

Education Committee

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

Tuesday 27 June 2023

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 27 June 2023.

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Members present: Mr Robin Walker (Chair); Caroline Ansell; Mrs Flick Drummond; Nick Fletcher; Kim Johnson; Andrew Lewer; Ian Mearns; Mohammad Yasin.

Questions 187 - 283

Witnesses

I: Rt Hon Nick Gibb MP, Minister of State for Schools, Department for Education; and Graham Archer, Interim Director General for Families Group, Department for Education.



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Rt Hon Nick Gibb MP and Graham Archer.

Q187 **Chair:** Welcome to the fourth and final evidence session of our inquiry into persistent absence and support for disadvantaged children. Today we will be hearing evidence from Nick Gibb, Minister of State for Schools at the Department for Education, and Graham Archer, interim director general of the families group at the Department for Education. You are both very welcome. First, Minister, what is your Department doing to drive down increasing absence rates?

Nick Gibb: It is an important question. When we came into office in 2010, reducing absence was one of our key priorities, along with improving the curriculum and the way maths and reading are taught. We appointed Charlie Taylor, if you remember, to do a review for us. As a consequence of the recommendations of the Taylor review, we implemented things such as redefining what persistent absence means—we changed it from 15% of missed sessions to 10%—and we increased the fines for parents who were taking their children out of school unnecessarily and in an unauthorised way.

As a consequence of all that, we managed to reduce absence. In 2006-07 it was about 6.5%. It came down to 6% in 2009-10. Just before the pandemic, it had reached about 4.7%. As a consequence of the pandemic, it jumped from 4.7% to 7.6%. You see a similar pattern with persistent absence, which was 19.3% in 2006-07 and 17.4% in 2009-10. Over the period of the reforms and before the pandemic it came down to 10.9%, and then, because of the pandemic, it jumped up to 22.5%. Both persistent absence and overall absence have been reducing since then, but both are still unacceptably high, so we are taking a range of measures to bring it back down to pre-pandemic levels.

First we published new guidance, "Working together to improve school attendance". That has a range of expectations for schools, multi-academy trusts and local authorities. In the guidance, for example, schools are expected to publish an attendance policy, appoint an attendance champion and use data to identify at-risk students. We may come on to this, but we now collect daily registration data from about 80% of schools, and that will rise to 100% in time. The guidance says that schools should be working closely with families to support absent pupils. Similarly, local authorities are expected to establish an attendance support team and hold termly meetings with every school to plan intervention for children at risk of persistent or severe absence.

We have also appointed an Attendance Action Alliance of people in the sector—in the police, health and social care—and we are working with those groups to try to find other measures to raise the importance of school attendance for children. We know that it is not just for education or attainment that children need to be at school—every day lost from school affects a child's long-term academic achievements and attainment—but it is also about their safety and wellbeing. We attach



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huge importance to tackling the consequence of covid in terms of absence and persistent absence.

Q188 Chair: Clearly there are a lot of initiatives in this space and a lot of activity. You talked about the expectation of schools, local authorities and others. What we were concerned by as we went into the inquiry is how slow the recovery post-pandemic has been, particularly with the stubbornly high level of persistent absence. Do you think further initiatives are required to address that?

Nick Gibb: One of the reasons for the stubbornness of the decline in absence has been illness. We have had outbreaks of flu and scarlet fever. Two-thirds of persistent absence is due to illness or medical appointments. Once we were through the winter period of what is called the twindemic—although it is actually a tripledemic because covid was also resurging—you see those rates of illness came down.

Having said all that, however, I agree; there are some longer-term consequences of lockdowns that concern us. One is that parents are slightly more cautious about sending their children to school with a mild cold. We are trying to emphasise that it is the fever that matters.

Q189 Chair: We will come back to parents' attitudes a little later. I was talking to heads the other day and separately—unprompted—three primary heads raised the concern that parents were more inclined now to talk about anxiety as a reason for children to be away from school, whereas perhaps before the pandemic they were more likely to say that their child was a little bit worried about going to school but still send them. Is that something that you have observed? Is it something we need to address?

Nick Gibb: Yes. There are two points to that. One is that it is easier for parents to allow their child to remain home if they are working from home. In the past, if a child was anxious but both parents had stressful jobs that they had to get to by 8 am, there was no choice and the child had to go in. There is that, but having said that, there is also a real mental health issue. I felt that there was a mental health issue in schools before the pandemic. That is why—along with Jeremy Hunt, when he was Health Secretary—we worked on a joint children and young people's mental health Green Paper on how to improve services for schools and children who were facing increasing mental health difficulties. The problem has become even more severe as a consequence of lockdown and children being away from their peers during the pandemic.

Q190 Chair: You mentioned the Attendance Action Alliance. I was fortunate to attend some of its early meetings. What is its tempo? Can you point to any specific outputs from that group in terms of what it has achieved to date?

Nick Gibb: It is chaired either by me or by the Secretary of State. What is good about these groups is that they are not talking shops, although we do talk; it is a doing group. For example, the North Shore Academy, a member of the Northern Education Trust, is rolling out its attendance hubs. That came from the Attendance Action Alliance. North Shore



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Academy has very good and successful attendance policies. We are rolling that out to nine more hubs, and that is a consequence of those meetings.

Dame Clare Gerada, president of the Royal College of GPs, has agreed principles for GPs regarding school attendance, so that GPs are giving priority to this when they are advising parents and children who come to see them. Commander Catherine Roper wrote to all chief police officers in England highlighting their role in safeguarding children and making sure that they are attending school. Isabelle Trowler, the chief social worker, ran a series of seminars to showcase best practice in local authority social care in making sure that children are back in school. There are some concrete outputs from those alliance meetings. They are very productive and enjoyable. I hope you enjoyed them as much as I do.

Q191 **Chair:** Are the meetings monthly?

Nick Gibb: I can't remember how often they are. They are quite regular.

Graham Archer: They are fairly regular. They are not quite monthly, but the key thing is how much happens between them and how we engage regularly with members to make sure that they are taking action, working with their particular sector. The Minister gave a couple of examples, with GPs and the police. The rhythm is one where we are engaged with people and they are working with their sectors in the spirit of attendance being everybody's business.

Caroline Ansell: Good morning to you both. I want to pick up on the pupil attendance dashboard. In your opening remarks, Minister, you said that around 80% of schools were participating. You also said that in time you are looking for participation to rise to 100%. Will that rise be because you are still looking to make it mandatory, or do you see support building? You said "in time"; what is your proposed timescale to move towards that?

Nick Gibb: It has been very successful on a voluntary basis. Such a high proportion of schools voluntarily supply their data. I think we will ultimately move to mandation. We do not have a timescale for that. It is a very successful project. It does not place any undue administrative burden on the schools. We scrape the data—I think that is the technical phrase—and that is incredibly useful in spotting trends and things that we did not know about in the past.

Q192 **Caroline Ansell:** If there is such a high buy-in and it is deemed to be a very successful tool, are there any commonalities among the 19% of schools that are not opting to participate in the dashboard at this point?

Nick Gibb: I wonder whether Graham has a feel for the 20%.

Graham Archer: My sense is that there is not a lot of commonality; it is quite a range of different schools. I think the key is to continue to demonstrate the effectiveness to individual schools of a wider accountability like this. It is becoming increasingly clear that this is the way that absence data is collected and acted upon. We want to see



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ourselves in a position where every school in the country is doing this and moving to that position.

Q193 Caroline Ansell: Is there a time by which you are hoping that the rolling stone will gather the 19% or is mandatory on the horizon at a certain point?

Graham Archer: We do want this to replace existing data collections and that will imply mandation, but we want to make progress with the 19% first so that we are clear that this is a process that is owned and understood by the whole sector. The action is to work with the 19% now and persuade them to make the shift. We will take decisions about making it the sole way in which we collect this data in due course.

Q194 Caroline Ansell: What is your assessment between the dashboard and the census? Is the dashboard the more effective way forward?

Graham Archer: I think the dashboard will be the more effective. We are still in relatively early days. We want to make sure that we have really good-quality data. At the moment, we test the two against one another. When we get the more established census data, we can use that to feed back, test through and be clear about whether our daily data is working effectively. I think that, because of its frequency, granularity and the way you can draw it straight into the Department's systems, the daily data programme is the future.

Q195 Caroline Ansell: Will you make the "Working together to improve school attendance" guidance statutory?

Nick Gibb: The intention is to make it statutory. We do not have the legislative vehicle to do that, but it is a very comprehensive and very well-regarded piece of guidance and schools are using it. Schools that are state bodies have a general law duty to be cognisant of this kind of guidance. Even though it is not statutory, it will carry great weight among local authorities, schools and multi-academy trusts.

Q196 Caroline Ansell: If it is moving towards being statutory, will there be any revisions? We have heard quite a mixed bag of evidence in the course of our inquiry. One or two contributors spoke about mental health, Minister, which you cited earlier and is increasingly of concern in schools. Their challenge was that that should be a premise for absence authorisation. Mind talked about greater recognition of some of the barriers. The Special Education Consortium recognised the need for a statutory code but wanted to see more inclusive practices. Will any of the feedback that you have had find form in revision?

Nick Gibb: We are certainly very interested in the output from this Committee, and we will look at your recommendations very seriously. There is already guidance on supporting pupils when a mental health issue is affecting attendance. There are also case studies that people can follow. If your Committee recommends revisions to the non-statutory guidance, we will look at them very carefully.

Q197 Mrs Drummond: In our first evidence session, the Children's



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Commissioner talked about irregularities in how people were recording attendance, particularly the B code. How do you collect the data on the different attendance codes? Are the current codes fit for purpose?

Nick Gibb: It is always a question of burdens on schools. For example, Caroline was hinting at whether you might have a sub-category of illness that reflects mental health. I would resist that, because it is difficult for schools to define, when someone is ill, whether it is a mental health matter or something else, or a combination. The more complicated you make the codes, in some ways you may get false precision.

