generously than other schools simply because of the deprivation contingent of funding, and that they are therefore more likely to be able to afford that at present? I am not saying that there are not pressures on their budgets; of course there are. If you did roll it out to other schools, potentially with a less deprived background, there would be some significant funding challenges, would there not?

David Holmes: Yes, there would. School budgets have lots of pressures. What is important—I say this in the sixth year of providing the national school breakfast programme—is that schools are prioritising contributing to the programme. They clearly think it is worth spending money on.

In such a challenging public spending environment, there is a choice: do you make this offer available to everyone, or do you make it available where it is going to have the most impact? If I had to choose, I would say make it available where it is going to have the most impact.

For example, when we talk about free breakfast provision but only for primary-aged children, I worry, because young people over the age of 10 in secondary school get hungry too. I worry if there is conflation of providing breakfast provision with childcare, because it is different; we know that most childcare provision is relatively small. We need to be really clear about the policy objective here, which is reducing morning hunger and making sure that there is a more level playing field so that children going to school have the same chance to succeed—that their chances are not affected by the fact that they are hungry. If that requires some prioritisation, I think that is all right.

Q124 **Anna Firth:** Can we move on to the issue of holiday clubs and the holiday activities and food programme? Declan, can you give a brief overview of how the programme works in Nottingham?

Declan Barker: Good morning, all, and thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak today. I am really happy to be here to talk about the HAF programme. In Nottingham city, we have close to 18,000 young people in receipt of benefits-related free school meals.



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In terms of how we work the programme, we have two lead organisations that deliver big universal provisions on site: Nottingham Forest Community Trust and Trent Bridge Community Trust. They work collaboratively with schools to base provision at the school sites. We see that as a key marker and a key success, because we are bringing community provision into a safe, secure site where the children know their schools. What we want to do is associate schools with really happy experiences. the HAF programme provides really enriching, highly stimulating experiences, inclusive of enrichment in sports.

The model of the programme is four days by four hours. In essence, that means that on arrival, children in Nottingham City will usually receive a breakfast—or if it is later on in the day, they will receive their lunch on arrival and snacks throughout the day. It is then very full-on in terms of activities and provision. It is very fast-paced, and the feedback that we have had from our evaluations is that the children really like the variation of trying lots of new activities. While our key outcome is always to try to feed as many young people in receipt of benefits-related free school meals as possible, there have been a lot of further outcomes in the programme: new activities, new friendship groups and engagement in wider holistic community activities, including mentoring, which has really helped young people to have better relationships with Nottinghamshire police, which we are really pleased with.

In the programme, while the format is to engage as many children in receipt of free school meals as possible, there is a 15% allowance within which you can target and engage children who are not in receipt of benefits-related free school meals. Each local authority has its own parameters around which young people meet those criteria. It could be looked-after children, or there may be children who have additional needs a safeguarding risk, so they really need the safe space that the provision offers—that four hours of real high-quality activity and safe space.

We ourselves also fund schools and SEND-specific programmes. Again, they are usually delivered on school sites due to difficulties of SEND children accessing community activities and the barriers to them accessing and continuing to access that.

Q125 Anna Firth: What you have just been saying about SEND-specific programmes and children with additional needs is very interesting. One of the things that has been raised to me by parents who come to see me in Southend is that there is not the same provision within that cohort for deaf children, for example, and children with learning difficulties. In Nottingham, within that 18,000 cohort, what proportion of children are you able to help with additional needs or SEND-specific requirements?

Declan Barker: At the start of this year we looked really hard at how we could increase our capacity to engage SEND children. It is quite clear that the cost per head for the SEND children is really high in comparison to a universal provision, but that should never be a barrier to a young person engaging in provision. What we have done is look back and say, “Instead



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of funding loads more SEND-specific provision, how can we bring them into a universal provision and make adaptations to that?" We have given our providers the strengths and resources through additional staff with specialist skills to be able to engage those children in a universal provision, which helps to reintegrate those children into their local community.

Q126 **Anna Firth:** How has that worked?

Declan Barker: It has worked really well for us. We have a centralised booking system that is universal: every child in the city on free school meals and identified as SEND gets access to that system. On booking, if it is showing that the young person has SEND, our providers do a discovery call to speak to the young person and understand more about what their needs are and how they can meet their needs. The provider and I will then have a two-way conversation to understand what provisions we, as a local authority, can put in place to make their universal provision fit for purpose for that young person. If it is not suitable, it is for us to work with our other holistic providers around SEND-specific provisions to make sure they are able to get on that provision, whether it be transport or—if they have autism, for example—perhaps a site visit in advance of provision to make sure anxieties are eased and that they understand where the fire exits are or what the site and staff look like.

Q127 **Anna Firth:** Of those who contact you with SEND difficulties, what proportion are you able to accommodate in Nottingham?

Declan Barker: I do not have that statistic to hand, but we are increasing year in, year out in terms of how many we engage.

Q128 **Anna Firth:** Thank you very much. A final question: of the 18,000 who are eligible to attend, what proportion actually do attend?

Declan Barker: During shorter holiday periods it tends to be a small proportion, but over the summer the number is much higher. We tend to find that children want to be outside more, the school sites have grounds that can better accommodate much greater numbers, and we have a greater uptake of providers who want to provide sporting activities.

Q129 **Chair:** What sort of proportion is it over the summer at the peak?

Declan Barker: Around 6,000.

Q130 **Caroline Ansell:** I should probably confess to being a passionate advocate of the holiday activities and food programme; I think it has incredible potential and enormous wider benefits, but we are just focusing on attendance today. One thing I am very aware of is the budget implications. It has to show value for money because there is a significant opportunity cost to every £1 spent. Nationally, £200 million is dedicated to this programme annually, and even in my own county it is £1.6 million across the 80 settings. In terms of the evidence base, and



David's earlier point around making a case for continued and further investment, what evidence are you aware of that the HAF programme positively impacts attendance?

Declan Barker: Each holiday period, the HAF team and I go out and conduct quality assurance visits. During Easter, I was at a large multi-academy trust. On the first day I attended, I was really fortunate, because they had a young person who was persistently absent from school but had already attended HAF on day one. The schools are coming back to us with that feedback. As part of the evidence we submitted, our schools that host provision with community partners coming in and providing activities are saying that the structure and consistency of activity over the holiday periods is showing increasing benefits—first for families and children's perception of school, and secondly for attendance rates when they return after the holiday period. That is why we are seeing an increased number of schools willing to host and open their gates during the school holidays. In year one, it was really difficult to get schools to understand what the programme was and to encourage staff to come in during the holidays, open the gates and allow community providers to come in and provide activities.

Q131 **Caroline Ansell:** That sounds very encouraging and promising, but in terms of data gathering, what you are describing is a little anecdotal in nature. What are you requiring of your schools to provide by way of substantive data?

Declan Barker: In terms of the HAF outcomes, the data is not around persistent absence, and it does not require that, but these are the wider outcomes that they are feeding back to us. It is something that we are going to look to measure more closely going forward.

Q132 **Caroline Ansell:** At this point, do you have any initial thoughts about how you are going to measure?

Declan Barker: Around the school attendance rates, really, to see what the drop-off is. HAF is delivered at the end of a full term, so we would be looking to see whether there was a direct correlation around a spike or a decrease in attendance when HAF had not been delivered over a half-term on school sites. That is the way we will look to measure that.

Q133 **Caroline Ansell:** Will you focus on the September return? Are you looking at particular ages and stages? Are you looking at different cohort groups? How will you do that? I am just very aware that the last funded year is 2024, so there is actually already quite a limited runway to establish this case. Are you aware of similar data gathering research proposals in other authorities?

