HOUSE OF COMMONS

Education Committee

Oral evidence: Accountability hearings, HC 136

Wednesday 6 December 2023

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Watch the meeting

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

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Witnesses

I: The Rt Hon Gillian Keegan MP, Secretary of State, Department for Education; and Susan Acland-Hood, Permanent Secretary, Department for Education.

Written evidence from witnesses:

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Gillian Keegan and Susan Acland-Hood.

Q1 **Chair:** Welcome to this accountability hearing of the Education Committee. We will be hearing from the Secretary of State for Education, the right hon. Gillian Keegan MP, and from Susan Acland-Hood, the permanent secretary at the Department for Education. I will start with this question to the Secretary of State: what have been the most challenging issues for you so far and what are your top priorities for the year ahead?

Gillian Keegan: Thanks very much. I have prepared an opening statement to cover those; I hope you don't mind. It has been just over a year—a year, a month and a week, I think—since I have been in the role. On the whole, it has been a good year and I am proud of the work we have done. We have some very ambitious reforms, but we are also seeing the benefits of some reforms that came earlier from other Secretaries of State and Ministers that worked in the Department. The long-term decisions that we have made continue to transform our education system. That is the key thing, really; that was one of the focuses when we came in in 2010.

But there is a key barrier to us achieving it at the moment, which is attendance, so that is one of my top priorities and something I am very concerned about. We are doing significant work on that—I know that the Committee has done a lot of work on it as well—but too many children are missing from school. Of course, these are the most precious, formative times and they are perishable—you can't get them back in some ways—so we are very much focused on trying to get people back into school.

It is not a unique issue to our country. At the G7, every other country had the same. We are seeing that it is a global issue from New Zealand to New York. Some children have broken the habit of going to school, and there are other issues as well. This is one of my top priorities. We are rolling out attendance hubs to support 800 schools, which will benefit about 400,000 pupils. We are piloting an attendance mentors programme in five local areas that have been particularly impacted, including Middlesbrough, Doncaster and Knowsley. We also have the data tool, which is probably one of our best tools to tackle this because it gives us immediate daily data of who is in, and 87% of schools are using it.

We have made some good progress. We now have 380,000 fewer children persistently absent or not attending school, but there is still a long way to go. That is the thing that probably worries me more. We will be setting out more work on that, but we are trying to make sure that we get to every kid, every family, and we are working with local authorities and schools to do that.

In terms of results, one thing that we always measure in education is actually what happened—the results. Never before has being in school been so valuable, because we have seen the standards rise again. Some 89% of our schools are now good or outstanding, compared with just 68% when we entered office in 2010.

We have successfully reduced the number of children in underperforming schools. We have a big focus on inadequate schools and children in inadequate schools, and trying to make sure that we move all those schools up to better standards and those children into better schools. We have reduced the number of children in underperforming schools by 90,000, and, as you will have hopefully seen in the PISA announcement yesterday, we continue to rise up the international league tables. We are very proud of that.

I think that two things stand out. One is the absolute results, in terms of the rankings. Obviously, everybody has been impacted by the pandemic more or less equally, but we are now ranked 11th in maths; we were 27th in 2009. We are 13th in reading; we were 25th in 2009. We are 13th in science; we were 16th in 2009.

Perhaps one of the things that we are most proud of is that we have been identified as a system that is in the top 10 most equitable systems in the world. We are always trying to make sure that kids, no matter where they are, no matter their background, have equal access to a really good education. That has been our goal. I know that many have had that goal, including yourself.

We continue to make huge strides, which is obviously thanks to our incredible teachers. There has been a lot of work on reforming the system and investing in teacher education, with the new initial training and the early career framework.

Q2 **Chair:** We will come to some of that; it is important. We have a lot to get through in the brief, so I will just follow up on the PISA point. Obviously it is welcome to see the English system rise up the rankings, but there is a very clear impact from covid, as you say; that is in every system. That impact is, judging by what we hear from schools, long term; it's not something that is just going to be a blip and be corrected. Do you not think the extent of the impact reflected in PISA perhaps justifies longer-term interventions than, for instance, the NTP, which is coming to an end this year? Is there an argument that some of the catch-up we all talked about in the immediate aftermath may need to be a longer-term programme than it was originally designed to be?

Gillian Keegan: Obviously we have a huge amount of support that goes to schools to enable children to get what they need, and that is largely in the pupil premium, but if you look at PISA, the biggest things that are impacting PISA are probably our introduction of phonics, our introduction of maths mastery and changing our teachers and teaching standards so that many, many more teachers are actually proficient and feel more

comfortable teaching primary school maths. We are rolling that out further as well.

The most important thing is high quality—access to high-quality teaching. We have more teaching assistants than ever in our schools; we have more teachers than ever in our schools—27,000 more. So that is really where the focus is, and the pupil premium is there to really support any additional needs that people have. I don't know whether you have any more comments on that, Susan.

Susan Acland-Hood: As the Secretary of State says, a large part of our recovery investment was in things like scaling up the investment in the early career framework and the NPQ system, and that continues, and will continue to have an enduring impact. We take this incredibly seriously, but I think a moment comes where it starts to be a bit artificial to describe a separate programme for catch-up—separate from the investment in the work that you want to do in schools all the time to try to make sure every child is achieving as much as they possibly can.

I think we are seeing some significant green shoots of recovery. You can look at a set of results that have come out over the course of this term. We have seen the early years and foundation stage profile results, which have gone up across all the measures and where the gap has closed. We have seen the key stage 1 results, which have gone up across all measures and where the gap has closed. We have seen the multiplication tables check, which has gone up and where the gap has closed, and we have seen the phonics screening check going up and the gap closing. It's not enough; we want more, but we think we are pointing in the right direction and with persistence we can get there.

The only other thing I would say is that when I go out into schools, teachers are working unbelievably hard on this. They are really thinking about it. Heads and teachers up and down the country are taking this incredibly seriously. The other thing that we can do is to helpfully support them as much as we possibly can in the work that they are doing. They tell us that the more we can do that through, as it were, mainstream support and the less we do it through lots of individual penny packets, the better.