The code B that you are talking about is about attending off-site. We need to make sure that that is accurately used. As you know, we recently consulted on the use of codes and the pupil registration regulations, and we will be bringing forward new regulations in due course to reflect that.

Q198 **Mrs Drummond:** So you will bring in a code of attendance. As I say, at the moment, codes are used quite differently by different schools and there does need to be good practice.

Nick Gibb: Yes. We will clarify the definition in the amendments to the regulations that we will bring forward.

Q199 **Mrs Drummond:** It would also be very helpful if you do use specific codes, because then you will know how many mental health issues there are and so on.

Nick Gibb: You are talking about illness, code I. We will listen to your recommendations if you do make recommendations on this issue, but I would caution that the more complicated you make filling in these codes for schools, it puts a burden on schools and they have many other things to do, and you can damage accuracy if you start demanding more precision that the schools do not actually have.

Q200 **Mrs Drummond:** The point is that they are not being used properly at the moment, so there needs to be a code of practice so that every school is doing the same thing. You cannot identify issues if schools are not all doing the same thing. I think that is what the Children's Commissioner was getting at.

Graham Archer: Clarity and consistency are important. We do not have really hard evidence about how code B is being used, but we hear from the Children's Commissioner and others that there are issues. Working to drive clarity is obviously a good and sensible thing to do.

Q201 **Mrs Drummond:** Presumably that would help the dashboard and other stuff too, because then we would have a really accurate picture of where children are.

That brings me to my next point, the out-of-school register, on which I have a ten-minute rule Bill. I hope the Department will take it very seriously and take it forward as soon as possible. Is it still a priority for the Department?



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Nick Gibb: Yes, it is. We think a register of children not in school is important and we consulted on it. Again, we do not have a legislative vehicle to introduce it, but we are still committed to doing so.

Q202 **Mrs Drummond:** The ten-minute rule Bill has had its First Reading. I am hoping that you might take it on and push it forward, if you can find some time.

Nick Gibb: I think our officials are talking to you about the vehicle in Parliament that we can use.

Chair: The Secretary of State described it before this Committee as her top legislative priority and, evidently, there have been indications from the Opposition Front Bench that they would welcome it and support it.

Q203 **Mrs Drummond:** Yes, there is definitely cross-party support.

Another point that is brought up by various charities and the Children's Commissioner is off-rolling. A lot of schools find some pupils too difficult so they off-roll them, but nobody knows where they are. Are you investigating off-rolling?

Nick Gibb: We have taken initiatives on off-rolling. We have asked the inspectorate to look at it. Where Ofsted finds evidence of unauthorised off-rolling, it will take a very dim view. However, children missing education is a more general issue. About 24,000 children are missing education. Most of them are transitional—moving from one school to another. At any one time there are about 24,000 children. We take it very seriously, as you know.

Q204 **Mrs Drummond:** We do not actually know how many children there are, because they are not on any register at the moment. That is why that is so important. There have been estimates of 80,000 home-schooled children and possibly 114,000 or so—

Nick Gibb: There is another figure of 94,000 children missing education at any one point in a year. If you compare that number with the 24,000, that implies that, generally speaking, children are missing education for about three months.

Notwithstanding all that, we do want to make sure that we know where children are, because there has been an increase. Home education is a perfectly acceptable form of education for children. I have constituents in Bognor Regis who educate their children brilliantly. I have been an MP for so long that I have met the adults who were children who were educated at home.

Mrs Drummond: Most of them do very well.

Nick Gibb: They have done extremely well. You can tell from talking to them how well-educated they are. But you have to make sure that the increase is not due to parents not being able to find a special educational needs place for their child, or because parents, for other reasons, have fallen out with the school and are unsuccessfully attempting to educate



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their child at home, and that it is not being used as an excuse for attending more extremist forms of education in unregistered settings. We have that to worry about too and there are other safeguarding issues. It is important that we know where children are and can make sure that they are safe.

Mrs Drummond: Brilliant. That is a good commitment, on the microphone, that you are definitely going forward as soon as possible with the register.

Nick Gibb: We can get the DG's affirmation as well.

Graham Archer: Indeed.

Mrs Drummond: Good. I look forward to talking to the officials. They have not approached me yet, but I want to push this forward as quickly as possible.

Q205 **Ian Mearns:** Minister, you have said that there is no legislative framework, but it has to be said that the Government are hardly overburdening Parliament at the moment. In the last couple of weeks Parliament has risen at 2.20 pm and 4.30 pm. There is time in this parliamentary Session to do something about this urgently—and I would say that it is urgent, because there are tens of thousands of children missing an education.

Minister, you previously sat in front of another iteration of this Committee and said that off-rolling is illegal. You have now said to the Committee this morning that the regulator or the inspectorate will take a dim view of it. If I went and broke a window, I hope that the Metropolitan police or Northumbria police would take more than a dim view of it. What we have here is a situation where children in some schools are being off-rolled on an industrial scale. Without a register, how will the inspectorate or Ofsted know that there is a problem in a particular school? I think the answers you have given so far on this question, Minister, lack an element of urgency.

Nick Gibb: We have taken measures. For example, when a pupil's name is taken off the register, there is a duty to know where that child is going next. We introduced regulations to require local authorities to take that action. We are not insouciant about this issue. It is very important and we are determined to introduce a statutory register.

Q206 **Ian Mearns:** One of the main mechanisms that local authorities had to enact any of this sort of stuff for tracking children was education welfare officers. We have seen a significant reduction in the number of local authority education welfare officers. In 2015 I believe there were about 700, and that was down from well over 1,000 before 2010. We are now down to about 400 education welfare officers. It is one of the main tracking mechanisms that local authorities have at their disposal. Because of the defunding of local authorities over the past 13 years, without a register and without ContactPoint, which was abolished by Michael Gove, we have a situation whereby you are saying that local



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authorities have the responsibility but they do not have the resources or means to do this effectively.

Nick Gibb: I disagree with that. I think they do, and—

Q207 **Ian Mearns:** But the numbers of EWOs speak for themselves, Minister.

Nick Gibb: There are other roles as well. There is a virtual school head who is there to make sure that looked-after children have all the support they need, and we are extending that to other children. We have attendance advisers supporting local authorities to make sure that they are adopting the best approach to ensuring that children are back in school.

Q208 **Ian Mearns:** There are a number of different statistics, and because of the lack of a register and proper tracking they might often include some of the same children, but in autumn 2022 we were talking about 125,000 pupils being absent more often than not and something like 140,000 children never in class. We are talking about more than a quarter of a million children who are missing significant amounts of school. Persistent absence, by the way, is defined as missing 10% or more of school. That means a day every fortnight.

Graham Archer: Coming back to education welfare officers and local authority duties, local authorities have a duty. It is obviously up to them exactly how they discharge it. My understanding is that there are something like 1,100 education welfare staff across the 150 top-tier local authorities with specific responsibilities. I think the sense is this is everybody's business, including everybody in a local authority, but also that there are different ways of handling this, and different ways of doing it, with multi-academy trusts and others. There is something about local authorities having a clear responsibility, flexibility about how they do it, and a not insignificant number of staff who are engaged in it.

Q209 **Ian Mearns:** The most recent LGA figure is 402 education welfare officers. Clerical staff supporting the welfare officers in particular units might bring the number up to 1,000, but that is not the same as having staff out on the street with the technical capability for enforcement.

Graham Archer: My data is from the new burdens assessment of the guidance that the Minister has referred to. That is where that comes from.

Chair: Thank you. That is helpful.

Q210 **Andrew Lewer:** As you know, we have been running this inquiry for quite a while. We have heard from multiple witnesses that fines and prosecutions do not work as a deterrent to school absence. Some of the people we have heard from have been very emphatic about that and have cited some of their own research. What research does the Department have, and what research has it conducted on the effectiveness of fines?



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Nick Gibb: If you look at the figures since 2010, when we increased the fines, you will see quite a dramatic fall in both persistent absence and overall absence. It went from 6% of children who were absent in 2009-10 to 4.7% just before the pandemic, in 2018-19. We have seen a similar pattern with persistent absence, falling from 17.4% of enrolments in 2009-10 to 10.9% in 2018-19. We doubled the fines in that period and put a greater emphasis on collecting those fines. You will have seen those absence rates falling very significantly as a consequence. That regime is still in place.

When I came back into office in October, as somebody who believes very strongly in making sure that all children are in school, I was very aware that there was something different now about children being absent. It was not just unauthorised holidays and so on; there was an increase in illness and in barriers to attendance. You had children who were stuck at home for quite a big chunk of two years due to the pandemic, along with all the mental health issues that that caused, children falling behind in their work and being frightened about going to school because of that—there are all these other barriers. What you need to do at this point is put the emphasis on helping families and children to overcome them.

Having said all that, if families are not prepared to engage with that support, there is a case for using the regulatory route to make sure that children are attending school, because they all deserve an education. No matter what their family background, that child deserves to be in school and to have an education.

Q211 **Andrew Lewer:** Related to that, the DfE did a consultation in July on the draft thresholds for legal interventions. Are you going to publish a response to that?

Graham Archer: The consultation and the wider work on attendance is something that we want to consider in the round, and we want to pick up what this Committee says, but in due course, yes, of course.

Q212 **Chair:** It is good to hear that you want to pick up what this Committee says, but this is an issue of great concern, which is why we started the inquiry. What worries us is that the levels of persistent absence and severe absence remain so high a year on from the pandemic. Surely, making sure that we have the right tools being used in the right way is a matter of urgency when it comes to getting on and dealing with this. We would encourage you to complete that work as soon as possible.

One thing I observed from a conversation with Rotherham was that they took the view that they had been using fines in the wrong way for a long time, that they were deploying fines as a first resort and that—very much to Minister Gibb's point—if they looked at removing barriers and helping families first and deployed fines only where absolutely necessary, they were far more effective and had better results. They changed the nature of the work they were doing to encourage people into schools and that seemed to be a model that worked quite effectively.