Declan Barker: I am not aware of any other local authority that is looking at this specifically.

Q134 **Caroline Ansell:** Thank you, that is very helpful. Relatedly, if part of the overarching mission is to reach those children who are on free school



meals and provide them with nutritious food during the holiday breaks, as well as having engaging activities, should we not be very concerned that only 29% of those children who are eligible are actually attending the programmes? If so, what are some of the responses to try to swell the numbers?

Declan Barker: Local authorities are becoming much slicker in how we are getting the messaging to children directly, ensuring that the pre-eligibility checks are in place and the messaging is getting in the right hands. When we look at the number of children engaged, it is important that we look at the wider context around attendance during the programme. Around a holiday period—take summer, for example, where we have 12 days of provision—we could look to engage each child once. We are perhaps not doing the greater good there, whereas if we have a smaller cohort engaging consistently throughout the programme, we are offering wider support for a longer period. Ultimately, it is about the funding level: we have to do what we can on a cost-per-head basis that works for both our providers and the food providers.

Q135 **Caroline Ansell:** Do you not have the funds associated with a 100% take-up of the programme? Is it funds or is it providers, or is it a mix of both?

Declan Barker: It is a combination of everything, really. It is parents' attitudes towards booking on a programme like this—although everything is put in place to de-stigmatise the programme, there will still be some who see it as a food bank. The cost of living is increasingly difficult: food prices are greatly inflated, so the cost per head has gone up naturally without the providers putting in any other additional costs around venues or their coaches' wages or salaries. It has become more difficult, but what we have seen in Nottingham is a real willingness and determination for the food network and the providers to work more collaboratively to drive that real value per head and work smarter around how they procure food, which sites they are working at and how they work in greater partnerships to engage bigger numbers, to minimise the cost.

Q136 **Caroline Ansell:** Is availability part of the issue, with the only 29% take-up?

Declan Barker: Again, it is trying to get as many bums on seats as possible for the cost per head. Ultimately, there are only so many children we can engage around the fees.

Q137 **Caroline Ansell:** I am not sure I am totally clear on that. Leigh, what are your thoughts?

Leigh Middleton: From our experience and the reviews that we have been on the fringes of is, it is about who is providing that offer. School sites are used a lot of the time, but young people do not want to go back to school in the summer holidays, because their holiday time is a time away from that environment. Where youth sector providers or youth services are providing in a different environment, in a youth centre or a



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more community-based orientated venue, that is more attractive to young people, and you get a different audience.

Caroline Ansell: That is also my experience in my home town. In fact, there are one or two schools in the mix, but otherwise it is sports clubs and activities.

Leigh Middleton: I have also seen how some councils are subsidised and are putting more money into their HAF pots because they want a broader range of interventions in a broader range of settings. Some of the restrictions, certainly in the earlier years of HAF, were put around the funding and how it could be utilised.

It is also about removing some of the barriers to access. We hear about online booking systems, but a lot of families do not have internet or do not know how to navigate it. It is quite difficult: special needs, young people, families, parents with special needs—all these things just make it harder and harder to engage. I have seen areas where they give out lots of vouchers, but then you hear, “What do you do with this bit of paper? How do I convert this?” All of that gets in the way of provision, but it is about providing support to young people where they need it and where they will choose to engage. That is where the special bits for youth work and youth services are.

Q138 **Caroline Ansell:** Are you seeing a higher take-up of places than the 29% average?

Leigh Middleton: I cannot answer your question, sorry. We have not done an analysis of HAF or interventions of that nature. Certainly with traditional youth services—not many of them exist like they used to, going back a decade or so—we would focus on the 10% of the population who most need free school meals, universal credit, etc. When I was running my local government service, we were getting 75% of that cohort of young people through our services, so you can provide the right support for them and in the right way.

Q139 **Caroline Ansell:** I have one final question, if I may, about the experience where there is not 100% take-up of places that are funded and provided, and the new freedom where around 15% can be dedicated to other groups. You listed a number of them—looked-after children, young carers, children at risk of exploitation or domestic violence. Frankly, I would have thought they should all qualify. Do you think there is scope to adjust that figure to be more inclusive and bring in a wider cohort of children such as those you talked about? When you consider this, 15% seems low.

Leigh Middleton: It does seem low. I would trust local people with local data to understand their local story, because it is so different in a rural or coastal community and in an urban one. The need and the percentages of different young people will be all over the show, so having more flexibility and saying, “Actually, this is an area we want to focus on—this is a group



of young people that we recognise are disproportionately missing in absence from school,” means that we could skew services in that direction. I guess that that is the targeting that David was talking about. In my head, that would be logical.

Q140 Caroline Ansell: That is really helpful. In terms of attendance, are you aware of any evidence, or gathering any evidence, to illustrate that this is having a positive impact on attendance?

Leigh Middleton: On the HAF Programme? Not directly, no. We ran a workshop for the Department with youth sector providers on their experience of delivering HAF under contract from local authorities and how we could improve that. Vouchers, online systems and all sorts of barriers came up, along with locations and the types of activity provided. A lot of it is quite sport-orientated, which is not so attractive to young women, stereotypically. We unpacked some of that, but not its effect on attendance. I am sorry.

Q141 Ian Mearns: I am interested in what you have been saying there, Leigh, regarding having to concentrate on particular groups of youngsters. It seems to me that you have put together programmes, or are working with programmes, that have had to prioritise particular youngsters. From your perspective, I am sure you would want to expand those programmes to a much larger group of youngsters if you could. I think it was one of your predecessors, Tom Wylie, who said that you cannot provide youth services without money. I think he said that in about 2004—I did know him quite well. It seems to me that there must be an awful lot of youngsters who, in your judgment, really should be able to engage with these programmes, but are prevented from doing so just because of the lack of money.

Leigh Middleton: Yes. Let’s get the money out of the way: we have spent £1 billion of public money less on youth services this year than we did a decade ago. That has a massive impact: there are fewer youth centres, there are fewer youth workers, we have a less professionalised workforce and there is just less support for those young people.

The thing we find quite fascinating is that young people spend 85% of their waking hours outside school, yet with all the interventions and everything, we expect schools to respond to every issue that young people have. Schools are amazing—they do incredible work for children and young people, and they are absolutely the hub around them—but children are not there for 85% of their time. That is the time when we have the opportunity to engage them. If you are not attending school, you are spending 100% of your time out of the school gates. Community-based provision, youth workers, Scouts, Girl Guides, uniform groups, church-based youth clubs, groups, parents in the village hall on Friday night—it is those trusted adults who have a relationship and a connection to those young people. We are starving those colleagues of the resources to meet those needs.



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Q142 **Ian Mearns:** The voluntary activity is brilliant and we all applaud it, but without the hard edge of a professional youth service, you are not actually actively trying to get out there and reach out to the youngsters who are not automatically brought into those voluntary organisations.

Leigh Middleton: No. These are interventions that youth workers are very familiar with, like detached youth work. There will be youth workers tonight on the streets of London talking to young people in housing estates, in communities, down by the river—wherever they are and whatever they are up to, they will be engaging them and sometimes preventing bad things from happening at the same time. Building that rapport and that relationship with young people means that you can then encourage them into education and give them that support.

You are absolutely right that it is about professional intervention. I think youth work is often dumbed down to just playing ping-pong and pool, but actually it is not. It is a highly technical skillset with degree-qualified experts who should be delivering this—absolutely supported by volunteers and others, but what we have lost in this country is a lot of our professional intervention.