Q3 **Chair:** That brings me to the mainstream support and the funding. You have mentioned, Secretary of State, that we have a higher number of teaching assistants in schools. With the proportion of school budgets being spent on staffing being higher than it has ever been—I think the Department recently changed its guidance on that to increase the recommended level—that is a significant pressure.

And, of course, we have a system where, in successive spending reviews, the Government, the Treasury, has provided funding for teacher pay increases, but has not provided separate funding for teaching assistant pay increases, which are set through local authorities and are not therefore in the same package. How do you see the ability of the sector to sustain those numbers and, particularly given the rising level of special

educational needs, the adequacy of the funding that is available in that space?

Gillian Keegan: I will answer your question, but I am just conscious that I didn't finish my statement, and I don't want anyone to say that these things weren't a priority. The other things I had on there were RAAC, the childcare roll-out, SEND—special educational needs and disability—and children's social care. I don't want people to accuse me of not—

Q4 **Chair:** Thank you. Those are all things we will come to—

Gillian Keegan: I know, but I did have them in my opening remarks, so I don't want people to say that they are not top priorities. They are top priorities.

Obviously, we have had lots of discussions around pay this year, and we have had discussions with the union. We were pleased that we were able to get a deal through the independent pay review body, which served its purpose. As you say, the local authorities do the agreements with teachers' assistants, who are on local authority rates. Once we calculated, in addition to what was affordable within school budgets, how much extra we needed for main teacher pay, we also provided more funding to recognise the teaching assistants as well. We have provided £525 million, £900 million this year, and we have considered that in our budgets.

Susan Acland-Hood: It is not tied to teaching assistant pay, but we recognise it in the affordability calculations that we make in order to work out how much additional we need to put in.

Q5 **Chair:** The feedback that we often have from schools is that they are finding it increasingly difficult to budget for numbers of teaching assistants, yet the demand for the support that they provide is ever increasing. So I think there is something there around the high needs funding system and the adequacy of that.

We had the error in the national funding formula earlier this year—the figure of £370 million. I appreciate the permanent secretary writing to the Committee to explain that and the apology that was given, but what assessment have you made of the adequacy of the current system for funding in general? This is an arcane system, some might argue, and there have been various proposals for reform over the years. I appreciate that some steps have been taken, but not all. What is the likelihood of being able to move further forward with a direct formula to fund schools according to the populations that they serve, rather than where they happen to be in the country?

Gillian Keegan: That is the direction of travel and we are on that journey to do that. But as you know very well, moving from one system to another also has to be done over a period of time—otherwise, it is too much change for schools to be able to manage, particularly those that may have higher funding in the existing formulas. We are moving to more of the NFF direct—I think about 10% a year. We try to get closer, but we do have some plans on that.

In terms of the error, the permanent secretary wrote to the Education Committee and also wrote to me, because this was deep down in the organisational, operational sort of funding calculations. I think probably it is best to pass over to Susan, although I did order a review, because, clearly, you cannot have these kinds of errors happening. It is unacceptable. I have worked long enough to know that mistakes do get made, but we have ordered a review to make sure that we improve the processes.

Q6 **Chair:** Has the review been completed, or is that still under way?

Susan Acland-Hood: First, I want to thank the Committee for the opportunity to repeat in person the apology that I gave in writing. The Secretary of State is right: we should not be seeing these errors. I say sorry to local authorities and schools as well, because we ought to pay attention to things like this. I do not think you can ever say that no error will happen, but you should have a QA process that makes it almost impossible for it not to be detected. That has been quite a lot of the focus of our work.

There are only three things you can do when you make a mistake. The first thing is to own it. The second is to fix it as quickly as possible, which is what we sought to do. The third is to focus as seriously and intently as possible on the learning you can get from the mistake and try to make sure that it cannot happen again. We have both done an internal review and we have already put in place change in response to that internal review. The scope of our quality assurance was the principal issue.

A large part of the detailed and complex calculation is double-run by analysts. The error occurred in a very early stage of the calculation, essentially in the inputs of pupil numbers. The QA scope was not broad enough to catch the whole of that, so essentially the double-run started with the same figures, rather than going back and looking at the whole of the scope of that calculation.

We have an independent review going on, led by Peter Wyman. It is very nearly complete and we expect to be able to publish it soon.

Chair: That will be published on the DfE website—

Susan Acland-Hood: Yes.

Q7 **Chair:** Okay, that is useful to understand. The reason this happened at this stage in the process was because of the system of allocating funding to local authorities and then having them run the schools forum with schools, and so on, afterwards.

Susan Acland-Hood: It certainly would be a simpler process to have a direct national funding formula, rather than going through local authorities. That is absolutely true. As the Secretary of State said, we have been tightening and tightening the relationship between local authority formulae and the national formula. We have seen more authorities each year perfectly mirroring the formula, and we required

local authorities to move 10% closer to the formula than they currently are, so we are making as much progress as we can. As you know, Chair, getting to the full direct national funding formula will take legislation, and we still have the intent to legislate as soon as we can.

Chair: The intent to legislate as soon as we can is something that we often hear on this Committee, but there don't seem to be many legislative vehicles to move things forward. That is a frustration on this front and others that we will come to. I want to bring in Anna on school buildings and RAAC, which, Secretary of State, you rightly said was one of your key priorities.

Q8 **Anna Firth:** Thank you very much. Obviously, this is something that the Committee has covered twice now. Secretary of State, Baroness Barran told us in September that Ministers advised you on 21 August this year that guidance on the impact of RAAC in schools should be updated following two incidents. You contacted school leaders with new guidance on 31 August. I know you have given explanations in other places, but for the purposes of this Committee, why did it take you 10 days to change the guidance?

Gillian Keegan: There were a couple of things going on. Just to add to the facts, a third case took place on 24 August—between the 21st and the advice. The first thing was that we had to go through the various decision processes. The decision that we made would have an impact on other colleagues, as everybody saw, so we had to make sure everyone was aware of that.