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Nick Gibb: The approach is support first, because of all the challenges children faced during the pandemic. All the issues that we have discussed so far—we may discuss more of them—are really important in helping children to overcome those barriers. But, ultimately, we do need to make sure that families are not taking term-time holidays for children.

There was inconsistency between authorities in the approach to issuing fixed penalty notices. You will recall from the Schools Bill that we sought to have some consistency across local authorities in how they use the regulatory approach to get children into school.

Q213 **Chair:** Presumably, in the absence of the Schools Bill, you will do that through—

Nick Gibb: Through guidance and spreading best practice of local authorities.

Q214 **Andrew Lewer:** You have heard already—and it will continue to be a theme—the concern expressed by all witnesses across the education family and by this Committee about persistent and severe absence. When the response comes out, and in the DfE's ongoing emphasis and work in this area, is severe absence intended to be the focus, rather than what might be regarded as the low-hanging fruit of occasional absences?

Nick Gibb: There is some evidence that unauthorised absence is correlated with authorised absence, but persistent absence is the most serious of the absences. As I say, two-thirds of persistent absence is authorised. The largest element of authorised persistent absence is illness or medical appointments and we saw a spike over the winter due to scarlet fever, flu and covid. Those figures have come down quite dramatically and I am optimistic that they will continue to fall.

I am also optimistic that because of the measures we are taking we will address this issue. A substantial amount of work is happening to address both persistent absence and absence as a consequence of covid. I am confident that those figures will return to pre-covid levels.

Q215 **Andrew Lewer:** You can understand parents' perspective when they end up with fines and all sorts of penalties for a holiday of a few days here and there when teachers are regularly on strike. They are told on the one hand that absolutely every day of school is vital but they end with a fine for having a holiday for a couple of days and then teachers are on strike for a week.

Nick Gibb: We know from the evidence that every extra day of missed education affects a child's ultimate achievement in GCSEs, so we have taken a range of measures since 2010 to try to prevent children from being taken out of school unnecessarily.

As for industrial action, it is very disappointing that this is the way that the unions have decided to conduct pay negotiations. It is not fair on children or their parents, particularly as children have been through the pandemic and have already suffered too much disruption to their education. We can talk more about industrial action if you want, but we



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have put a very fair pay offer to teachers, which the unions rejected because they felt it was not funded, but it was funded. We have received recommendations from the School Teachers' Review Body. We are looking at those and we will respond in due course in the usual way.

Q216 Kim Johnson: Good morning, panel. My first question is on attendance hubs. Minister, there are 125,000 persistently absent pupils. Would you agree that the attendance hubs are only considering the presenting problems at the moment and are not looking at the underlying barriers that you have mentioned in terms of mental health, poverty, racism and bullying? What evidence is there that the attendance hubs are improving attendance?

Nick Gibb: I do not disagree with anything you have just said. All those other issues are hugely important. I cannot emphasise enough the seminal nature of the Green Paper on children and young people's mental health that Jeremy Hunt published as Health Secretary and that we are implementing. It is a big change in the support that children are getting. We have given grants to about 13,000 schools to train a senior mental health lead in the school. We are training up mental health support teams. They have already reached 35% of pupils in the schools they are in and we want to get that to 100%. I wish it was 100% today, but it is a big job, training 8,000 people to run those mental health support teams. We take mental health very seriously indeed.

The hubs build on the work of the North Shore Academy, part of the Northern Education Trust. They did exemplary work and had very successful attendance policies—this was pre-covid—so we have taken that approach and tried to spread it to more schools. We have taken it to nine attendance hubs serving about 600 partner schools. I know you can say that there are 23,000 schools, but we want to make sure that it works, and I am confident that it will.

Q217 Kim Johnson: Can you say a little about the criteria that were used to identify the additional areas?

Nick Gibb: I think they are disproportionately in the priority education investment areas, but Graham can say more.

Graham Archer: They are in priority education investment areas. We received applications. We are at a particular point in the scaling-up process. We have a good theory of change in a single place where it works really effectively, in the North Shore Academy. We then spread it a bit to test it in a number of different environments. If that works—and we will evaluate that—we will spread it again. We have not focused absolutely on the places where attendance is worst. We are disproportionately looking at places where we need to make a difference to educational attainment. We have a different set of schools. There are primary, secondary and alternative providers in there. There are only 10 hubs, so it is not an enormous sample, but it gives you more of a sense of how things work in a range of circumstances and then you can expand some more. That is the basis on which we did it.



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Q218 Kim Johnson: Thank you for that, Graham. We know that it is a major problem and it is increasing. One of the issues with these kinds of programmes is the short-termism element. It is a three-year programme. How much emphasis are you putting on dealing with the problem of persistent absenteeism?

Graham Archer: It seems to me that there are two approaches to this. The Minister has set some of this out. First, we have some specific things that focus directly on attendance. Hubs are a really important part of that approach, taking the strategies that the best schools use, spreading them more widely and doing school-to-school support. But there is also a sense in which this is everybody's business and, within schools, the whole school's business. It is about having schools that are calm, supportive and inclusive and about having good partnerships between schools and local authorities. The hubs do not take away from the wider work described in the guidance that we look to schools, local authorities and others in the partnership to do. This is a way of turning the dial sharply on the basis of spreading really good practice.

Q219 Chair: Can I come in on this? We have some figures from School-Home Support on the priority education investment areas. Those were the areas where the Government were trialling support in various areas, including attendance. I think they said that £42 million is being invested across those areas. They are interested in finding out how much of that is going towards attendance, which presumably would be in part through the pilot hubs, but they point out that the proportion of priority investment areas that are seeing persistent absence rise above the national average has increased over the relevant period.

Last year, 19 out of 24 priority education investment areas had a persistent absence rate exceeding the national average of 12%. In the subsequent year, 21 out of 24 surpassed the national average, which had risen to 22.5%. Those figures are quite concerning and reflect that this is an acute challenge in the priority education investment areas. Is that something that you would take into account in considering whether to expand the role of hubs or whether other interventions are required to address attendance in these areas?

Nick Gibb: Don't forget that those areas have become priority education investment areas because of disadvantage and educational outcomes. We do know that absence is higher among children from disadvantaged backgrounds so the figures you are citing are foreseeable. However, we are seeing the numbers for persistent absence beginning to come down right across the country. Given that the whole purpose of the attendance hubs is to test the proof of concept, I think it would be premature to say that they are working or not working.

We first introduced hubs for maths, spreading the Shanghai or Singapore approach to teaching maths in primary school, and they are a very successful way of having a school-led, professional-led way of spreading best practice. We have extended the model to behaviour, reading and modern foreign languages, and I would argue that it has been proven to



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work. We just need to make sure that the approach that the North Shore Academy has successfully used can be spread to other schools. I am pretty confident that it will be successful.

Q220 Kim Johnson: Minister, you just mentioned that disadvantaged children are more likely to be persistently absent. The End Child Poverty coalition has identified 4.2 million children currently living in poverty in this country, the fifth richest economy in the world, which is impacting so many children. I want to talk about attendance mentors, another initiative that you have identified. You are talking about rolling out more mentors to cover 1,665 children. That just looks like papering over the cracks, given the major issue we are dealing with. Are you looking to roll attendance mentors out nationally? If so, when is that likely to happen?

Nick Gibb: You are right: we launched a £2.3 million attendance mentor pilot to deliver intensive one-to-one support to persistently and severely absent pupils. The pilot will run for three years and will support about 1,600 pupils. We have also extended that to four additional priority education investment areas: Salford, Knowsley, Stoke-on-Trent and Doncaster.

In answer to your earlier question about how much focus there is on attendance in the priority education investment areas, there is that and it is also a key feature of almost all the 24 priority areas. Attendance is going to be an important element of their work. We will wait to see the evaluation of the pilot before we decide whether to expand it further.

Q221 Kim Johnson: Can you say a little about whether those mentors adopt a whole-family approach, Minister, and what that looks like?

Nick Gibb: We do believe in the whole family—we are spending quite a bit of money on family support. Graham may want to say a bit more about that.

Graham Archer: As I understand it, the mentors work with children, but obviously understand the contexts in which those children live. That is an important part of their role. The work that schools do alongside local authorities and early help systems—family help and so on—definitely takes a whole-family approach and works with the family to drive attendance and wider action. Mentors work specifically with children and take family circumstances very much into account in doing so.

Nick Gibb: The Supporting Families programme, a highly funded programme, supports about half a million families, who have already benefited from it. We are projecting that it will help a further 300,000 families. Supporting Families is a very important Government initiative.

Graham Archer: If mentors do discover issues involving engaging families more directly in their children's education or references to other external support, they are a route for doing those things, and they do work with families in circumstances when their work with the child exposes a wider set of issues, as it very often will, I imagine.



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Kim Johnson: Sadly, the family hubs that you mention, Minister, do not really replicate the Sure Start programmes that we had and that made a significant difference to ending child poverty. Looking at rolling them out even further would be beneficial to children currently living in poverty.

Q222 **Chair:** Coming back to the issue of education welfare officers, which Ian raised, the Committee has heard evidence that since money for education welfare officers was devolved to schools, it has become a traded good for schools or a postcode lottery for pupils. Have you considered the case for centrally funding some of these roles? Is that an option? We talked about the numbers in local authorities. Have you considered an audit of what different local authorities have in this space? Whether it is education welfare officers or educational psychologists, there seems to be enormous variation among local authorities in what they have in their own complement and therefore the support they can provide.

Nick Gibb: We do not necessarily recognise some of Ian's numbers, but there could be a nomenclature issue with whether a local authority calls the role "education welfare officer" or something else. Local authorities have duties that transcend the autonomy of schools and those duties have not been changed. They have central duties to ensure that there are enough school places for children and make sure that the admission system works, and they have the pastoral support in terms of assessing children for special educational needs.