Q143 **Kim Johnson:** Henry Dimbleby, in his food strategy, and CPAG state that policies like universal free school meals are the best policies to improve health and education attainment. Have there been any comparative studies between the roll-out of breakfast clubs and universal free school meals?

David Holmes: My starting point is that the eligibility for the national school breakfast club programme is a lot broader than the eligibility for free school meals, but I think if you bring it down to the level of the individual child—it is always important to do that when you are thinking about the effectiveness of policy—what we are really talking about here is providing food for children who otherwise might not eat. The imperative has to be that we are ensuring that children are receiving enough healthy, nutritious food to be able to function well and to have the same chances as any other child.

Q144 **Kim Johnson:** This inquiry is about persistent absences. Would you say that this is just presenting a problem and not going far enough in looking at the major issues around poverty, housing or health, and that what needs to be done must reflect more than just a sticking-plaster approach in terms of breakfast clubs?

David Holmes: That is really important, because you could just look at persistent absence, severe absence, without situating that issue within the context of everything else that is happening in a child or family's life. In my earlier comments, I was talking about taking a segmented approach to who we are actually talking about. What are the reasons for a child being persistently late? Is it because they are a young carer and they have significant caring responsibilities at home? Is it because of family functioning, where for whatever reason the routines are not in



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place to ensure that that child gets to school on time? Are there mental health reasons? Is it special educational needs or disability? Is it the cumulative impact of poverty that is causing such problems within the family that things just are not working as they should?

I was looking at this specifically in the national school breakfast club programme. For children in temporary accommodation, the breakfast club was such a benefit because it stopped the parents having to struggle to make breakfast in the morning when they were sharing facilities: instead, they could just take the child to school and know that the child was having breakfast. So yes, you have to take a systemic approach to this and think about how the provision of a breakfast club, or other interventions together, can reduce inequalities.

Q145 Kim Johnson: David mentioned that the system does not go far enough. It has been suggested that free school meals, the voucher scheme, has been and could be more beneficial than holiday activities or breakfast clubs for disadvantaged pupils. Declan, would you agree with that or not, and why?

Declan Barker: In my experience, having worked on the HAF programme and seen the difference that the programme consistently makes in its impact on young people's lives, I would be overwhelmingly more positive around the holiday activities programme—around the destigmatisation of young people engaging with a programme that is dressed as a holiday club as opposed to a free school meal setting. We have seen good success and we are getting in front of the right children that we would not usually expect to see at a programme like this by working with a wide range of partners like Nottinghamshire police. We are seeing young people who would not usually engage in a programme like HAF, so I would be overwhelmingly more positive about the HAF programme, having worked on it for the last two years.

Q146 Kim Johnson: We currently have 4 million children living in poverty. I think you have all alluded to the fact that there are children who should be eligible but are not eligible. Leigh, I just want to know whether you feel that free school meals and the projects that are available at the moment are meeting the needs of the most disadvantaged children.

Leigh Middleton: They are set up to meet the needs of the most disadvantaged. Whether the most disadvantaged are accessing them—because of stigma or other barriers to access such as parental interest or engagement information—I think is to be seriously questioned. That cohort who should be able to access those services is a much larger pool of young people who desperately need help and support.

I want to see a greater join-up of all these activities and programmes. There are pots in all sorts of places, from anti-social behaviour pots to DWP. If we could draw all this funding together, we would make a much greater impact on children, young people and families, but because it is all disparate and Departments do not necessarily get the opportunity to



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talk and share as they might, there are so many things falling through the cracks that are just missed opportunities.

Q147 Kim Johnson: In terms of what this inquiry is looking at, what do you think needs to be done to ensure children go to school and to challenge the persistent absence issue?

Leigh Middleton: It is about truly understanding why children are not attending. Picking up on the points already made in some respects, there will be a whole series of layers: need that is going unmet, or barriers holding those children back from going to school, whether that is poverty, special needs or, frankly, their Xbox, depending on their age. It is an onion, and we have to pick away at those layers to get to the core. Fundamentally, it comes down to helping and supporting parents and families and communities to support those children back into education. I go back to what I said about the 85% of their time out of school. It is about actually engaging them in non-educational time, but reinforcing the importance of their education, understanding why they are not attending and what is getting in the way there, and then removing those onion layers to make sure they get back in.

David Holmes: Could I just add that there is some learning here from the national school breakfast club programme? It is actually not anything to do with the provision of food, but it is learning from a national programme. Over 2,500 schools that are all members of the same programme, it is like a community of learning. There is not one set model of how this should be delivered. So much time and attention is spent enrolling schools in the programme to work out what is going to work for that school. Can we take a similar approach to school attendance, school by school, to really understand what the issues are in that school? They will be different, school by school. What are the different cohorts of children who are missing school or who are persistently absent in that school? We then need to come up with strategies to tackle the different groups of children, recognising that that will probably need to draw on expertise because there is specialism here from other agencies: a national school attendance programme, maybe. It is about making this a national priority. We know it is a big issue post-pandemic, so how can we put together a programme that on a school-by-school basis will actually grow that enthusiasm and expertise to be able to tackle it?

Q148 Chair: On Leigh's point about the 85% of time out of school, one thing that this Committee has previously recommended is piloting attendance mentor schemes outside the school system, to work with children and encourage them to understand those sort of things. Is that something that Family Action has looked at as something that you could potentially do with the expertise that you have?

David Holmes: There are lots of different models, and I am aware of that programme. The pilot in Cumbria that I alluded to is actually working with, I think, eight secondary schools, working with groups of children where absence and attendance are an issue. That is all about instilling



ambition and aspiration in those young people and really enthusing them about the future and why school is a really important part of reaching those ambitions. There would be lots of different interventions that you could put in that would address all those different reasons why attendance becomes an issue, but it requires that holistic thought about bespoke approach and recognising that all the expertise to deliver those interventions will not be in the school; some of it is specialist family support.

Q149 Ian Mearns: Apart from the national school breakfast programme, there are other schemes providing breakfasts in schools: there is Magic Breakfast, there is Greggs—in the north-east of England, but it goes beyond that—and there is Kellogg's. Between them, they are helping to provide breakfasts in literally thousands of other schools. Is there no drive from the DfE or from your own programme to try to do some assimilation so that the different programmes can learn from each other about what works, what does not work and what the shortfalls and any potential pitfalls are?

David Holmes: Family Action is already meeting with Magic Breakfast, Greggs and Kellogg's to talk about where our programmes overlap, where there is a shared evidence base and what we know together. I can tell you that there is consensus across those providers. Between us, we are probably providing breakfast for over 4,000 schools—probably the best part of 4,500 schools. There is not a piece of paper you could put between us in terms of the fact that this has positive outcomes. Yes, there are different providers, but there is absolute consensus about the fact that this makes a difference to children.

Q150 Ian Mearns: I have no doubt about that at all, but the thing that strikes me is that between the four programmes that you have talked about—your own and the others—there are 4,500 schools, which means that something like 18,000 schools are not involved.

David Holmes: Many of those other schools will have their own provision already, but there is a bigger conversation—I am really glad you are raising this—about how you maximise the effectiveness of breakfast provision. If you have 16 or 20 children sitting down in a school hall, having a paid-for provision which is all about childcare, that is very different from having a whole-school approach to making sure that no child is too hungry to learn. That is why, to Kim Johnson's point, there is learning from a national programme here about what works and how to maximise the benefit of these interventions so that we are really getting the best value for money.