The most important thing that I said and put into the advice at that time was that we needed to operationalise it. I couldn't have a lot of schools—there were 104 at the time that were immediately going from non-critical to critical, and we were changing what they had to do—running around looking for surveyors, portacabins and people to help mitigate the work. We wanted to stand up a proper operation so that we had portacabin providers with portacabins on order, and surveyors contracted and ready to go out straightaway to schools. If you remember, we also put in place a caseworker system to manage all that. Each school had a caseworker who could make sure it got access to whatever it needed.

I have enough experience to know that if you don't operationalise things, you get chaos, and I wanted to try to manage that as much as possible. There was another case that happened during that period, but it was about the decision-making process with other colleagues it had an impact on, operationalising it and standing up a caseworker system so that schools immediately got the support they needed.

Q9 **Anna Firth:** Thank you. That deals with the past, but I think we are all more interested in looking at the future. With that explanation in mind, how many schools and colleges with suspected RAAC are still waiting for a survey to confirm its presence or not? If there are any, when will they be completed?

Gillian Keegan: Can I just take the opportunity to say that the schools involved have responded absolutely brilliantly? They have been amazing and very practical. They have done everything possible to keep children in school, and they have done a wonderful job. In the early days, there were all kinds of scare stories about 7,000 schools and lots and lots of chaos. It wasn't like that at all; it was actually very well managed by the schools.

Everybody has now responded to the school questionnaires, so we have 100% of the questionnaires from the settings in the target era—the years that could have contained RAAC. All the first surveys are complete, and we have identified 231 settings with confirmed RAAC. Ninety-nine per cent of all pupils are in face-to-face education; we have three settings that are in hybrid education. Obviously, that is a moving picture. It moves all the time. As we identify schools, we get them surveyed and put whatever mitigations and temporary accommodation they need in place.

Just to put this in context, there are over 22,000 schools, and every single one in the target era has responded to the questionnaire. They have all had their first survey, and 231 currently have confirmed RAAC.

We expect there will be some more because, as we go back for follow-up survey work, we will identify a few more, but what we have learned during this process—we have learned a lot during this process—is that what we expect now from where we are, having been to the more difficult to reach parts of the building—

Anna Firth: So—

Gillian Keegan: Just let me finish, because this is important. We have learned that there will probably only be a handful more cases. It has definitely slowed down massively. As you saw, we had 214 on the 16 October and now, having gone through a lot more, we have 231.

Q10 **Anna Firth:** We are following up on some points that we raised last time. I just want to be absolutely clear for the record that no schools are still waiting then for surveys to be carried out.

Gillian Keegan: For second surveys, potentially. What we have said is that all have had a first survey. Some of those may require a second survey. They are usually the ones that are slightly more complex. Either they are in more difficult-to-get-to areas—you need to take a piece of the building out, so they might be waiting until the kids are not there to do that—or there are ones where they are handling other things as well, such as asbestos. Some of those have been done, but if they are a bit more tricky they may be waiting for Christmas to do the second survey.

Q11 **Anna Firth:** I've got that. I think you have answered this, but just to be absolutely clear: have you have now received questionnaires from all responsible bodies?

Gillian Keegan: All in the target area, yes, which was quite a lot.

Q12 **Anna Firth:** Good. There was a concern as to whether responsible bodies

had the necessary expertise to make a judgment as to whether they had the presence of RAAC, but that has now been dealt with and you are completely happy that the questionnaires have been sent back and that the proper judgments have been made?

Gillian Keegan: We asked for them to be quite cautious. We sent guidance out and said, "If you see, think or even suspect that you've got RAAC, then we will go and do a survey." We have been very cautious. Some of the responsible bodies, which include dioceses, multi-academy trusts and local authorities, obviously have sort of building survey people and building estates management people. This was always our concern with schools because we have 64,000 buildings and we are obviously a very fragmented, dispersed service. That is why we took this cautious approach with schools specifically, but we are satisfied that the guidance was very thorough. The reality is you can see signs if you've got RAAC. If you look, you can see it—it is visually identifiable.

Susan Acland-Hood: We are confident from the rates that we are seeing. As the Secretary of State said, we were very clear with responsible bodies that if they were not sure, they should say either that they were not sure or that they suspected it and we would come to survey. For those that responded later and more hesitantly, we have seen lower rates of RAAC identification. That suggests to us that, on aggregate, responsible bodies were making pretty good judgments about whether or not they had RAAC. We have said that, when we have finished all the ones who need a second survey, we will do a dip sample test of those that told us that they definitely did not have RAAC to ensure that we are not missing anything.

Q13 **Anna Firth:** Good. That is very reassuring. Can I come on, Susan, to the comments you made in September? You told the Committee that there were 29 schools that required temporary classrooms and that 11 schools had received them. Can you give us an update on those numbers?

Susan Acland-Hood: Yes. We have 41 settings that now have temporary buildings on site. That is about 215 temporary units in total. A unit is a sort of block that you can pick up with a crane, if that makes sense. It might contain more than one classroom. As you can understand from that, what we have is a relatively small proportion of the total number who need quite a lot of classrooms between them. Again, there is a big difference between a school in which you are finding RAAC in one small area of the school, where typically the best response is to manage around that area, and a school where you are seeing very extensive RAAC across large proportions of the school.

Q14 **Anna Firth:** Do all the settings that need the temporary buildings now have them?

Susan Acland-Hood: There will still be settings that we have identified later in the process that need temporary buildings that will not have them yet. There will also be settings that did not need temporary buildings in order to get all pupils back into face-to-face education but might still benefit from some specialist units in order to make sure that they can deliver the full curriculum.

Q15 **Anna Firth:** How many schools that need temporary buildings are still waiting for them?