Graham Archer: The approach is very much to work with local partnerships within the existing legislative framework, which gives local authorities both responsibilities and flexibility in how they work. What works in Kent may be a bit different from what works in Wokingham. We want to be a bit careful about that.

Q223 **Chair:** I accept that, and I accept that local authorities will have different needs to meet, but in both this inquiry and some of the one-off sessions we have had on SEND, we have heard the concern that some local authorities do not seem to have the staffing that you might expect in order to meet their statutory responsibilities and are either reliant on external agencies or simply are not always able to meet what is required of them, leaving parents to commission their own educational psychologist's reports, for example. Surely that is a matter that the Department should take some interest in.

Nick Gibb: It is. That is what lay behind the special educational needs and alternative provision Green Paper, which led to the improvement plan. It is designed to provide higher standards for the special educational needs provision that parents will have for their children in mainstream education. If they are more confident about that, the need to obtain an EHCP and all the debates and disputes that go into the conclusions of those assessments, or even getting an assessment, will not be necessary. That is the long-term objective of the improvement plan.

Q224 **Chair:** Graham, you mentioned that you had looked at a burdens



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assessment in terms of where the numbers of education welfare officers were across the system. Did that give you information about other roles that are supported across the piece?

Graham Archer: The new burdens assessment was designed around whether the guidance was placing new burdens on local authorities or whether it was funded within the current settlement. We do not have a detailed breakdown of what roles are used. As the Minister says, nomenclature is important and different aspects of that will play out.

Regarding accountability, Ofsted plays a part in both the special educational needs regime and social care, including the early help regime. Elements of that play into whether or not local authorities are doing what they need to do.

Q225 **Chair:** Ofsted also has the new ILACS inspection approach, looking at the whole local area support. Do you think that will pick up some of these things in terms of what support is available?

Graham Archer: I think it will, yes. It will continue to focus on a wide range of things, particularly, perhaps, on the harder end of social care. You would expect that you might see more about early help and this broader space than you saw in some of the previous inspection regimes.

Q226 **Chair:** The Committee has heard that local inventions such as community hubs and family support practitioners could be implemented and could make a difference. Is the Department considering any other areas of local support to improve attendance, beyond the attendance mentor scheme and attendance hubs?

Nick Gibb: Crikey, what else are we doing? We have our attendance hubs, as you know. We have our 10 attendance expert advisers. We have talked about the mentoring programme. The thing about attendance is that it looks across everything we are doing in education. For example, we are spending £5 billion on education recovery for pupils, and that is very often a barrier for children coming back into school. The holiday activities and food programme ensures that children not only get a nutritious meal during the holidays but are engaged in quasi-educational activities, which means that when September or January come along, they are confident about going back to school. These programmes are important in their own right in trying to improve education. Of course, we have the SEND and AP improvement plan on top of that.

Graham Archer: If you go a bit wider into the world of the local authorities and their role, the Supporting Families programme, with the whole-family approach, has a specific attendance outcome; improving attendance over two terms is one of the things that that plays into. There is also the expansion of the virtual school heads from just being for looked-after children to being for all children in need—those children with a social worker. Those two things are also quite important elements in thinking about how the whole-family approach helps with attendance.

Q227 **Nick Fletcher:** What is the Department doing about the higher absence



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rates in special schools?

Nick Gibb: The same issues apply. We have very high expectations for attendance of children with special educational needs, whether they are in special schools or in mainstream education. We know that the overall persistent absence rate for pupils with an EHCP was 36.9% compared with 32% for children with SEN support and 20% for pupils with no identified SEN. That 36.9% compares with 24% in 2018-19. You can see two things. First, even before covid, there was a higher persistent absence rate among children with an EHCP than among children without, but it has also risen as a consequence of covid from 24% to 36%.

All the issues that we have described—mentors, the guidance we have talked about, the expectations on schools to work with parents, the supportive environment, helping children to catch up, dealing with mental health difficulties—apply to special schools as they do to mainstream schools and children with SEN in mainstream schools.

Graham Archer: There are specific things that you need to take into account and specific barriers that need to be brought into play in the specialist space. These are children who are likely to have medical and other appointments that impact on attendance, they may have transport needs that are different from those of other children, and they will need specialist services to be available to them. The guidance and the work of the hubs works to adapt those general high-expectation principles to the particular circumstances of children in special schools. There is a recognition that needs can be greater and that we need to address them in a way that works for those children but does not undermine the high expectation that all children deserve and have a right to a full education.

Q228 **Nick Fletcher:** There is authorised absence and unauthorised absence, and children with special educational needs have lots of appointments that they have to attend outside school. Is there a way to collate these absences? These children will be going on to employment at some point, and having unauthorised absences throughout their school lives could have a huge effect on that. What do you think of that?

Nick Gibb: In terms of authorised absence—

Nick Fletcher: Unauthorised absence.

Nick Gibb: Unauthorised absence would not be the medical appointments, though. All the illnesses, medical appointments and transportation issues facing those children would be in the authorised absence category.

Q229 **Nick Fletcher:** Are they clearly marked as such? Can it be seen from outside, "That is an authorised absence and that is unauthorised"? Can that be clearly seen at the moment?

Nick Gibb: Yes, all that data is available. In fact, we collect it on a daily basis, so we absolutely can see that. The advantage of all that data coming in is that we can see trends, and there are interesting trends that we can perhaps talk about on another occasion. You can see differences



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in attendance on different days of the week, for example. So we can look at that, and you can drill down to see if particular children are more likely to have unauthorised absences than other children and target those children. We send this data back to schools as well, in an analysed way, so that they can say, "Why are these children from these particular backgrounds more likely to be engaged in unauthorised absence?" and take specific targeted measures to improve their attendance. We can do that in special schools and mainstream schools.

Graham Archer: In both the authorised and unauthorised spaces and in the intersection between them, which the Minister talked about earlier, you can see how, coming out of the pandemic, the parents of some special school pupils will be more nervous than parents of pupils in mainstream schools because of those children's vulnerabilities. There is something about how schools use the data that the Minister has talked about to work with children and their families to encourage them to get the benefits from a full education and overcome some of those worries about their children's vulnerabilities. In the weeks that I have been doing this job, heads of special schools that I have talked to have spoken very eloquently about how they have managed that and have significantly improved attendance as a result of that close working with parents as well as children.

Q230 **Nick Fletcher:** The Minister would not expect to sit in front of me and not be asked about RSHE lessons, something that is close to my heart. Is the right to withdraw from sex education lessons classed as authorised or unauthorised?

Nick Gibb: That is a good question. I think withdrawing from a lesson does not mean that you go home. I think you would stay in school and engage in some other lesson—some other part of RSHE, I would presume. If you slipped off home, I think it would be unauthorised. I think that is the answer to your question.

Q231 **Nick Fletcher:** What about parents who are taking children out of relationship classes where there is no right to withdraw? Are they going down as unauthorised absences?

Nick Gibb: If parents come and ask their child to leave school during the day, yes, that would be an unauthorised absence.

Q232 **Nick Fletcher:** We are going to be seeing much more of this because people are obviously realising what children are being taught at school. Are we going to move towards having a right to withdraw from relationship education that parents feel uncomfortable with?

Nick Gibb: As you know, the rules are that parents do have a right to withdraw their children from the sex education element of relationships, sex and health education. They do not have a right to withdraw their children from the sex education element in the science curriculum or from the relationships or health elements of relationships, sex and health education.



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You know that we are also bringing forward the review of the RSHE guidance. The RSHE guidance is a very good document. It was worked on by senior figures in the sector. I spent a lot of time on it as well. It landed well right across the education sector, from the orthodox side of schools right through to our colleagues in the House, who take varying views of this issue.

I share your concern about some of the reports of material being used in some schools that is not age appropriate, and that is why we have brought forward the review, which would have happened in September. We have brought it forward, and we are appointing a panel of experts from the sector to look at it and make sure that all those issues are addressed in that guidance. I hope that guidance will resolve the problems that you and I are worried about.

The other thing is that the Secretary of State has written to all schools saying that they ought to be sharing the teaching materials that are being used. That will make sure that parents can be satisfied and reassured that the right materials are being used. It will also engage schools to make sure that they are using the right materials. They do have a duty, even in the current guidance, to make sure that any material either they get themselves or an external visitor teaching the subject uses is age appropriate and in accordance with the guidance.

Q233 Nick Fletcher: I do not want to press too much on this—and I will be very quick, Chair—but unfortunately parents are still not seeing as much of the material as they should and schools are still making it very difficult for them to see it. When they do see it, they will be withdrawing their children, which is going to have an effect on absence, which will look bad in a report like this.

I think teachers are struggling with the definition between sex and relationships. The two are conflated, and it is creating harm in our schools. I encourage all parents to press schools to make sure that they can see all the material. I have heard, “This is what parents need to have a look at, and this is what the children are being taught”—we have seen evidence of that—which is disgraceful. I would press all parents to make sure that they see everything that their children are being taught. If they are not happy with it, they should have a right to withdraw them from that.

That is what we need in place; otherwise, you are going to get unauthorised absences. Unfortunately, on this subject, I would agree with those unauthorised absences, because I do not think it is right what we are teaching our children at the moment. I am glad the Government are looking at this, but they need to look at it extremely carefully. Even when this has all gone through, there will still be parents who want a right to withdraw from these lessons and I think we should be looking at that.

Nick Gibb: I would not advocate that, because there are some elements of relationship education that are important in a modern world. It is important that children are introduced to the different kinds of families that there are and so on. In some of the more orthodox schools that



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might not happen without this guidance and without there being compulsory RSHE in those schools. As I said, the guidance did land well right across the range of schools we have in this country, so I would counsel against that.

We have been very clear to schools that they do need to share this material with parents and—parents do not have a veto on what is taught—reflect on parents' concerns. If parents are unhappy, every school has a complaints procedure to go through. I would counsel parents to use that rather than to withdraw their children from school, because education is so important for children and I do not think taking children out of school is the answer to that problem. There is a complaints procedure.