Q151 Mohammad Yasin: Moving on to youth services, the youth sector offers a wide range of provisions that may support school attendances. Leigh, what interventions provided by the youth sector have improved school attendance rates?



Leigh Middleton: A lot, and it varies, so I will walk you through a few examples. One approach is placing youth workers into schools. The Oasis academy trust has trained, professional youth workers in every one of its secondary schools. They are there to be around young people, engage with them and talk to them, but also to be the link between the community side of the 85% of their time and their school provision. That is about helping those young people to navigate that and, when they are struggling, to have a friendly face.

It is often about the professional approach that is taken. We have all experienced having teachers who are there to tell you what to do and educate you, whereas with a youth worker it is the other way around: they will start from your developmental interests and what is going on for you, and then build their support around you as a young person. Because you are volunteering and choosing to participate in that provision, your personal engagement as a young person is far higher. Having that liaison between school and community can be really, really effective.

We have also seen provision where there are detached youth workers, as we touched on a little while ago. These are trained youth workers who are on our streets, walking around our parks, talking to young people, engaging them, finding out what is going on in their lives and working out how to support them. Often, they are putting them in groups because young people have the same challenges, the same needs, the same issues, and that enables them to support those young people in the most effective way possible.

What is really powerful about that detached youth work model is that you have to go to them: by being in the park, you are in their space rather than them coming into your space. If I have to enter a classroom, I enter the teacher's space, with their rules, and I have to operate within the boundaries of that environment. If you are engaging me in the park or outside shops or wherever I am, you are engaging me on my terms, so the relationship and the nature of that interaction is very different.

Open access, drop-in youth provision such as youth clubs tails off at around 14: most young people over 14 do not want to go to a traditional drop-in youth club over 14. That is where we have more targeted provision—social action projects, volunteering projects, community projects, environmental projects. By engaging those young people with a trusted adult in the community, you can work out how we can support them to remain in education, to keep them attending, to work, to get ahead of the barrier, to make sure that that is not something that is stopping their learning or their ability to remain in school.

Q152 **Mohammad Yasin:** Thank you for that. Youth clubs are a very important service for young people, especially in deprived areas—people raise that point to me again and again. Which of those interventions from the youth sector have best supported disadvantaged people?



Leigh Middleton: Gosh—they are all very different and they all operate in quite different ways. On school liaison, we have a report coming out in a couple of weeks' time which a couple of MPs, Tim Loughton and Kate Green, before she left, chaired for us around the role of youth work and schools and the interplay there. We can share the report with the Committee when it comes out; it is only a couple of weeks away. There is absolutely evidence that shows a really strong link between youth work and schools and provision.

It is also about where it is provided. In Nottinghamshire, they have 12 youth centres on school sites, so you can actually walk to the end of the driveway and meet the youth worker. It is slightly separated from school, and you can have that professional intervention. It is a mixture, depending on the challenges and the needs.

Q153 **Mohammad Yasin:** In your view, what can DfE do to support schools to engage with the youth organisations, to develop partnership and to support disadvantaged pupils?

Leigh Middleton: I would say that DfE could work with schools, DCMS—because that has the duty brief for community youth work provision—and the local authority. The three parts all stitch together. I think there could be more guidance to schools and academy trusts on how to engage with community-based providers. Many schools are excellent at inviting in the community, youth projects and so on; others will not let you in at all and do not want to talk to you. The Government could issue guidance to schools and set expectations around this.

The extreme of that is that some of the Ofsted frameworks can be reviewed. Where youth workers are operating in and around schools, schools do not get credit for it. It is not in the framework, we do not give that credit, and yet it is some of the most impactful work that we have seen. The same goes for Ofsted inspecting children's services: the best children's services are employing youth work methodologies, but because it is not in the framework, it does not get recognised. They are quick wins, just to help boost that stuff and support it. I would agree with a national funding programme around youth work and youth prevention linked to attendance and other barriers that children and young people have.

Q154 **Mohammad Yasin:** Looked-after children are one of the biggest cohorts to be impacted by persistent absence. This is despite the pupil premium plus, meaning that there should be funding to better support them individually. What measures do you think would work best to improve school attendance for looked-after children?

Leigh Middleton: I would go back to first principles. What is holding those children back from accessing that provision? Is it that they have other caring responsibilities? Do they have siblings they are worrying about? Is it travel or transport costs? What are the other barriers holding those children back? In theory, if they are in the care system, there is a



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social worker and the system should be there to encourage and engage them and support them through. I would undertake an in-depth piece of research to understand what is holding those children back, what is preventing those children from accessing education, and move forward from there.

Q155 Mrs Drummond: I am very keen on the extended school day: you could bring in all the activities, enrichment activity and so on. Is that something that you would support, if we managed to get the youth services engaged as well?

Leigh Middleton: Where do I sign? Absolutely. It is the fundamental building block of communities for children and young people that is missing in many places. It is about out-of-school settings, enrichment, additional support and finding the right type of provision for each young person's interest. For some young people, uniform groups are spot on and work very well, but others are not remotely interested, so we may need to focus on more traditional youth work provision or volunteering. There are different types of community-based provision, but fundamentally it is about trained, trusted adults being able to support those young people where they need it.

Q156 Mrs Drummond: You mentioned that some children would do better outside the school, but actually if you could incorporate it then every child would then be looked after.

Leigh Middleton: What we hear from youth workers all the time is that a lot of children and young people really struggle with school, just because of the rigidity of it and the way it operates. I am always struck by the fact that one in five young people—20%—leave school at 19 without five GCSEs. That is a big cohort, so clearly something is not working in the way we educate our children and put them through that machine. I understand why—I am a qualified teacher and a qualified youth worker, I have been working in schools for most of my career, and I can see that you have to have process and structure—but for a large number it does not really work. That is where we have to try different things.

We have been doing some work around alternative provision. DfE did some research into the effectiveness of alternative provision and alternative schools and realised that where youth work was the founding principle, the outcomes for those children were far higher. Attendance went up 15% where it was youth work-driven versus being more traditionally teacher-driven. That is because young people in alternative provision have fallen out of school and dropped out of that process; it has not worked for them, so we need a different methodology. We need a different way of engaging them.

Q157 Mrs Drummond: Do you think an extended school day will help with attendance as well?



Leigh Middleton: Yes, if it is the right provision and you don't have to stay until 6 o'clock on the school site. If you can go off and do activities—go on the river, go kayaking or whatever—then absolutely. But if you say, "You have to come in at 7 o'clock for breakfast and you can't leave until 5 or 6 in the evening," young people will just vote with their feet, because they do not want that. They want fun, adventure and opportunities to volunteer. They want to be able to go on residentials, climb mountains and have all the great opportunities that this country can give them. It is about making sure they have that access.

Q158 **Mrs Drummond:** Certainly. One of my heads said that the only days these kids come in are activity days, so it does make sense. David and Declan, do you agree with extended school days, from your point of view?

David Holmes: There is a lot of value in an extended school day, but I absolutely agree that it needs to be designed so that it is going to work and provide the support and encouragement that children need. You also have to think really carefully about how no child will be excluded from that because of family circumstances or poverty. It has to be provided in such a way that it works for everyone.

Declan Barker: I totally agree with both, having been a youth worker in a previous life and gone to school on enrichment days. You just saw the energy of the young people when you were providing those high levels of activities and that different feel from the school day. We had so much more out of the young people on those days, and you could see how much they were getting from that experience.

Q159 **Mrs Drummond:** Some of the funding we have spoken about may be finishing next year. Which interventions would you recommend that the Department for Education prioritise to approve attendance? It sounds horrible—let us hope that it will carry on—but if we had to choose, which one would you prioritise?