Susan Acland-Hood: When it comes to the more recently identified ones, and those where we are talking about the breadth of the curriculum rather than getting children back into face-to-face education, in lots of cases, there is still work going on with the school to work out what the best solution is. We are quite often preferring mitigations that keep the existing school building in use, such as timber frames across the ceiling, because they help keep people in designed accommodation. We have about 110 schools where we think mitigation is the right approach rather than temporary buildings. We also have schools where it may be better for them to share facilities with a nearby school—things such as science labs—because the lead time on specialist temporary units is long. That is because they tend to be built bespoke by portacabin.

Q16 **Anna Firth:** That is completely understandable, but how many schools that do need the temporary buildings—those that do not fit into either of those two categories—are still waiting for them?

Susan Acland-Hood: I cannot give you a definitive figure on that because conversations are going on all the time with schools in which different options are being looked at.

Anna Firth: Could you just write to us and let us know?

Susan Acland-Hood: Sure.

Gillian Keegan: Of the ones that we are looking at, we have three that are in hybrid. One of those is getting temporary buildings on 13 December and the other two have been very recently identified, so the caseworkers and the project directors are working with them right now to see what the best combination is and whether they need portacabins or temporary structures. They are the three that are hybrid at the moment.

Q17 **Anna Firth:** There is one example that I want to talk about specifically. That is Kingsdown School in Westcliff in Southend West, which as you know is the only special needs school in the country to be is severely affected by RAAC. Baroness Barran visited the school, which was extremely welcome, so that we could be absolutely certain that she and her officials fully understood all the specific needs and logistical challenges of getting those temporary buildings in place, such as the fact that the school is not far from an airport and special licences were needed. We were promised that those temporary buildings would be in place and in use immediately after half term, but they were not. The school had to get in contact with me, and I had to intervene because no fire certificate had been applied for. Can you tell me why that was?

Susan Acland-Hood: I am afraid I would have to write you on the fire certificate. As I understand it, children were all back on site from 10 November. I am sorry that it did not happen as early as it should have done.

Q18 **Anna Firth:** Would you agree that making sure a fire certificate is in place

for a temporary building is quite a straightforward logistical issue?

Gillian Keegan: Yes. It is one for the responsible bodies, so we will take that up with them. It is, but it is actually something the responsible bodies are responsible for.

Q19 **Anna Firth:** Can I just praise the police, fire and crime commissioner for Essex, who also intervened and made sure that happened in very short order?

The second thing I want to talk about is refunding for schools. We were told by Baroness Barran that schools would be refunded for all reasonable costs and that it would be a light-touch system to ensure that, on top of dealing with very disabled children and a very disrupted school with staff working in the corridors, there would not be the extra bureaucracy of a difficult system of getting payments refunded. That was in September.

Eight weeks later—on 23 November—Kingsdown School had still not received the very first payment that it had applied for. It may have received it by now. I have not got an update on that, but would you agree that eight weeks is too long for a light-touch system?

Gillian Keegan: Actually, you know what? Each of these cases is so individual. The staff at Kingsdown, by the way, have done an amazing job. We have been working very closely with them from the beginning. Each one of these cases involves its own complexities. Kingsdown is probably one of our most complex—obviously with the equipment, the specialist facilities for the children to cope with their complex needs. What they will be doing is working as closely as possible, but we are always happy to look at it on a case-by-case basis. If you want to escalate it individually via the caseworker, we are always happy to look at that. Some of this stuff is ongoing, so they could still be looking at it.

Q20 **Anna Firth:** I totally agree with you that we cannot always generalise from a specific case, and the staff will very much appreciate your comments about them having done a fantastic job. However, the general point is that here they had to go through five committees and the trust to submit these invoices. As a general point, could you look at the process to ensure that it is light touch and easy for schools in this situation to go through?

Gillian Keegan: Yes, we will do, and we have been very conscious to try to make it as light touch as possible. Having said that, some of these are really quite large financial decisions, so we have had to get the balance right between making sure we have the proper audit trails and doing it as quickly as possible. We understand that it is important. We also understand that, retrospectively, there may be some that have already done some of the work and the surveys. We have also been dealing with those cases as well, because we want to be fair to everybody.

Q21 **Anna Firth:** Thank you. This is my final question, because we must move on. How long are these mitigations likely to be in place, and what deadline have you set to clear RAAC from every school?

Gillian Keegan: The first objective I had was to make every school safe—so, the mitigations that Susan just talked about in terms of hardwood or steel beams. That was the first objective. I hope that that will be done in the very near future.

Then there are two routes. We have a panel looking at each individual case at the moment. I know that many schools are keen to understand where they are, and we will be issuing that as soon as possible. That will state whether the school is going to get some mitigation work—so, get rid of the RAAC through grant funding—or whether it will go for a significant school rebuild or a complete school rebuild in some cases.

Obviously, those ones that are in school rebuild will take longer, because it takes a few years to rebuild a school. For the others, the projects will vary depending on the length. I cannot give you a definitive date. We will be able to give you a definitive date for when all schools are safe from RAAC, because that was my very first objective—that everybody in school is safe from RAAC.

Q22 **Anna Firth:** When will we have that date, please?

Gillian Keegan: I cannot give you it today, but we will be able to come back to the Committee with it very shortly.

Chair: Before Christmas?

Gillian Keegan: I don't think it will be before Christmas, but let me say that it will be a new year present.

Q23 **Ian Mearns:** The one thing about this that strikes me as a little difficult to get my head around is the fact that the Department of Health and the NHS were aware of the potential difficulties with RAAC in 2019, and commissioned structural surveys and research into what was happening in their own building estate back then. Why did it take the DfE until August this year to get its head around this? Then, there was that rush during August to make schools aware of the problem and the action that had to be taken.

I will declare an interest: St Anne's Catholic Primary School is in my constituency, and I am a member of the trust board of the multi-academy trust, which also has two other schools that have been affected by RAAC. I do not want to be overtly party political, but it seems that some MPs are being much better briefed than others about what is happening to schools in their areas.