Q234 Mohammad Yasin: Many pupils with SEND are often absent due to unmet needs, in both mainstream and special schools, so what is the Department doing to tackle unmet need among pupils with SEND?

Nick Gibb: This is a really important issue and it is one that the Government are taking very seriously indeed. It is what led to the Green Paper on special educational needs and AP and the improvement plan. It is also an issue for local authorities. Their high-needs budgets are often in deficit, because there are more children now with EHCP plans. Some of that is because of better medical care for young children; children who may not have survived in the past do survive, and some of them have quite severe needs.

The high-needs budgets of local authorities have been put under pressure in recent years and we absolutely recognise that. It is why we have increased the high-needs budget by 50% over the last four years. That is a very significant increase. It is now about £10.1 billion, I think, the high-needs budget in schools.

That does not mean to say that the issue has been resolved, but the improvement plan seeks to make sure that standards of SEN provision in mainstream schools are at the right level for those children so that, first, children are getting a better education in mainstream education and, secondly, parents can be reassured about the provision in mainstream education. Then we can make sure that the whole EHCP process and allocating children to special schools is for children who need those particular types of education.

Q235 Mohammad Yasin: You mention funding. Funding is still a major problem; in recent years, it has not kept pace with demand. Obviously, the demand is higher than the funds available. What can be done to make sure that the demands are met?

Nick Gibb: These are discussions that we have with the Treasury every year. Overall school funding has gone up by 15% over the last two years, 2022-23 and then into 2023-24. It went up by £3.5 billion or £4 billion this year. These are very significant sums at a time when the Treasury is having to balance all kinds of competing demands, not least from the



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NHS. We do take these issues very seriously. We are putting more and more money into high-needs funding.

We are also building and opening more special schools. One of the problems local authorities faced was that they had to send children into very expensive independent provision if there was not enough state-funded provision. Under the free schools programme we have opened about 93 special free schools, because we just need more provision in special schools for those children that need it. I acknowledge the problem that you raise and we are addressing it. I am not saying that the job is done yet.

Q236 Mohammad Yasin: Another issue we heard about is that three in 10 teachers who work in special schools rarely or never get the support that they need to teach SEND children effectively. What support is available for them at the moment? Is the Department trying to give them more support in the future?

Nick Gibb: In terms of support for teachers generally, whatever their specialism, I acknowledge the fact that we are losing too many young teachers starting out in their careers in the first year. One of the reasons is that these people, who are straight out of university, straight out of their PGCE, are put in a classroom and then we say, "Well, teach the geography curriculum." I think we need to be more supportive. That is what the early career framework is about. It is a two-year programme with mentoring. We put £130 million a year into that to make sure that they are getting the support.

In a special school, that mentoring will be by an experienced teacher of children with special educational needs to make sure that that new teacher has the support they need. That is what the early career framework is all about. I do not know whether you want to add anything specifically on special schools, Graham.

Graham Archer: I don't think I do on special schools, actually. I think that support for individual teachers and thinking about how the whole school delivers for pupils is really important.

I want to extend a tiny bit and say something about mainstream schools, where I think there is an equivalent challenge of enabling teachers to understand less severe special educational needs and mental health and provide an overall more supportive system for them, making mainstream a more attractive proposition for parents of children with special educational needs and enabling more children with special educational needs to remain in that mainstream setting. You have a parallel action in mainstream and in special. The national standards and the change programme that is associated with them are intended to do those two matching actions.

Q237 Ian Mearns: Earlier, Minister, you said a substantial amount of work is happening to address absence and that you are confident that numbers will return to pre-covid levels. Can I ask you when?



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Nick Gibb: I thought you were going to ask that. The answer is that I don't know. We are, in a way, in uncharted territory from what we have all experienced and what children particularly have suffered in this period. We have discussed measures this morning; if there is more that we think we should be doing, we will do it. We will keep all these initiatives under review and we are always talking to people in the sector about what more we can do to try to improve attendance. As I say, we will look at your recommendations very seriously as well.

Q238 Ian Mearns: I am not going to ask you to put a particular target on it, but what would you think would be a reasonable amount of time to get back to where we were? If we wait 10 or 15 years, every youngster who has been affected by covid will have left the system. That is not exactly addressing the problem. Would you say that five years, at most, would be an appropriate amount?

Nick Gibb: I don't know. The extreme end of those figures would be unacceptable. If you talk to any employer about the proportion of staff who are working from home, that has not returned to pre-covid levels. It is a new phenomenon. That does have an impact on attendance, because it is easier for a parent to allow their eight-year-old who is unhappy at school to stay at home.

That is what the guidance is about. It will require the school to work with parents to say, "Look, unless your child is ill, they should be in school because it's going to damage their long-term prospects," and to have what the guidance calls sensitive conversations with parents. Tackling those fundamental lifestyle changes that have come out of covid is not going to be an overnight issue.

Q239 Ian Mearns: I would be interested to see whether the Department is going to do some work on that. For instance, train driver and bakers cannot work from home, but office-based workers have the capacity, with the agreement of their employer, to work from home. In fact, many employers find that staff are more productive and that there are less overheads in allowing their staff to work from home, in terms of leasing office space, paying rates and all the rest of it. In order to flesh that out, is the Department going to do any study to see if there are greater instances of absence among the children of home-based workers, or previously office workers, as opposed to other workers?

Nick Gibb: I don't know whether we have or are going to.

Graham Archer: I don't think we have. I am slightly nervous about doing so. It feels like quite an intrusive piece of work to be undertaking.

Ian Mearns: It's the Minister's assertion, for goodness' sake. Come on!

Graham Archer: We hear from schools that that is part of the issue and we would expect schools to be having some of those conversations with parents as part of their attendance programme. There is something about what you do locally and engaging in a survey that digs into people's lives in a deep way.



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Q240 **Chair:** Anecdotally, it certainly seems to be part of the issue, particularly on Fridays, with more people working from home some days of the week.

Nick Gibb: You do see that in the daily data. These are issues we will just have to deal with and we will deal with them. We saw a big rise in unauthorised holidays happening. We made it very clear that you have to get the headteacher's permission to take your child out during school term time and that taking a child out for a term-time holiday is not an acceptable reason, and that did result in absences reducing over that period. We will take similar measures this time, but they will not necessarily be the regulatory—fining—measures. Particularly when absence is associated with anxiety about being in school or mental health issues arising from being away from school and being at home for that period of time, you have to take a more sensitive approach. But measures will be taken.

Q241 **Ian Mearns:** I think the Department could do some work on that. If an education welfare officer gets involved, for instance, the very fact that an education welfare officer goes to someone's house is intrusive, but it is trying to tackle the problem of a youngster not attending school on a regular basis. We know that youngsters who do not attend school on a regular basis do not achieve as well as their peers who do.

I will come on to the question I want to ask, which is about mental health. What specific work is the Department doing in conjunction with the Department of Health and Social Care for pupils with mental health difficulties? How can that work support pupils with high absence rates? Are health impacts on young people and their educational prospects given any priority by the Department of Health and Social Care?

Nick Gibb: As I mentioned earlier, mental health was a priority of the Department before the covid outbreak. Working with the Department of Health on the children and young people's mental health Green Paper led to all the measures that we have introduced, such as training a senior mental health lead in every school—we have already issued grants of £13,800 to schools—and the establishment of mental health support teams.

We have worked closely with Peter Fonagy from the Anna Freud Centre, whose analysis of this issue is brilliant, and we have leant very heavily on his expertise. There are different levels of anxiety or distress that children have and the idea is to make sure that at every level we try to address and support so that it does not escalate to the next level. A one-to-one discussion with your own teacher can often deal with some underlying issues. If they need more technical support, there are the mental health support teams to provide that. Ultimately, if it is a very serious mental health issue, there is obviously CAMHS.

Q242 **Ian Mearns:** Has the Department done any scoping work to see exactly what the impact of covid has been on the increase in youngsters who manifest mental health problems?



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Nick Gibb: We do know that it has had an impact. I am just trying to think of the studies that we might have that will demonstrate that.

Graham Archer: We absolutely understand that there is an impact. In terms of absence, it is hard to quantify exactly how that relates because mental health issues very often combine with other issues to drive absence. We invested £15 million overall in wellbeing for education return—post-covid programmes to help schools with guidance, support and expert training so that they were better able to cope with the presentation of new issues. I think that has helped. None the less, it feeds into the figures, and in quite a complex way.

Q243 **Ian Mearns:** Would it not be interesting, though, to try to disaggregate the impact of covid from everything else that is impacting young people's mental health? One of the things that we regularly hear about is testing stress, or exam stress, among particular cohorts of youngsters. Have you thought about doing any work to disaggregate the covid effect to see what else there is out there that is impacting young people's mental health at the moment?

Nick Gibb: I certainly look at studies. There is a recent study from the United States that shows a correlation between the use of smartphones and referrals to mental health. Also, suicides among 10 to 24-year-olds tripled between 2012 and 2019, as I remember that particular study. I have always taken the view that children's spending an inordinate amount of time on their smartphones will contribute to mental health issues. It is not necessarily what they are doing with the screen; it is the fact that they are not doing other things, such as being outside in the fresh air, meeting friends and spending time with their parents. It just seems to me axiomatic that that will lead to mental health issues.

It was very clear to me when the Green Paper was being worked on that mental health was an increasing issue among young people—this was prior to covid—because we know that children are bullied online. In my day, you could be bullied at school, but you went home and that was the end of it, but today you can be bullied at school and bullied online; you get home and you are in your bedroom and it is still continuing. You can see why children get very distressed. We had to take action to deal with that, even prior to covid. Being at home, away from friends and teachers, of course, will inevitably be an additional contributor to that.

Q244 **Kim Johnson:** Minister, we know that there was an increase in eating disorders among pupils as a result of covid. Prior to the pandemic, services were inadequate to meet the needs. I am curious what conversations you are having with the Department of Health to look at resources to meet the increasing demand—in particular, resources close to home, so that pupils do not have to go out of area to receive the support they need.