Leigh Middleton: I suspect we would probably all disagree and all champion the thing that we are all here for, but absolutely it is about the long support for young people from breakfast to sundown in the right way. For me, it has to be community-based support and provision for young people, because that is where they are 85% of the time.

David Holmes: As someone who has worked in health and social care for a very long time, one of the key learnings is that often we stop things that are working. The national school breakfast club programme is now in its sixth year. It runs very well, it is effective, it gives value for money—it should continue. How it might develop in the future, who knows, but do not stop something that is working and that schools like.

Declan Barker: A joined-up approach was mentioned earlier. That is crucial. It must be so difficult for schools to understand all the individual funding parts and what the programme's aims and objectives are. There



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needs to be a more targeted approach to schools and partners to say, "This is the suite of packages that we could offer you," making it really clear and concise to schools, to drive that buy-in from the headteacher downwards. Often it is the headteacher who says, "Yes, we will do it," but it is the people beneath who are the real drivers making it happen.

Chair: Thank you much. Miriam, did you want to come in?

Q160 **Miriam Cates:** Just very quickly. You have all made a very passionate case for breakfast clubs and the holiday activities and food programme, and you are doing an amazing job. Understandably, you are all arguing for more money and more resource to expand these excellent programmes, but all states have limited resources. All societies have limited resources. Our state spends more money than it ever has. Taxes are higher than they ever have been. We just cannot increase the amount of spending. Would we not be better focusing our spending on families and helping families to provide breakfast for their children, helping families to provide the support that allows children to come to school on time? Would that not be a better use of resources? We do have the highest rate of family breakdown in the OECD. That is not insignificant.

Leigh Middleton: That is a great idea. I often say this to officials: I think there is enough money in the system, if it was all properly spent and joined together, but because it is all broken in fragmented lumps, we miss the opportunities to join that up and share things. I know lots of youth providers take HAF resources and spread them over a longer period of time.

Q161 **Miriam Cates:** What I am saying is, should we not be targeting the limited resources we do have at, for example, helping to reduce family breakdown? Family breakdown has a huge impact on children being in poverty. It is a huge indicator for it. If we could help families not to break down, that would be an initial barrier that we could just remove, helping children get to school.

Leigh Middleton: The obvious answer to your question is yes, but there are so many layers to those barriers and there is so much complexity in those communities and those lives that you have to unpick all those bits, which is incredibly complicated.

Miriam Cates: Anyone else?

David Holmes: I would say that we want children to go to school and we want children to make the best of their day at school. If providing a healthy breakfast helps to get those children into school and start the day, I think it should be a national priority.

Chair: Thank you very much to our panel. I am grateful for the evidence that you have given us this morning.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Nathan Persaud and Jonathan Pauley.

Q162 **Chair:** Welcome to the second panel in our inquiry into persistent absence and support for disadvantaged students. In the room, I am pleased to welcome Nathan Persaud, programmes director for England, School of Hard Knocks. Online, we have Jonathan Pauley, the 11+ education manager for City Inspires. Thank you for joining us.

The first question is a nice open one: why do sports-based activities help pupils' engagement with education? It is fairly obvious, and anecdotally they do, but Nathan, can you perhaps give us some hard evidence as to why that should be the case?

Nathan Persaud: I will start by making a distinction between sports-based activities and targeted sporting interventions. The latter would have a very deliberate use of sport and an interpersonal element.

I would summarise the effects in three main ways. There are some physiological effects of sports-based intervention; you have that initial endorphin rush that we all know about. Sport makes you feel happy, so there is this immediate sense of fun and engagement for young people. We find that young people are very much in the moment, and sport provides that endorphin rush within a quick feedback environment. If you spoke to young people about their mood at the start and the end of a session, all of them would say that their mood and their feelings had improved. The endorphin effect is very much like paracetamol for a headache: it is a really good antidote to low mood and mild anxiety.

The other thing that we are really interested in is the concept of neuroplasticity. Essentially, after exercise, the brain is more malleable; it is more open to new ideas, new ways of thinking. If you have young people in a very fixed mindset and quite a negative place, exercise naturally helps them to think differently. We couple that with workshops to help that, and it is no accident that we receive most of our safeguarding disclosures alongside the pitch where young people have just exercised.

There are several emotional reasons why sports work so well. In the way good providers do it, it is completely novel a lot of the time. To young people, it feels different from school straight away. It feels like something exciting and different. One of the most important things is it provides probably the only space for young people to practise skills around resilience. You cannot just talk about resilience in the classroom and in workshops; you need to give young people an opportunity to practise skills like anger management in a real time setting where they are getting immediate feedback while practising those elements. The other emotional part is really, really key: it is in the relationships that sport allows the practitioner to form with the young person. We find that because we are not within the school system, our relationships have a



slightly different power balance, and we can build trust and rapport really well through sport.

There are also a couple of social aspects to it. Every sport has a set of expected behaviours, cultures and values. You can use sports as a vehicle to teach young people new types of behaviours and explore new values. We use rugby to talk about the power of a team, and the fact that to be successful in your aim you have to work as part of that team. Only one person can speak to the referee, so there is respect for authority in a different context from what they are used to. Finally, it encourages peer bonds. Because we mix year groups, we get pupils making friends from outside their year groups that they then take through the rest of school.

In all, we feel that sport is in a unique position to meet a variety of needs, even when the needs in that cohort can be completely different.

Q163 Chair: How does that work for the children who do not consider themselves sporty? Earlier, we heard some of the concerns about girls not necessarily being traditionally attracted to sporting activities in the holidays as much as boys. Speaking as one of those boys who was terrified of sport at school—I suspect there are a lot of people in this place who were—how do you make sure you can engage the children who are perhaps less physically able?

Nathan Persaud: That is part of why it is so powerful, because you are engaging them and you are suddenly making them feel successful at something they have previously felt unsuccessful at. If you have that transformation for them in sport, you can liken it to other areas of their life.

We talk about growth mindset. By demonstrating growth mindset in action, you can show them that if they do 13 weeks of rugby, they will start to see a really significant improvement, even if they hated it to start with. If they try to engage in it, pupils feel a sense of confidence and achievement they can take into other areas of their school life. They can see that if they put some concerted effort in, they get better at something they did not like and were unsuccessful at.

Jonathan Pauley: Thank you for having me. We come across a lot of students who are not interested in sport, yet still require support to increase the level of engagement within education. We find that all students enjoy the sense of leadership and achievement, so if we can find roles within a sport like football where they are not necessarily playing but are still actively involved and making a difference, they will become part of that cohort group or team. The more that success is shared, the more—hopefully—they want to get involved in most aspects.

If they are doing a leadership activity, it is also about building relationships with each individual coach to allow them to develop all the skills that we are talking about in resilience, teamwork, communication and confidence skills. They have a platform to achieve, even though they



are not directly involved in the session. We encourage students who are not particularly interested in football to join the programme, and we really want to work with them to ensure that they are benefiting.

- Q164 **Mrs Drummond:** Unlike you, Robin, I was in all the teams. If I had it my way, I would have an hour every day for compulsory sport, but I know that there are children who do not like sport, as we mentioned. Have you looked at all the ways of including them? Robin might be more interested in dance or something like that, and that is a part of sport. It is always said to me that not everybody likes sport, so I get it, I suppose.

We are talking about absence, and you have heard that I am very keen on the extended school day as well. Do you think that creating wider varieties of sports within schools would help with absence, and encourage children to come into school rather than staying away?