Gillian Keegan: On that last point, I have held surgeries with MPs from all parties and have had individual meetings. I have been on visits with different MPs of various parties, as have my colleagues. In terms of your core question, you kind of answered it: the NHS took care of its buildings. The NHS owns and manages a lot of its estate. There are many fewer buildings—I think it is a couple of hundred buildings—and they have huge estate managers.

But we did take action in 2018. In 2018, we updated the guidance for schools and responsible bodies, because we had had an incident in Kent. That was the start of this process, when we took action and said that all responsible bodies need to take action on RAAC because of the findings of both the NHS and the DfE. I guess the big difference is the number of buildings, but also who is responsible for the buildings. The NHS will be responsible for its buildings. It has a couple of hundred and quite a lot of estate management teams to do that. We are not responsible for the buildings. We have 64,000 buildings in 22,000 different school settings under, I think, 7,000 to 8,000 responsible bodies, so it was just a different thing. We did put that guidance in place, and that was where the responsible bodies were encouraged to go and look at the implications of RAAC, and some of them did. Some of them went and surveyed the schools, found RAAC, and dealt with RAAC, and some of them did not. As we have said before, we started to get more concerned because we did not know what every responsible body was doing, and that was when we started the questionnaire process in, I think, March 2021.

Q24 **Ian Mearns:** That is a capacity issue because, obviously, the school estate used to belong to a few organisations—local authorities and diocesan authorities, which controlled voluntary aided schools. It was not that fragmented back then, but now with the establishment of multi-academy trusts and some standalone schools in a trust, there are capacity issues within some of those organisations to conduct the sort of work that you have talked about. Surely you would accept that.

Gillian Keegan: That is why we started the questionnaire process to, first of all, try to understand where RAAC was, where, as Susan said, it was suspected, or even just to hear from schools, "We're not sure—just send somebody in." That is why we also, at that point, directly employed surveyors to go into schools or paid for others to do surveys, as long as they were RICS-accredited. We were very conscious and—this was before I was in the role—a lot of work went on from March 2021 in particular.

I would like to put on the record and pay tribute to somebody who I think has done a very good job, who is Baroness Barran. She really pushed that from March 2021—before I turned up—trying to get these questionnaires back, trying to get these surveys done and trying to get more information. We were increasingly conscious that we did not know where all the RAAC was, and we wanted to know where it all was. The responsible bodies were responsible for that, but we were not 100% sure whether every single one was getting to it—had the capacity, as you say—or was really focused on doing it, so that is why we did that. It was very unusual; the Department does not usually take such a hands-on role, but we decided that because it was so important, we would. I don't know whether you have anything to add, Susan, because you were there.

Susan Acland-Hood: The questionnaire was originally issued in March '22. Baroness Barran wrote to all the responsible bodies that had not yet responded in October to chase. As the Secretary of State said, from then, we were following up, offering surveys and, indeed, identifying RAAC cases. The thing that changed over the summer was not interest in

identification; it was that distinction between critical and non-critical that we had previously been making.

Q25 **Ian Mearns:** While we are on the question of buildings, it has come to light in the past few days that free schools built with a modular construction method will now be demolished, and they have only been built since 2021. It seems incredible that we have allowed school buildings to be built that quite clearly were not up to standard. One wonders what element of building control has been conducted with these methods of construction and how many millions of pounds are being spent on these buildings. I understand that one company has been responsible for the construction or partial construction of five different schools. How many more are there potentially?

Gillian Keegan: First of all, in that case, it was a specific provider who did not do a good job. Once we discovered that—you are right that that should have been discovered by whoever signed off the building, which certainly was not myself or the permanent secretary—

Q26 **Ian Mearns:** Unfortunately, we have a situation now—an almost deregulated situation—where developers can appoint their own building control experts. I have thought that that was bonkers for years, but not to worry, you know?

Gillian Keegan: This is primarily about poor workmanship. Some of us have had that in our houses: sometimes, something happens, and you poor work. We will pursue all available avenues to redress that. The works were signed off by both building control and technical advisers, which obviously is something that we will look at further. We introduced a new capital framework. We require technical firms to provide a clerk of works to carry out further building inspections on behalf of the Department prior to work being signed off. That is our own sort of secondary check. However, we will rebuild, and we will fund the rebuilding of those three schools, and we will seek redress from the company that has done a poor job.

Q27 **Ian Mearns:** We understand that it has gone into administration. Or is that not the case?

Susan Acland-Hood: That is true.

Gillian Keegan: Yes. That makes it more difficult, for sure.

Susan Acland-Hood: When the Secretary of State says that we are looking at all avenues of redress, we are looking at all avenues of redress. Redress will be harder where a company has gone into administration, but we will look really hard at other ways to identify those people.

On the point about the clerk of works system, that strengthening has been introduced since the sign-off of those buildings. It was not done in response; we had made the change anyway, but we have gone around and had another look at what else we could have done. There is deep discomfort that this has happened, but as you say, the building control sign-off and the TA sign-off is particularly concerning.

Q28 **Ian Mearns:** On modern methods of construction, I suppose the big question is: how many other school buildings are being constructed, or have been constructed, by different companies using similar methods?

Susan Acland-Hood: We do not think that this is about the building being modular; it is a workmanship problem, to do with how the modules were connected together, rather than a failing in the modules. The key thing is that we have the checks going on to ensure that the quality of the workmanship is where it needs to be. This does not raise a question about all MMC buildings; it is very specific to this company.

Q29 **Ian Mearns:** Given the failings of building control in these situations—of course, the buildings are in different locations, so the building control issue is vital—I think it is worth asking whether you might be doing some double and triple checking here.

Susan Acland-Hood: Yes.

Gillian Keegan: Yes.

Q30 **Chair:** I will ask one further question on that before we move on. You have talked about 231 settings that have been identified as having RAAC. Obviously, there is a wide variety of levels of impact among those. Do you have a figure for the number of buildings that will have to go through a complete rebuild? There are 100 slots left in the priority building programme. Do we anticipate that all of those, or a significant proportion, will be taken up by RAAC-related work? What do you think the level of need is for complete rebuilds as a result of RAAC?