Nick Gibb: We know that there has been an increase in referrals to mental health services. The NHS long-term plan has basically committed to increasing investment in mental health services by at least £2.3 billion



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a year by March 2024, and aims for an additional 345,000 children to be able to access NHS-funded mental health services. We do talk to the Department of Health about this. A disproportionately high element of the increase in funding for the NHS has gone to mental health. Within that, a higher proportion than you would expect has gone to children's mental health. It is an important issue. There is always room for more, but significant funding has gone into children's mental health.

Q245 Ian Mearns: But the waiting times for youngsters to access mental health support from the NHS are inordinate. That must have a detrimental impact on their educational outcomes and prospects.

Nick Gibb: I agree. Part of the Green Paper proposals was to pilot a four-week waiting time for CAMHS services and how that could be delivered. A child that is in an emergency situation will have treatment straightaway, but there are still children for whom I believe we need to do more to make sure they receive those services.

Q246 Ian Mearns: Should there be a separate attendance code for mental health-related absence issues?

Nick Gibb: I can understand the argument for it. We touched on this earlier with Caroline's questioning. The danger is that it is difficult to assess whether it is solely mental health that has led to the absence or whether it is a combination of mental health and other issues. As I said, you can have false accuracy. If you are asking for too much information from schools, it just becomes inaccurate and a burden on schools to submit it. I will listen to the Committee's recommendations.

Q247 Chair: Do you think that there is a risk that if a specific attendance code was created for mental health, it would become an excuse for people to say, "Oh, I can't come in because of mental health"? Do you think there is a risk that that could drive non-attendance?

Graham Archer: I don't think we have any evidence either way on that, but you can see that a combination of a mild cold and anxiety is the sort of thing that might lead to children being kept at home in a way that we would not want to see. I think there are some risks but I don't think I would be in a position to quantify.

Q248 Mrs Drummond: The "Good Childhood Report" published by the Children's Society says that there is an unacceptably large proportion of children unhappy with school and it is getting worse. That must really worry you as Minister for Schools. What are you going to do about it? We have talked about mental health, but it is not just everybody—I mean, we have huge amounts of persistent absence and mental health. As Schools Minister, that must be something that you are really concerned about that you are talking about with schools, because an increasing number of children do not want to go to school.

Nick Gibb: There is no one cause of the problem that you are describing. I do not want to rehearse everything we have discussed, but there are a whole range of reasons why absence and persistent absence is high coming out of covid. It just went up like that, if you look at the chart.



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Q249 **Mrs Drummond:** It was happening before, wasn't it? I have been reading the "Good Childhood Report" for some time now and it is getting worse. That is one of the reasons why I was looking into it.

Nick Gibb: In terms of happiness of children—

Mrs Drummond: Yes. Isn't there something fundamentally wrong in our schools if children are not happy in schools?

Nick Gibb: Part of dealing with absence is making sure that every school has a calm and safe environment where children are supported. If you go to schools that have very high attendance rates and a culture that is safe and supportive of pupils, you will see the children there are happy. We have put a lot of effort into improving behaviour in schools since 2010.

We have our behaviour hubs, which are headed by Tom Bennett, our behaviour expert, to try to spread the best practice of those schools that I have described. How do we get what they do into every school in the country? I believe that is the source of making sure children are happy. There is evidence that mental health is improved by being with other people and socialising, but also by learning. The process of study helps your mental health. However challenging simultaneous equations are, the process of trying to understand it is, I am told—although it seems difficult to believe—intended to make you happy.

Q250 **Ian Mearns:** What is better, then: happy learning or repressed, behaviour-controlled learning?

Nick Gibb: You talk about repressed behaviour. I just think instilling good behaviour in schools is designed—

Q251 **Ian Mearns:** You can do that in a happy way. I once appointed a headteacher when I was chair of governors at a secondary school. It was one of the best day's work I did in my life. He had a very simple philosophy. What he wanted in his school was happy bairns learning and achieving. What is wrong with that as a philosophy?

Nick Gibb: I 100% support that philosophy. The question then is: how do you achieve that? If you look around the country—and I have visited over 1,000 schools in my time—you can see different approaches to behaviour policy. There is a thing called, if I remember the phrase, the warm-strict approach to policy, which I think you are hinting we are opposed to. Those schools have a strict set of rules about the conduct of children, combined with very strong pastoral care for those children. It isn't just, "Don't talk in the corridor. Be on time. Do your homework." It is also, "How are you getting on? What's life like at home?" That is what you see in the best schools around the country, and that is really what our behaviour hubs are trying to instil: how do you make sure that children are obeying the rules, doing their homework, going to bed on time, coming to school fresh and behaving properly at school? That is how you create a happy environment and that is what we need to do more of.

Q252 **Ian Mearns:** Lastly from me, we touched on this earlier when we were



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talking about people working from home, but illness remains one of the main drivers of absence, and illness absence rates remain higher than pre-pandemic levels. Is the messaging for parents consistent regarding illnesses and when children should be attending school when they are ill?

Nick Gibb: Your question raises an issue; there is higher caution among parents about sending their child into school if they are showing symptoms of a cold or something. There is NHS guidance—it says that schools are encouraged to circulate it—and its key message is that you should not keep a child off for a cold or cough unless they also have a fever. If you take a child's temperature and they have a fever combined with a cold and a cough, that is a reason not to, but there is that caution.

Q253 **Ian Mearns:** Does the Department provide any guidance on what support should be offered to pupils who are still suffering from covid-related impacts—for example, pupils with long covid?

Nick Gibb: There is this NHS advice. I don't know whether you want to answer, Graham.

Graham Archer: We would want schools to treat that as any other longer-term illness: think about the needs of the pupil and make adaptations, whether they are formal legal disability adaptations or adaptations that help children with issues that are below that threshold but would still help them to thrive in a school. We would absolutely want schools to do that. We would want them to follow sensible NHS advice in that space.

Q254 **Mrs Drummond:** The Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community have very high rates of absence. What is the Department doing to tackle that?

Nick Gibb: You are right; they do have high rates of persistent absence. In 2021-22 Gypsy/Roma pupils had a persistent absence rate of 58.7% and Traveller pupils 66.5%. We are working with DLUHC. It has delivered a £1 million Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pilot education areas programme to test initiatives to improve educational attainment of GRT children. That is on top of the £400,000 funding provided in 2021 for catch-up tutoring for GRT children. We also have a GRT stakeholder group, which is a forum for policy teams to consult directly with the community so that they can express their views to the DfE on how we can tackle the challenges faced by GRT children.

Q255 **Mrs Drummond:** I think one of the biggest issues is bullying as well as racism. What guidance do you give to schools to help with that?

Nick Gibb: The guidance we have on behaviour is very clear about bullying. Any form of bullying—homophobic bullying, racist bullying—is unacceptable in schools. The guidance is very clear. I think that most schools work very hard to eliminate that kind of bullying.

Q256 **Mrs Drummond:** Some ethnic groups, such as Chinese and black African, I think, have very high attendance rates, but groups such as Pakistani pupils and black Caribbean pupils have quite high absence. What are their specific barriers to attendance?



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Nick Gibb: You are right; the figures show varying absence rates among different groups. Do you want to add anything, Graham?

Graham Archer: As always in things of this kind, there is a combination of things. Some of that is about the circumstances in which you live. Where poverty is relatively impactful, some of this will be about the effectiveness of the inclusion policies in the schools and the way they make children more or less welcome. I would guess there will also be some cultural impact about the point at which you require your child to go into school and the point at which you don't. We have talked a bit about some of that too. My guess is that will be a broad combination of issues. Schools will need to understand those in relation to each individual pupil and work through those with the children and the families involves.

Nick Gibb: The issues are complex and generalisations can be unhelpful, but the great advantage of all the data that we have and the analysis that we can provide back to schools is that schools can see which particular groups in their own school, rather than national generalisations of the data, are particularly prone to absence. They can then focus on those six children or those 23 children to make sure that they are talking to the parents and finding out why they are not coming into school sufficiently.

Q257 **Mrs Drummond:** So the Department would give extra support to those schools with an issue if they wanted it.

Nick Gibb: We give them support in terms of the data. We also fund schools to help them tackle—for example, the national funding formula gives extra funding to a school for a child that has English as an additional language or low prior attainment, or comes from a disadvantaged background. There is a whole raft of issues where we give extra, and they are not small sums; they are in the thousands of pounds. Schools get £500 or £1,000, depending on the particular characteristic, for each pupil that has that characteristic. If they have multiple characteristics—they live in a disadvantaged area, they are on free school meals and they speak English as a second language—the school will get all that funding, in combination, to enable them to fund those initiatives.

Q258 **Kim Johnson:** Minister, you mentioned the collection of data. Do schools have to report on racist incidents in school? If they do, how is that data collected and how is it dealt with?

Nick Gibb: My understanding is they don't. It is physical—do you—

Graham Archer: I don't know, but I can find out and write to you.

Nick Gibb: We can write to the Committee about that.

Chair: It is something that came up in conversations we had with Ofsted—that there isn't a requirement to keep a record of every incident.

Q259 **Kim Johnson:** If you are not collecting data on racism, how do you have



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an evidence base on the high levels that are apparent in some schools?

Nick Gibb: We have very clear guidance. Schools are run by professionals and they are autonomous, but we fund them and we have guidance. I haven't yet met a teaching professional who does not want to tackle racism in their school. The guidance to schools about behaviour is very clear that racist bullying and racism itself is unacceptable. The RSHE guidance, which we touched on, does not just cover some of the sensitive issues that Nick was raising; it also covers how to behave and issues about race and equality and understanding and respecting difference. All those issues are very clear in the RSHE lessons for schools.

Kim Johnson: I would have to disagree with you in terms of how the issues are dealt with. We saw what happened to Child Q in school. I will leave it there.