Nathan Persaud: Engaging pupils in sporting activity is very different from them taking part in sport for technical excellence. Initially, it is about taking part in sport for fun and enjoyment. We have found that we have improved attendance, and that some pupils only attend school on days when we are running things. Ultimately, that comes down to the relationships they have with the staff, because their needs are being met, in one way or another, by the staff who are delivering that programme. Our staff are in a special position to be not a teacher or a friend, but a mentor, and to help them explore their relationship with school as well. Sport is the vehicle to enable that relationship to happen.

- Q165 **Mrs Drummond:** Jonathan, what are your views on getting children in because of sports activities?

Jonathan Pauley: At the start of each programme, we find a youth voice in each of our groups to ensure that this is not just a football programme; it is an engagement programme. If there are students who are interested in other sports, we will find time to deliver those sports to give those individuals a chance to succeed. There are a lot of different sports delivered as part of our programmes, because not everybody is involved or interested in football.

They have a chance to succeed in whatever they look to do, and it is all indirectly working towards developing a relationship with a trusting adult who is able to work on skills that they need to re-engage in education. We are using sport for teamwork and confidence, to increase all those pro-social behaviours that they do not know they are indirectly working on. Sport is driving that to benefit them and their school.

- Q166 **Mrs Drummond:** How would you try and encourage people like Robin to actually—

Caroline Ansell: It is never too late.

Mrs Drummond: It is never too late. How would you try to encourage them to try it out in the first place? There are lots of children who are



disengaged from school who might be brilliant footballers or rugby players but are just not coming to school. Those are the pupils who need to have at least a try-out to see whether that is something for them.

Nathan Persaud: In the first instance, like I said, it is something that feels very different from school. We run the three-year programme, but in the first year, for year 9s or year 8s, the activity takes place during lesson time. They can either spend time with us or go to their lesson—that is their choice. That is really how we initially engage pupils, because they are generally up for trying us as an alternative to going to their normal lesson.

Like Jonathan was saying, we have to listen to the young people who are part of the programme. If we run something that they do not like and are not engaged with, it fails completely. That sometimes means that minor adjustments are made for specific groups. One group we had a few years ago really hated rugby, so they played this weird hybrid of football and rugby where a rugby ball was used for five minutes and then a football was swapped in for five minutes. It was a unique sport, and it was theirs—it was something they created.

We also find that young people like different levels of physical contact, so we do not really teach full contact rugby until the second term. This is something that some young people absolutely really love, and, at the opposite end, some do not. We have to find ways of delivering a session where both groups can engage and take part.

Q167 **Ian Mearns:** While I was not great at any particular sport, I like all sport. One thing I am particularly interested in, Jonathan, is whether you have seen any changes in attitudes towards football, particularly among girls, since the success of the England team in the UEFA European championship and the greater TV coverage of the women's professional game.

Jonathan Pauley: Like you, I am not great at sport, but I love all of them, so I am familiar with that. I agree absolutely about the change. We really drove that, because we saw it as an opportunity to engage those who had just found an interest from watching it on TV and seeing the success that it could bring. We introduced more female-only programmes and mixed gender programmes. From that, the engagement with girls has significantly increased.

It is not just that. Some girls, especially at secondary level, are put off by the negativity that comes from boys—the typical comments. However, since the women's football team has represented itself, the country and all the girls so well, that negativity has drifted slightly. They are able to feel that sense of, "Actually, we can do this. The football team have shown we can do this." We are still working on the back of that and keeping that level of engagement up because of the benefits that we have seen from it.



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Q168 Ian Mearns: It is really interesting, because the television coverage in particular, but also the success of the national team, has driven interest and growth in activity within girls' and women's sport to a level that had probably not been anticipated for another decade. Of course, if that then helps in engagement in sport and educational programmes, that all has to be grist to the mill for the good.

Jonathan Pauley: Exactly that. We have had such demand, with schools coming directly to me and other staff and asking whether we can deliver a girls-only extracurricular activity, which just was not happening within football. We are trying to do that, and at some points you can actually stretch that far, which shows how much of a need there is with girls from all ethnic backgrounds. That is breaking down cultural barriers, which is really, really special. We are just trying to carry the momentum of that, and hopefully the England football team will keep being successful to allow that work to continue.

Q169 Andrew Lewer: We are focusing on school attendance. We have not come up with a huge amount of evidence that clearly demonstrates that sports-based activities improve school attendance—Flick has touched upon that already. Are there any large programmes or co-ordinating bodies that can enable you to gather that evidence together?

Nathan Persaud: We are part of the Sport for Development Coalition, which has about 400 members. One of its priorities is to help smaller organisations like us. We will come together and pool our evidence to create a larger body, but on the ground, it is not a day-to-day priority for us. It is quite hard to fit in with our resource, but they would be someone to take that forward.

Q170 Andrew Lewer: What have they come up with so far?

Nathan Persaud: So far they have generated a collective evaluation tool to try to agree on a common outcome framework. In reality, they have actually come up with a lot of other actions that need to happen in order to make that work, because we have all found that we have competing ways of measuring. There are overlapping outcomes, but there are also additional outcomes and priorities, so the biggest challenge is to bring all that evidence together.

Q171 Andrew Lewer: Have those organisations tried their best to make sure that it is not overly bureaucratic or complicated? You have people who really want to work with young people and help them play sport, not spend their time filling in forms.

Nathan Persaud: Absolutely. That is one of the challenges with impact measurement at this level. We collect termly or biennial data, but you cannot use more than a couple of scales with a young person per term. It is a complete turn-off. We do that by phone as well as pitch side, but that is a challenge for the sector as a whole.



There are a whole raft of things you could measure that we as a sector are changing, but we each have to choose one or two things to focus our measurement on, for that reason.

Q172 Andrew Lewer: Does school attendance tend to be one of those? Are there ways to make that more of a focus? Indeed, do you think it should be one of the premier focuses?

Nathan Persaud: It is not a predominant focus at the moment; it is almost a by-product of some other priorities. Our big drivers are around pupil wellbeing and pupil behaviour—outward behaviour, in terms of how the school sees it. If we do those things well, the attendance will improve, and it is probably similar for a lot of programmes I know. They may focus on academic attainment or have another priority and find that if they meet that, the attendance improves.

Q173 Andrew Lewer: It seems obvious that discipline, having more enthusiasm and being focused on a team, working together, would improve attendance because it is generally improving behaviour of which attendance is a component. Is that a very strong correlation or just an assumption that everybody makes?

Nathan Persaud: I don't think so. Pre-covid, we used to measure attendance from the schools' data. We had really good data on attendance—it was between 70% and 100% in some cohorts—but we stopped measuring it, partly because it was quite high and we did not feel it was something we were trying to change directly. We wanted to focus on the outcomes we were trying to change directly with our measurement.

There is evidence there, and it is not just about behaviour; it is also about the relationships of the pupils and their families with the school. If their behaviour is better and they are happier in school, the interaction with family and parents becomes a positive rather than a negative one and attendance improves because the families and the parents may not have such a problem with the school.

Q174 Andrew Lewer: Thank you. Jonathan, there are similar issues for you to address. You have heard all I had to say. What are your views on data gathering—the benefits and disbenefits of that, but also the connections between a focus on school attendance and the link between better behaviour, getting into a team spirit and school attendance?

Jonathan Pauley: First, the attendance piece is a high priority of ours because it is a high priority for schools now. Since covid, the attendance figures and motivation levels have dropped. Covid is a frustrating one, because we are trying to compare data from previous years, which is not as clear because of covid data.