Gillian Keegan: First of all, I would just take this opportunity to make it clear that the rebuilding of the 400 schools mentioned in the announcement is definitely going ahead. On 22 December, I announced 239 of those schools. Rebuilding of them all will still go ahead. We are going through that panel at the moment to see which ones will be rebuilt, and which ones will use a different method to mitigate or remediate the problem. We do not have that right now. I mean, we have an idea, but we have not completed that process.

However, we have got a commitment from the Treasury that we will do what we need to do to rebuild, if more than 100 slots are required. I anticipate that it will probably be more, which is why we got that commitment in the first place. Hopefully the Department will get some credit for this, because we have proven, I think, that we will do the right thing. We will take the tough decisions. We will not shy away from them, and we will make sure that we work with schools to keep kids in face-to-face education. We will work fairly with them to get them what they need in the longer term as well. We will continue to do that all the way through this process.

Chair: Thank you. We should put on record that this Committee is grateful to Baroness Barran for the work she has done on this, and for the evidence she has given us.

Anna Firth: She has been an absolutely superb Minister.

Gillian Keegan: She has.

Q31 **Caroline Ansell:** Good morning. I will pick up on the long-term vision. We are staying with the built environment, but this time looking at it through the prism of environmental sustainability and the Government's overall target to reduce public sector emissions by 75%. I am sure that it will not come as a surprise to anyone that education is the public sector's largest emitter of carbon because of the vastness of the estate, from north to south and east to west. It contributes 37% of public sector emissions. First, what steps is the Department taking to make a contribution to the target? Secondly—this is related to climatic change—what steps is the Department taking to mitigate any risks to the school estate from those changes?

Gillian Keegan: We take this extremely seriously. We have our own targets and goals. We have a chief sustainability officer, who attends the cross-Government boards. We also have a DG who has been appointed sustainability champion. There are two elements to this as far as we are concerned: the building side of it, and the education side of it. Education obviously has a much broader impact, in terms of educating children and ensuring that we are all aware of the role we all have in tackling the climate crisis. Some 37% of all public sector building emissions are from education settings. Most of those are from schools; next is higher education, and then some comes from nurseries. We have a phased approach. There is a decarbonisation scheme fund, and we have secured £342 million so far. We have negotiated a pot of that for education, and that is part of what we will do to look at what we can do.

We are making sure that all new buildings are net zero operationally, and there will be more new buildings, obviously, because we will replace the school estate as it ages. We also have pots of funds for decarbonising existing buildings as well, and there are a number of pilots. We are looking into a number of schemes to see which ones work well, so that we can roll them out further. I do not know whether Susan has anything to add.

Q32 **Caroline Ansell:** On new builds, there is obviously recognition that that is an important way forward, but there was a slight challenge on the sort of investment being made. Would there not be greater returns if more was spent on improvements to the school estate, rather than having disproportionate spend on absolute state-of-the-art schools? Was the budget being spent to maximum effect, when the proportion of new-build school buildings in the estate is very small?

Susan Acland-Hood: I haven't heard the criticism before that we are spending too much on making sure that new buildings are net zero. It would be quite short-sighted to build new buildings that could not be net zero in operation. The challenge on retrofit and looking at the existing estate—as you say, the new buildings will certainly initially only be a small proportion of the total estate—is partly about money, but it is also about understanding the right approach to retrofit, and that is much less clear. There is better evidence and intelligence on how you build a new school

from scratch that is net zero than on how you retrofit a huge range of existing buildings.

We are spending about £140 million on pilots and pathfinders to look at a range of different ways of retrofitting school buildings. We have low-carbon heating pilots, the resilient schools programme—this is on both low carbon and the resilience question that you asked—and a school water strategy. We have the GenZero pathfinders, which are looking at net zero in construction as well as operation in schools. That is quite small. That is the bit where you could make an accusation that we were looking too much at the new, but it is very small-scale and exploratory. We have energy and sustainability pods. With the energy pod system, we are effectively looking at bolt-on heat pump methodology that is suitable for a building the size of a school.

Gillian Keegan: And solar, combined.

Susan Acland-Hood: Yes. It is heat pump and solar combined in a unit that you can fit on the sides of a school. Also, we have work going on on energy management systems, because the energy reduction that you can achieve in some buildings by replacing the building management system and using the energy differently is quite significant.

We are working really hard on making sure, before we spend a very large amount of money on retrofit across the whole estate, that we are spending it in the right way, and that we have the right range of mechanisms. There are potentially significant energy savings to be made as a result of the retrofit, and there is potentially an income from solar for some schools. As a result, we announced in November that LocatED is doing a feasibility study for a net zero accelerator programme. That will look at alternative sources of finance and funding to help us move more quickly on these issues.

Q33 **Caroline Ansell:** I completely recognise how important it is to establish best practice in how to approach this, but what does that mean for the targets that you have set yourself?

Susan Acland-Hood: Our target is a 75% reduction in emissions across the school estate by 2037, and we believe that establishing the right approach now will allow us to hit that target.

Q34 **Chair:** Secretary of State, you mentioned the educational side of this, and the impact that the Department can have in this space. In the sustainability and climate change strategy, there was a big emphasis on green skills and jobs. There was also a commitment to a natural history GCSE, to be first taught in, I think, 2025. Is that on track?

Gillian Keegan: Yes. We also have the nature park, the climate action award, sustainability leadership and climate action plans, so there are a lot of key initiatives. We already have climate in the curriculum—in geography, science and citizenship—but at COP26 in Glasgow we made a commitment to having a natural history GCSE by September 2025. We are

on track with that, and I think it is much anticipated. I get asked about it quite a lot.

Chair: It is. I was talking to PGCE students at the University of Worcester about it just a few weeks ago, and I think they were keen to hear that it was on track, and that the timetable would be met, so that is certainly welcome.