Q260 **Mrs Drummond:** We have heard evidence that children who arrive late to school—particularly refugee children or children from asylum-seeking families—are being withdrawn from mainstream schools or placed in alternative provision. Is there any guidance that you are giving schools? What steps have you made to ensure that schools have better knowledge and understanding about what they can do with those arriving late to school?

Nick Gibb: Do you mean late in the day or late in the term?

Mrs Drummond: Late in the school year—in the term, yes.

Nick Gibb: Schools are equipped to help those children catch up. That is what they do. For the particular refugees from Ukraine or Hong Kong, we do have very specific programmes for those children. Schools are funded and they are equipped to help those children catch up. I don't know whether you have any additional points to make on that, Graham.

Graham Archer: No. I have not seen that specific evidence, but I would be interested—

Q261 **Chair:** I think it was around children being withdrawn from mainstream education within the school, rather than necessarily from schools themselves, so being put in separate streams, which obviously could be, in the short term, a legitimate way of helping them catch up, but—

Nick Gibb: Well, if they are coming into school with no English at all—these children really learn it quickly. The younger they are, the more swiftly they learn, but it may be that in the first weeks of arriving at a school they need to really home in on their English language, and then they can access all the lessons.

Graham Archer: Some schools do operate a really effective set of temporary, time-bound, focused streams of work, not just for refugee children but for children more generally, which helps to get them into mainstream education. If that is the issue, that is part of the way in which schools effectively manage learning.



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Q262 Mohammad Yasin: The End Child Poverty coalition estimates that the overall child poverty rate in the UK stands at a staggering 29%. In my constituency of Bedford, it is a bit lower, at 24.8%, which equals 10,806 children in poverty. This is a major problem. What support is currently available to families where the cost of the school day is a barrier to school attendance?

Nick Gibb: As you know, we have increased the number of children eligible for free school meals. It went up from 1.7 million to 1.9 million. That is largely because of the approach we took to the transition to universal credit. On top of that, we introduced universal infant free school meals for children in the first three years of education. About a third of children now qualify for free school meals when they are at school and I think that is important.

On top of that we have the pupil premium, which is paid for every child eligible for free school meals. That has risen from £2.7 billion last year to £2.9 billion this year. Schools have quite a lot of discretion about how they can support children with that, although we point them to a menu of effective interventions to help children from disadvantaged backgrounds with their education.

On top of that, of course, we have discussed the holiday activities and food programme in the summer, Christmas and Easter holidays to help those families. In addition to all that, the Chancellor has given families up and down the country support in dealing with the consequences of the Ukraine war and the consequences of the cost of living rises coming out of covid. There has been quite a generous and supportive range of measures by the Government in dealing with the very real cost of living challenges faced by many families up and down the country.

Q263 Mohammad Yasin: Given the huge pressure on families from the cost of living crisis, do you have plans to introduce further measures? Some children are missing school because they cannot afford transport or uniform costs. Is there any help available to them?

Nick Gibb: As you know, children from disadvantaged backgrounds have extra rights to transport, so that they can have the same choice of school they go to as children who can afford transport. Those are called extended rights, and that programme is very effective in helping those families.

Graham Archer: On uniform, we have issued statutory guidance, which focuses very much on affordable/reasonable so that families are not expected to spend an enormous amount on that. That is an important part of it.

Q264 Mohammad Yasin: Some children, very sadly, feel shame that their family is struggling financially. Is anything being done by the Department to highlight and tackle this problem?

Nick Gibb: As I said, we take this issue extremely seriously right across Government. It is not just the Department for Education. There has been



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multiple billions spent. I think something like £94 billion has been spent over the last few years—I can write to you with the exact figure—on giving extra support to families who are struggling with energy costs and a higher cost of living as a consequence of what has been happening since covid and since the invasion of Ukraine by Russia. That support has been hugely important, on top of the support that we all had during covid itself.

It was the Conservative-led coalition that brought in the pupil premium, which now stands at £2.9 billion going to schools. As I said, a third of children now get a free school meal every day at school, on top of the holiday activities and food programme and the £30 million national breakfast programme to make sure that children in the most disadvantaged areas of the country have a nutritious meal at the beginning of the day. All that will help.

The Children Minister has also announced changes to childcare. They will all take some time to be implemented, but there is now very generous childcare support to help working families have childcare, which is quite expensive, for free to enable them to go into work and bring up their family.

Q265 Andrew Lewer: You talked about the national school breakfast club programme. Has the Department, in consultation with schools, thought about how that programme can be used to further support school attendance in particular, as well as its other benefits? Does the Department have a view on the fact that food inflation is at a particularly high rate relative to overall inflation at the moment in terms of its cost envelope?

Nick Gibb: Yes, and that is why we recently extended the national school breakfast programme to the end of the summer term of 2024. There is £30 million in the programme, which supports 2,700 schools in disadvantaged areas. That means that hundreds of thousands of children benefit from a nutritious breakfast at the beginning of the day. That will help families deal with the cost of living challenges.

Q266 Andrew Lewer: The other thing that schools provide to help people with that is free school meals, yet the eligibility criteria for the breakfast club programme and for free school meals are different. Why is that? Is that likely to be harmonised at some point?

Nick Gibb: Schools are eligible if they have 40% or more pupils in bands A to F of the IDACI. Within the school—I think it is a matter of discretion for the school.

Graham Archer: It is a matter of discretion, but the key difference is that the breakfast is place-based and free school meals are individual pupil-based.

Andrew Lewer: Income-based. Thank you.

Q267 Kim Johnson: Minister, you mentioned the benefits of universal free



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school meals for infants. The Nuffield Foundation has supported that. Has your Department considered rolling out universal free school meals to all children to help with educational attainment and health improvement?

Nick Gibb: These are not inexpensive programmes, so there is an opportunity cost in any new initiative like that; it means that something else somewhere across Whitehall will not happen. Our philosophy and approach is to target scarce resources of taxpayers' money on those children who are most in need, and I think that is what we have delivered. Right across the school ages, any child who meets the eligibility criteria will qualify for free school meals. I think focusing it on those is the right approach. We keep it under review. If we found that the way we calculate eligibility is not reaching all the children that it ought to reach, we would review it, but at the moment we think it is the right approach.

Q268 **Kim Johnson:** In the eligibility criteria, unfortunately £7,400 is the cap, which means that so many more children are living in poverty—4.2 million, as I mentioned earlier. Something significant needs to happen to take all those children out of poverty.

Nick Gibb: If you look at the £7,400, when you take into account all the benefits, that is equal to an income of between £22,000 and £29,000, depending on the individual circumstances of the family. That is why we think it is the right figure, but, like I say, we keep it under review.

Q269 **Caroline Ansell:** A seamless move, Minister: you talk about measures being “not inexpensive” and opportunity costs, so I am going to raise the holiday activities and food programme. I should say up front that I am a huge supporter of the initiative. I have seen it at first hand in Eastbourne, and some of the reporting back from it speaks of increased confidence—I think you mentioned that too. But, of course, for every pound spent, you need to demonstrate value.

At the very start of the programme—I remember speaking to the Children's Commissioner on this—there was a hope that there would be a discernible, tangible link between attendance at the holiday activities programme and a September return. Minister, you spoke about the confidence, particularly for children who perhaps suffered mental health issues—that that continuity and connection would carry them through what can often be a very stressful time for children with the September return.

The permanent secretary told us in December that at this point the evidence has not come forward to demonstrate that link with attendance. We have moved on a full six months. Has the position changed? Are you aware of any findings that highlight the positive impact on attendance that we had hoped to see?

Nick Gibb: Of course, that is not why the HAF was established. It was initially—

Caroline Ansell: Indeed, but it is an interesting by-product.



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Nick Gibb: Yes, absolutely. Just intuitively, you feel that it would improve attendance, but the purpose of it initially was to help children in the holidays who were getting a free school meal at school and that suddenly became a cost for the families. That was the purpose of it. We piloted it, if you recall, in a number of authorities and it was successful. It also has an educational element to it—not simultaneous equations, but it engages children in other educational activities so that they do not suffer the educational loss that there is so much evidence for over the summer period.

We do not say that the programme has to be only for children eligible for free school meals. Local authorities have flexibility about who they can invite to come on the programme. We are saying to them that they might like to think about children who are low attenders and who may not otherwise be eligible for free school meals to go on to the programme. I do not know whether we have any evaluation yet of—

Graham Archer: We do not have any evaluation that draws out specifically the impact of HAF. You would expect that, for a child who was persistently or regularly absent, you would be engaged in a number of activities to keep them in school, of which HAF is one. We do not have an evaluation that says, “This is the impact of the HAF programme as opposed to other elements.”

Q270 **Caroline Ansell:** We do not have that evaluation at this point, but is that something that has been designed in? Will there be a reporting back? At £200 million, this is no small investment, particularly at a time of straitened finances and the need to target. Has the Department set in train that sort of data capture so that the programme can be seen to be effective, however that is defined? If you are saying that it is around nutrition—if that is what the Department is looking to do—is simple attendance enough, or are you seeking further from it?

One of our guests in the third oral evidence session was Declan Barker from Nottingham City Council, who leads on HAF in that area. They are drawing an assessment together, but he said there is not a requirement by the Department. I imagine that they are doing that because they foresee a time when they will have to present the case for the continuation of the programme. I understand that there is funding for one more academic year, but I have not been aware of any further announcements or commitments. What data is the Department gathering?

Nick Gibb: There was a 2021 evaluation, so I am assuming that we are—knowing the Treasury as I do, I cannot believe there is not an evaluation.

Graham Archer: There is an evaluation, but it speaks to your point about what the HAF was established for and its secondary purpose. The evaluation focuses on the, I think, primary impact of HAF but does not have that direct link to what impact it has on attendance. That is partly because of the methodological challenge that that would present and



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partly because you set something up with a particular set of purposes and you evaluate those purposes. We have come to the attendance impact a bit later in its life.