When we have looked from late last year to part of this year, we have seen significant increases in students who were not part of sports-based provision with ours, which is City Inspires. Last year, they were not



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involved, compared to this year being involved—which will be finalised at the end of the year, but we did it mid-year—there is a significant increase of between 4% and 6%, from what I have looked at just this morning. It is a big push for us. We have to get students into school and, as was mentioned before, for some of our provision it might be the only day of the week that a student attends school. That is a 20% difference from where they would be for that day: at home or just not engaging in positive activity.

It is certainly something we really want to focus on. Ours is partly a Premier League-funded programme, and looking at attendance and risk of exclusion and making sure that young people stay on the right path as much as they can is a priority for the Premier League as well.

The more resources organisations get, which is increasing year on year, the more time and capacity we have to gather this evidence, which is absolutely vital. It is not until you come to the end of the academic year that you realise this is the evidence that we need to get. We all know it works, but we have to put it in front of headteachers, academy trusts and other people to make sure they know the value of what we offer.

Q175 Ian Mearns: Nathan, could you give a brief overview of the School of Hard Knocks programme for schools and describe what impact the programme has had on improving school attendance? You have alluded to it, but could you flesh that out, please?

Nathan Persaud: It is a three-year programme, a long-term intervention, typically starting in year 9 or sometimes year 8, and going all the way through to year 11. We have three staff—two coaches and a behaviour specialist—who deliver the three components of the programme: about an hour of rugby, an hour of a group workshop and then one-to-one sessions for the pupils. The aims are to enhance wellbeing, but also the 5Cs framework developed by Loughborough University. We look at communication, commitment, confidence, control and finally cohesion, which is that team element I talked about. We moved away from schools' measurement or definition of what good and bad behaviour is to our own specific measurement of behaviour.

We work to form the pupils as a rugby team. They play fixtures against our other partner schools, they have a shared purpose and ethos, and—I have said it a few times—they have developed relationships over time with either the coach or the behaviour specialist who becomes a trusted adult for them.

We work really closely with the school safeguarding teams, with any of the disclosures and the information the pupils pass on, but also with things around attendance, to ensure that the pupil gets the support they need outside our time. We are very clear about what our role is and what our intervention is.



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In terms of attendance, I still see that we are having a strong effect from covid; we are almost in a unique era. Jonathan made a really good point: it is impossible to compare. Leading up to covid, we stopped measuring attendance because we had a really strong effect on it, typically between 70% and 100% in various cohorts. Because it was so strong, we were looking at other areas that we could measure and we did not think it was a particular issue, partly because attendance is a symptom of behaviour and unmet needs. Because we felt that we were working more on that level of the pupil meeting their needs in school, that is where we focused our impact measurement.

Ahead of this, we have just done a headcount, because we currently have a lot of anecdotal evidence that the pupils, either by choice or via arrangement of the school, only attend school on School of Hard Knocks days. We think that around 20% to 25% of our 1,700 pupils only attend school because of School of Hard Knocks, or that School of Hard Knocks plays a significant part in their attending school.

One of the reasons might be that if pupils are suspended, as long as it is safe for them to return to the premises, they can take part in School of Hard Knocks but not mainstream school. That is something separate from the school. They are eligible to take part even when they are suspended. It is really positive for their onward attendance after the suspension is finished that they have actually come to something on the school site.

Q176 Ian Mearns: You have mentioned that most of the pupils you see only come in on the days they have the programme. Would you say that the programme has a continuing impact on improving overall school attendance, beyond the programme itself?

Nathan Persaud: Yes, for those who have an issue with attendance it does—for us, it is around a quarter or a fifth—because you are helping them with the issues that are preventing them from attending school in the first place, and we are doing this over three years. A lot of this is down to external problems at home, which really undermine what we and the school are trying to do. If they go through a poor period at home, we might find their attendance drops again. But that is the beauty of having a three-year intervention; they know that we are still there, even if they are having a bad time at home or they feel like school is overwhelming for them. They can come and still see the staff members on the day and not feel so overwhelmed by going through the rest of the school thing. It is about long-term support.

Yes, it has an impact on improving attendance, but that is only possible through doing that over a long period of time. We initially started doing a 10-week pilot and thought it was definitely not enough to make any kind of impact on behaviour or attendance.

Q177 Ian Mearns: Jonathan, you mentioned earlier the Premier League's focus on attendance. Could you give a brief overview of the City Inspires programme and describe what impact it has had on improving school



attendance? I know you have mentioned that it is difficult to compare because of the covid statistics.

Jonathan Pauley: City Inspires is partnered with the Premier League, and it uses Manchester City and the Premier League to work with young people at risk of not fulfilling their potential—that is the line that we use—and support them throughout their education process, give them the tools that they need to succeed such as their confidence, attitude and pro-social behaviours.

Our coaches will predominantly work with a group of 15 students one day a week for the full academic year. Different organisations or different football foundations will do it differently, but we pride ourselves on that model of giving ourselves the time throughout the academic year to really build that relationship and that element of trust with young people.

A lot of programmes will go on for 12 weeks, but we found that that did not give us enough time to really embed sustained change, so our coaches will work with a group of 15 young people. Depending on the needs of the group, they will spend two or two and a half hours in the classroom in the morning delivering a football-based qualification or some sort of PSHE topic related to their community, school or area that will benefit them socially. In the afternoon, they will take an hour and a half doing a sports-based activity, developing all those pro-social behaviours that we talked about earlier.

The reason why it is a year-long change is that if we come across a student who only turns up for City Inspires, that is not the goal. Yes, in the first two or three months we work with that student to develop trust, but once we know that they will attend every City Inspires day, we need to push them to attend the day before or the day after, so that their attendance continues to increase and so that their level of appreciation for the school and for what we are offering increases, and that is shown in their education. There are usually students outside the group who are really keen to get involved, so we use them to push what we do and promote to the students who are involved that there are young people who would love this opportunity, so it is on them to make the most of it and show their appreciation.

It does not work all the time, but most of them do not want to lose that opportunity that is so unique and that a lot of schools do not have the option to get. As a result, without the coach having to do too much, that benefits their attendance because they know they need to show that appreciation by enhancing in other areas of school, one being attendance.

Q178 **Ian Mearns:** I am a football fan myself: I support Newcastle, and the Newcastle United Foundation has similar programmes. From your perspective, does the fact that you are working for a very successful football club at the moment have an impact on improving overall school attendance?



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Jonathan Pauley: It is different across here. We really have to use that, and every football club of that stature—Newcastle being one of them—has to use that pull that football clubs have to benefit young people and we are so passionate about that.

It is different for different-sized clubs. Smaller-sized clubs might get more access to the players than we get because of how in demand they are. Every football club has a unique fan base and a unique selling point, and we have to use that to benefit young people.

Thinking back to my time in education, I did not have any exposure to a football club or a rugby club within secondary school. I would have loved that opportunity; it would have inspired me. Trying to get organisations like ours to benefit young people and develop relationships and give them a sense of belonging to a football club only has benefits.

Ian Mearns: Just to show you how old I am, I was actually at St James's Park in 1968 on the day that City won the First Division at Newcastle.

Jonathan Pauley: Seriously?

Ian Mearns: Seriously, aye.

Jonathan Pauley: Sorry about that!

Q179 **Miriam Cates:** Jonathan, you mentioned that some of your funding comes from the Premier League, which is fantastic—I hear they have cash to spare. Where does the rest of your funding come from? Is the funding model secure?