Q35 **Nick Fletcher:** Thank you, Secretary of State, for coming today. We should start with the positives: our rise up the international league tables is a fantastic achievement. Since 2010, we have gone from a score of 68% to 90%, and from "good" to "outstanding"; that is excellent. Thank you for mentioning Doncaster and the work on attendance. Obviously, we cannot do anything with children unless they are in school. That is hugely important.

As I understand it, there is an awful lot of good work going on in schools, but they have to deal with lots of issues these days that they never really had to deal with before. I genuinely believe that we put an awful lot on teachers that parents used to pick up and have to deal with. One of the big issues, which, as you know, I have spoken quite publicly on, is transgender guidance, and the relationship, sex and health education materials in our schools that we are having to deal with. We are meant to be getting transgender guidance. It was promised back in 2022. Where are we with that? The press has briefed us that the guidance will allow some social transition in schools, with parental consent. When can we expect it, and are the rumours true?

Gillian Keegan: First, we are very much focused on trying to get it out by Christmas. We previously committed to summer, and we had to change that, because it is quite a complex area. Through the gender questioning guidance, as it is called, we are trying to help schools navigate this area, which is quite difficult, within existing laws, so we have had quite a lot of legal input. The intention is that it will be non-statutory guidance—that is the legal position of this document—and it will hopefully be with you before Christmas. What we have been going backwards and forwards on and trying to understand is how the various layers of law will fit together, and how we can help schools navigate this with something that is legal, but also useful and helpful.

On your second question around social transitioning and parental consent, obviously I will not give too much detail on what is in the guidance, but I think it is fair to say that there are limits to non-statutory guidance. I know that other people have called for no social transitioning in schools, full stop, but that would require a change in equalities law, and would be a matter for the Equalities Minister.

We are trying to get some guidance, because we need to improve where we are today. Schools, as you say, are struggling to deal with the issue, and with a lot of other issues. This is where we are at. We will go out for a long consultation, because many people have quite strong views on both

sides of this discussion, and we want to make sure that we have an open debate, although it is a difficult one to have.

Q36 **Nick Fletcher:** We now know that most children with gender confusion will grow out of it, given time and space, but if they are socially transitioned, they are more likely to continue on a path of puberty blockers, hormone replacement and irreversible surgeries. Children who go down this pathway can end up chemically castrated and unable to have children. Their bone development and even their brain development will be disrupted. The full side effects and consequences remain unknown. This is an unprecedented medical experiment on our children. How can we justify the Government, the school system—the very adults who should be safeguarding our children—being complicit in putting children on this pathway? Shouldn't all social transition be simply stopped in schools?

Gillian Keegan: The first thing is the medical side. All those medical interventions that you talk about—puberty blockers, operations, etc—none of those can take place for children. They are for adults only. There is no sense now that children can get access to that. In fact, I think the NHS is reviewing in parallel its own approach and guidelines. The medical interventions are for post 18 anyway—that's it.

What we are talking about in schools, as you rightly say, is social transitioning. We are very clear that we want the guidance to be helpful to schools, and to ensure that this is taken very seriously. This is not something that can be easily done. There is a lot of careful consideration, but as I said, this is non-statutory guidance, and there are limits to what you can do. If you wanted to get rid of it all together, that would not be legal under our current system. You would have to change the equalities law.

Nick Fletcher: We can bring in laws for an awful lot of things, Secretary of State, and the King's Speech brought in lots of things that we should do. Surely we should bring in a law to protect our children. I genuinely believe that all fires start with a spark; no matter how big a fire we get in this world, it starts with a tiny spark. That tiny spark can start with our calling Jack "Jill", or she "he", or this, that and the other, and it is starting in our schools now.

It is one thing for a child to see some of this on social media, or for an influencer out there who wants to sell an extra record or two to do whatever they do, but there is a difference between somebody on social media, and an actual teacher socially transitioning a child, and textbooks—I will come on to them next—saying that these things are fact and real. Do we think the school system should be part of that? This can be absolutely catastrophic, not just for the child, but for the parents, the family, and the friends of that child.

As this is only guidance, from what we have heard, this will be down to an individual teacher. You could have a head who agrees with this, but you could end up with a teacher who doesn't, so then you are breaking down that authority chain. It should not be down to an individual teacher

to make that decision; it should be firm. It should be law that we cannot do this to our children in school.

We hear so much about history, and we are getting children who are ashamed of their past. They are confused about the present because of this, and they are scared of the future because of net zero. I have had letters from children at school, and they genuinely think the world is going to end. What are we doing?

We are doing some really good core work on maths, English and science, and yet we're bringing in all this noise, and it is so damaging. Our job, more than anything else in this world as adults, is to safeguard and protect our young children, not to confuse them. We must say no to this in our schools. We must say no.

We have spoken before about this, and I know that lots of other people out there don't agree with me. I put my head above the parapet with this. This brings me no votes. This brings me no popularity. This brings me nothing. But I cannot go to bed at night allowing a Secretary of State to sit in front of me today without telling them that what we are doing in schools is completely and utterly wrong. We need to stop this.

Gillian Keegan: First of all, never think you go to bed at night caring more about children than I do or the permanent secretary does. Every single day, they are at the heart of everything we do—every decision we make. What you describe is the reason why we are putting together gender questioning guidance. It doesn't exist today. Well, we have a draft of it, but that is the reason: to deal with some of the concerns that you raise.

Now, I cannot go into the detail of what is in the guidance, because it has not been published yet, but you will get to see the detail. You will get to have nine weeks or so in consultation—long enough. As you say, you are on one side of the argument; some people do have other views as well, and we will have to navigate those. Schools are having to navigate them at the moment, and they are crying out for this guidance because they want to have clearer guidance. But as I said, there is a limit to how far non-statutory guidance can go within the law. And we have been trying to get to the point that we know exactly where that is.

We also have, as you say, the relationship, sex and health education guidance, which was issued during the pandemic and, I think, was made statutory during the pandemic, which may be part of the reason why we have had issues with some of that. We have also had the independent panel review. It has given us its findings; we are going through them at the moment, and we will be issuing updated guidance.