Q271 Caroline Ansell: It is about the provision of food, in which case, are you concerned that only 29% of those pupils eligible for free school meals are taking up those holiday places?

Nick Gibb: It is not compulsory; this is a voluntary scheme. The provision is there. I have a figure here for the number we have reached; something like 600,000 pupils have benefited from the scheme. I am not sure that any local authority is turning away children who are eligible for free school meals.

Q272 Caroline Ansell: Perhaps it is just about comms. If you are not gathering evaluation-type data to make a case for the continuation of the programme—

Nick Gibb: We didn't say that.

Caroline Ansell: —can we assume that this is now a fixed provision in the same way as free school meals are, and that it does not have to be seen to be washing its face cycle after cycle?

Nick Gibb: It will be evaluated on the basis of what it was set up to deliver. It will not necessarily be evaluated in terms of its impact on attendance.

Q273 Caroline Ansell: Is there a staging post for that? When will that evaluation be—

Nick Gibb: We will write to the Committee about the precise details of the evaluation. With all these programmes, it all depends on the spending review cycle. We have to make the case every spending review.

Q274 Chair: One other area that until recently depended on the spending review cycle is sport provision in schools, but we had the good news of a multi-year funding settlement for the PE and sport premium, which many of us had long been calling for. We have heard quite a lot of evidence in this inquiry that sports-based activities can improve attendance in terms of their positive impact on behaviour and wellbeing. Minister, you and I have debated the issue of sport in schools and the fact that it can also improve attainment. What steps will you take to further develop sports programmes in schools across the piece?

Nick Gibb: We are about to publish the school sport action plan that we are working on as part of the national plan. As you rightly point out, we have announced the continuation of the primary school PE and sport premium as well.

I take sport in school very seriously. There is a report out today about cricket and how we need to have more cricket in schools. I agree with that. We need to have more sport played in schools. I worry that sometimes we make it an overly technical issue. It is important that



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children know how to play sport, but also they need to get on and play the sport. I sometimes think that we do not quite have that balance right.

I certainly agree with you that sport is hugely important in schools. As we say in the RSHE guidance, exercise is very important for mental health, as well as the long-term fitness and health of every individual. You are preaching to the choir when it comes to sport in schools.

Q275 Chair: You have recently made a number of announcements about music. We have heard quite a lot of evidence that the balance of what pupils get in schools, particularly in primary, can be important in encouraging attendance and engagement. Obviously, different types of pupils think in different ways and engage differently with different subjects. Do you recognise the importance of the breadth and richness of the curriculum, including proper breadth when it comes to music and the arts? How do you make sure that all the emphasis that we quite rightly put on reading and mathematics does not squeeze out some of those areas such as music and the arts?

Nick Gibb: It shouldn't and it mustn't. I am absolutely passionate about music in schools. The schools with the best academic standards in English and maths also have very good sports provision and music provision. I have never seen it as an either/or. We want both. We need children reading proficiently and being good at maths and science and the humanities and a foreign language, but we also need children to have been introduced to our culture and to the world's culture.

We published a national plan for music education and we have introduced a model music curriculum. That is a 100-page document setting out from primary school right through to the end of key stage 3 a very high-quality term-by-term music curriculum that we hope schools will introduce.

I also had an initiative with Classic FM, the Classical 100. That is a website available for schools that has 100 pieces of top-quality classical music played, with some interesting facts about the composers, that schools can sign up to. It is a way of introducing children to classical music. I love classical music. The only reason I think I was introduced to it rather than the hit parade, as it was called in my day, of pop music was because at school they played a piece of classical music when we came into assembly. I thought, "This is wonderful," and I went off and found out more. I want that for every child in our schools. That is what the Classical 100 is going to do.

Chair: To Ian's point about happy bairns, it certainly can play a role in supporting that. You have been very generous with your time. We are about to cross the noon hour, but I see lots of hands going up.

Q276 Mrs Drummond: One of my headteachers said that the children who are most often absent only come in on days of activities. What are your latest thoughts on the extended school day, which would provide time to do all these exciting things and give people a reason to be in school?



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Nick Gibb: We have said that we expect schools to reach at least 32.5 hours a week, which is the average. I visit schools all the time. At Mercia School in Sheffield, the school day goes to 5 o'clock every day, and the last session—I can't remember what they call it—has these kinds of activities. It is a homework club for some children but it is also for activities such as sport and music.

Q277 **Mrs Drummond:** Shouldn't that be rolled out to all schools? That would help parents who are working. It would give schools much more opportunity to do all this interesting stuff.

Nick Gibb: Yes, I agree with you. The challenge I have is that the Schools Minister does not have a lever to implement these things. We have 23,000 schools that are autonomous. We implement policy by spreading best practice and talking about these things. That is why we have performance tables; that is why we have Ofsted. The Northampton School for Boys has something like 20 orchestras and ensembles as well as high-quality sport. You know that other schools do not necessarily—

Mrs Drummond: There are schools that do it, but—

Nick Gibb: There are schools that do it and schools that do not. We need to make sure that all schools do it, because it delivers the high academic standards as well. My heart sinks when I hear schools saying that in year 6 they have dropped all subjects except English and maths when all the evidence is—

Q278 **Mrs Drummond:** Why do you think that is, Nick? Are they worried about SATs?

Nick Gibb: They are worried about SATs, but the schools that do best in SATs are the ones that do not do that. If you talk to people like Robert Pondiscio from the American Enterprise Institute, he will say that to do well in a reading test, you need a wide vocabulary and knowledge. The best way to do well in the SATs reading test is to keep studying history, geography and science in primary.

Q279 **Mrs Drummond:** Some schools, unfortunately, are so engaged in SATs because we have put such an emphasis on them.

Nick Gibb: It is important that we hold schools to account for the quality of their primary education. We cannot have children, as used to happen, leaving primary school still struggling with reading and basic arithmetic. We have risen in the international PIRLS league table—we were fourth in the recent study that came out, among 43 countries testing children of the same age—because we put such an emphasis on every child being able to read fluently. We have done well because of the low attainers doing better and children from disadvantaged backgrounds doing better. Our country and our quarter of a million teachers in our primary schools should be proud of that.

I will say again that you do not get those results just by teaching English. You get them by teaching history and geography so that you know what a peninsula is and you know all this tier 2 vocabulary from subject-



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specific domains in science, history, geography and, indeed, foreign languages.

Q280 Kim Johnson: The recording of young carers on the school census has been raised with us. The Carers Trust has said that there is significant under-reporting, which could contribute to persistent absence. What will your Department do to ensure that that data is collected and looked at going forward?

Nick Gibb: Carers have huge challenges in their lives. I know that schools are sensitive to the challenges those children face, whether—

Q281 Kim Johnson: How do they know the challenges if they are not recording and reporting?

Nick Gibb: I thought we did know who they were but, Graham, do you want to—

Kim Johnson: There is under-reporting.

Chair: You are absolutely right to raise it. The concern is that the Carers Trust has far more children on its books as young carers than are reported in the school census. Its concern is that it does not feel that the schools are necessarily asking the right questions to find out where the young carers are.

Graham Archer: Let me commit to a conversation with the Carers Trust. We will take it forward on that basis.

Kim Johnson: Thank you.

Chair: Thank you. It is an important question.

Q282 Ian Mearns: Going back to Robin's last set of questions, regarding sport, the report of Independent Commission for Equity in Cricket referred to endemic racism, sexism and class discrimination in cricket. The pipeline for professional cricketers is predominantly from independent schools. In response to that—he was very sorry, of course—Richard Thompson, the chair of the ECB, cited the loss of playing fields in state schools, among other things. Is he right? What tangible support and encouragement can the Department give to schools to get them to engage in sports like cricket?

Nick Gibb: I don't think it is as simple as saying, "Schools are selling playing fields."

Ian Mearns: That is what he said. I am just quoting what he said.

Nick Gibb: Exactly, but he does not necessarily have the data. To sell a playing field, you have to go through a vast process. You need the permission of the Secretary of State. If you want to sell a piece of land, you have to demonstrate that you have replaced that provision elsewhere in the school.



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I think there is something else happening. PE is timetabled in every school—it is compulsory right through to the end of the compulsory school age—and it is being taught, but I wish it was at least two hours a week. I would like to see more actual games of cricket, games of football, games of netball being played for the whole length of a match. I am speaking in a personal capacity here. We will say more about these kinds of issues in the action plan that we will publish shortly, but it does concern me that we do not see full matches being played, although, having said that—I will get criticised by all kinds of people—a lot of after-school activity is happening in schools. There is no question about that. For those children who excel at those sports, there is provision and that is happening. I worry about what is happening for people like me who did not excel at any of these things, but nevertheless were forced out on a Wednesday afternoon in the rain to play. Although I did not particularly enjoy it, there is something to be said for it.

Ian Mearns: It's character forming, Minister.

Nick Gibb: Absolutely.

Chair: I share the Minister's experience of school sport and not necessarily being one of the high performers.

Q283 **Ian Mearns:** I have a serious point to finish on. The report by the Independent Commission for Equity in Cricket and the response of the ECB, which is of course just an initial response, throws down a challenge for our education system in terms of what we will do about school sport and also about those pipelines into professional sport, which really should come from all schools and not just a particular sector.

Nick Gibb: Yes, and it is a challenge that I am keen to take up.

Chair: Very good. Minister, you have been generous with your time and we have covered a broad range of topics, so thank you. You will be coming back before the Committee in just a few weeks' time—before the end of this term, we hope—on other topics.

I might set you one piece of homework. I know you will have been given plenty of challenge over the years by my predecessor as Chair of the Select Committee. You can remind him that the Committee's third report, on the future of post-16 qualifications, was published on 28 April and therefore his response is now due. We have a debate on it next week. If you could assist in chasing that up with the Minister for Skills, that would be much appreciated.

Nick Gibb: I certainly will. It will be my pleasure to do so.

Ian Mearns: And your comments are on the record, Chairman.