Jonathan Pauley: The rest of the funding comes from schools, and no, it is not secure. A change in leadership at a school can change the sense of what they want to achieve. Schools are governed by results, so if they are struggling with results and they have a change of leadership, taking students out for a day a week and investing £7,000 from each school into what we offer is a big risk when there are other priorities and tight budgets in schools.

I would not say it is secure, which enhances the reason for us to develop evidence of these figures. With our monitoring and evaluation team, we are currently looking at the costs and benefits to the school and the community per student avoiding exclusion. We work with numerous students who are on the level of being permanently excluded. We prevent that and provide them with the tools to succeed and be a positive role model within their school, which immediately pays for everything else that comes that academic year. However, evidencing that is quite tough, because how would you know someone was about to be permanently excluded? Only a certain amount of people in the school know, and they usually do not make big decisions such as spending X amount of money on a provision.

Q180 **Miriam Cates:** In terms of the balance of funding, do the Premier League



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pay for your basic set-up, admin cost and staffing, and do schools then pay a fee for the number of children they enrol on the programme?

Jonathan Pauley: It depends how much you want to grow and reach out. We could work with a really small number of schools and just use the Premier League funding, but we really want to widen the reach across Greater Manchester, so we stretch that.

A lot of Premier League foundations have come to us to say, "How do you charge?" If you have not been charging for a provision, once you start to charge money schools are quick to say, "No, we've had this for free. We're not going to do it." We have had numerous conversations now and, as was mentioned before, there is the pull of Manchester City. We probably are in an advantageous position there, but we stretch that. Schools pay around 80% compared with what the Premier League funding stretches to for City Inspires. It is different for different programmes, but for City Inspires the schools pay more, just because we really want to keep widening that reach. We have six full-time coaches now across 25 days, and there are so many more schools that could do with the support and provision. We are going to keep stretching that funding and begging the Premier League to help us.

Q181 **Miriam Cates:** That sounds good, thank you. Nathan, could you describe your funding model as well, and whether or not it is secure?

Nathan Persaud: It is quite similar, in the way that we ask schools to cover 50% of the costs, which is £30,000 for the whole year. We ask them to cover around 50% of that, and that actually forms 40% of our total organisational income. If schools can no longer pay, that is a huge risk to us.

We always charge schools. We found that when we initially did not charge or found funding elsewhere, we never had the same buy-in. The programme did not work in schools where we went in for free. In recent conversations with headteachers across the country, because we have now renegotiated for next academic year, one of them said to us, "My choice as a headteacher is getting a new LSA or your programme," and he chose our programme. It is not based on the evidence that—

Q182 **Miriam Cates:** Where does the other 70% of your funding come from?

Nathan Persaud: That is through a mixture of grant and corporate income that we get.

Q183 **Miriam Cates:** Business sponsorship and things like that?

Nathan Persaud: Yes, and our own fundraising. As non-delivery staff, a big part of our job and what we are doing a lot of the time is going out to business, to individuals, to help us raise money.

Q184 **Chair:** What is your geographical footprint?



Nathan Persaud: There is Glasgow, but our biggest collection of schools is around Cardiff and the valleys, where rugby is obviously the main sport but there is also a huge level of deprivation. We actually have the least number of schools in London. I have found London to be the most competitive in terms of external interventions for schools: everyone we have spoken to either has other people coming in or has a range of interventions. We have grown a lot in Hertfordshire, for example, where we found there was just no competition—there is not anyone doing what we are doing. For me, there is scope to do more in those types of areas, outside or slightly outside the big cities.

Q185 **Chair:** What approach should the Government take to roll out sports-based attendance interventions more widely? Obviously we have recently seen the welcome news of a multi-year funding settlement for the first time with the PE and sports premium, but do you think more could be done on the fringes of the school day that could make a difference to children's attendance? Flick mentioned extending the school day and that side of things.

Nathan Persaud: There is this real untapped potential of community sports clubs not being used in the school day. A lot of the time they are only used at evenings and weekends—rugby clubs, football clubs, cricket clubs and so on. A lot of the ones I have come across really want to help the local schools, but cannot get in to work with them. There is a real opportunity for something that is low or zero-cost to bring more sport. We predominantly do it on site, but there is value in doing it off site as well. It is just about connecting them. Schools are hard to get into and they are hard to work with initially, so it is about making that easier as well.

Chair: Any thoughts on that, Jonathan?

Jonathan Pauley: Yes. It is about investment, getting behind programmes and organisations that are successful in this area and really championing what we are looking to achieve—everyone is looking to achieve the same thing in bettering outcomes for young people in the wider communities—and then having a real focus on gathering the evidence, because it is not until you put that evidence in front of a school leader that they become invested in it straight away. They do not get access to the programme—they are obviously too high up to see the day-to-day—so we need some investment in putting in front of them what they want to read: the attendance figures, the exclusion figures, the pro-social behaviours, everything data-wise so that they can say, "Right, this is benefiting each young person, which is having an impact overall on the school."

Q186 **Chair:** Nathan, you started by giving us a good scientific overview of some of the benefits of physical and sporting activity for young people and how that helps them to switch on, pay attention and be in a better mood. Are there any elements from these sports-based programmes that schools could take and learn from in order to support their internal



approach to attendance?

Nathan Persaud: When you initially talk about sport, you are thinking about going to the playing field, but actually you can integrate sports or sporting activities into the classroom—you can do activities with bean bags, or something like that. We have found that if we are teaching in a classroom intervention, pupils really cannot hold their attention for more than 20 minutes, so they need a physical energiser. That is something we have started to train teachers on: how to integrate sporting activity day to day. This sense of fun is something that pupils seem to be missing a lot in life in general, so if that classroom environment can have an element of fun that is still boundaried, that is really engaging for pupils.

The main thing for us is that relationship. We really appreciate that the teacher's time is limited in terms of that relationship within that setting, but we work with the young person to empower them to be aware of their needs in that classroom environment. That is something that we teach teachers as well: to try and see behind the behaviour and take, as much as possible, a non-punitive approach in terms of changing that behaviour, because that behaviour is just communication.

Chair: Do you have anything to add to that, Jonathan?

Jonathan Pauley: I have to emphasise that relationship piece. We use that as a real opportunity to be successful. Teachers will have 30 students for maybe two hours a week, so it is hard to even know their second name within that time, whereas we can really invest in these young people to the point where they know. We will have a lot of students who are quite resistant to support and will say, "I need you to stop caring now," which, where we are at, is an absolute win—basically, they have not had enough adults in their life to care about them, so for us to do that feels strange to them.

It is about making sure that there are enough staff, or enough time for staff, to really invest in getting to know the young person on a personal level and their interests or hobbies—whatever you can do so that they invest in you. When they know that you are invested in them, they have a responsibility towards you. Our students will always apologise for misbehaving across school, because they feel like they have let us down. They haven't, but we have created that sense of appreciation and responsibility that probably is not able to be created across school.

The other point I would like to mention is that students within our provision do not feel the stress of feeling pressured by results. If they do well, great; if they do not, we try again and we go again. Naturally, across secondary schools, there is a pressure that is put on teachers that then, whether they like it or not, is put on the students, which can create challenging learning environments. I feel that that is why a lot of students enjoy being with us, because there is not that level of stress. We understand that there is not a lot that can be done, but it helps if teachers can be mindful of that. We always have open conversations



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about the learning environment being a much more positive one when you are mindful of that. We find that creating safe spaces for students to talk freely and have opinions, and making sure that they are heard and thought of within education, gets the buy-in for young people and makes them want to return to what we do.

Chair: Very good. Thank you very much for your evidence, which is very much appreciated.