In terms of the sequencing, we thought the first step was to get the gender questioning guidance in place. Then, on top of that, we need to get the RSHE review, make it clear what schools can teach by what age, and deal with the impartiality and contested views issue as part of that review. Then, once we have those in place, we will be holding schools to account. There will be guidance that will be looking to see how it is dealt with. We

will be looking at how things are taught—having clear age appropriateness guidelines as well.

I think these things, put together, will massively improve the system, even as far as your concerns are there. I understand your concerns, because we have not got to the point where we have published the guidelines, but they will very much improve how schools navigate it and will also give parents a lot more say and insight.

Q37 **Nick Fletcher:** On the gender question, do you think that we are getting so many of these children coming forward because of the RSHE materials that we have got out there? I have spoken with some of the big four publishers. This material is not being hidden from parents; this is material that you can buy from bookshops.

I have got one here. This is for 11 to 14-year-olds, and one of the first lines is: "Your sex is usually decided at birth"—decided at birth. Another thing: "Myth 1: the world is divided into men and women"—myth one! This is what we are saying to our 11-year-olds: "Truth: everybody is different whether they are trans or not. Trans women are women and trans men are men." This is for 11 to 14-year-olds, and then you are wondering why we are having to bring forward trans guidance within our schools. We are actually teaching them this stuff—to question their own supposed gender. This is happening.

Gillian Keegan: That's exactly why we are doing it, Nick. That's exactly why we feel the need to put in place gender questioning guidance; it's exactly why we feel the need to go and clear up impartiality and contested views; and it's exactly why, a difficult job though it is—all these are difficult jobs, by the way—we need to go through the RSHE curriculum and decide age limits and age appropriateness. That is exactly why we are doing what we are doing.

Q38 **Chair:** What you have just said, Secretary of State—that is going to be after the gender questioning guidance. You said that you want to get the gender questioning guidance done before Christmas, and then the next phase would be the RSHE review. Presumably that will be early next year. Is that a reasonable assumption?

Gillian Keegan: I am not supposed to put dates out there, but I think that that is fair to say. They have kind of been going along in parallel, but we do think that that is the sequence—gender questioning first—because we need to clear up, as Mr Fletcher has said, the gender questioning guidance, because that guidance doesn't exist today. It is something that lots of people have views on, and lots of people are questioning how schools should be dealing with it. We have to help schools navigate this within the laws that exist today.

Q39 **Nick Fletcher:** Don't you think that we should just remove all RSHE guidance from schools as of now—immediately—so that we are not creating more problems for more children? We could do that now until we actually got the RSHE where we needed it to be. I mean, if you had a glass of water and 1% of it was poison, would you give it to your child?

Gillian Keegan: Well, I'm not sure what the poison question has got to do with this, but—

Nick Fletcher: I believe that nearly 100% of what we are teaching our children in school is really good stuff, but what I've just said to you is the 1%—

Chair: I think you have made your point. I want to bring in Miriam on this. We do have to focus on some of the process and policy issues. Your views are very clear on this, and will have certainly been noted, but I will bring in Miriam.

Q40 **Miriam Cates:** Thank you. Apologies for being late; I've been on a DL Committee.

On the guidance—absolutely, you're right that schools have been crying out for this for a long time. I think one of the tests of whether the guidance is successful is whether it takes the legal risk, essentially, away from schools and puts it on to the DfE.

The situation at the moment is that schools are making case-by-case judgments on whether to allow a child to social-transition and so on. Schools are rightly very concerned about the implications for them of getting it right or wrong—of saying yes or no. I think what they are really looking for in this guidance is to be able, essentially, to pass the buck, but very legitimately so because they are not Equality Act lawyers and they need to know in black and white that the responsibility for this lies with the Government, who make the law, not with them as individual schools. Will the guidance, when produced, make very clear what is and isn't the responsibility of a school?

Gillian Keegan: This has been one of the challenges, right? I am not a lawyer either, so I'm right up there with them; I've been heavily reliant on the people who are lawyers. The other things is that there are a number of different sorts of laws, and I guess you could at some point see that they are competing in some ways or not clear in some ways. But I also do not have the power to control who sues who. Of course, we are really keen to make sure that this guidance is helpful to schools, but there will also be judgments that schools will have to make.

You put your finger on what makes it quite difficult and why we have had to go round the loop several times. We are trying to be as clear as possible and to provide something that will be helpful but that is also legal within the existing law. As I said, if you wanted to go further on some things, you would have to change the equalities law, and that is then obviously not a question for me. We are looking at non-statutory guidance for schools. That will take us much further on from where we are, which will be good, but if there was a desire—or perhaps if we saw that there was more need—that would be something that the Equalities Minister would have to consider.

Miriam Cates: Yes, I completely see that. There are some quite strong competing legal arguments, but you have hit the nail on the head with the

question about who sues who.

This is the question that schools are facing. Let's say that a child comes with their parent's permission, asking for their gender to be changed in school. At the moment, the school has to take the legally precautionary position, because schools don't have unlimited budgets—as we know, they are not lawyers; they are there to educate children. You can understand the headteacher saying, "Well, if I don't allow this child to transition, I'll be sued, and quite frankly I can't afford to be sued." I think they are justified in saying that. Really what the guidance needs to say is "If there's any suing to be done, sue the Government, because the Government have the resources"—not you personally, Secretary of State, obviously.

Gillian Keegan: I was just thinking how many bits of guidance have been written that say that!

Q41 **Miriam Cates:** If somebody wants to take legal action against the policies of the DfE, they may do so, and they will come up against the Government. It is not fair for schools to be a proxy for Government policy, because they just do not have the weight to take it. Will the guidance make it clear that if there is any suing to be done, as it were, the Department for Education should be challenged, not an individual school?

Gillian Keegan: I don't think that that is where the guidance will go, in terms of the legal structures. You will get this very shortly, and there will be a long consultation, but what we have been working with is to try to make sure that it is legal in the first place, that it is helpful and that it is useful to schools and gives them very clear ideas of where we are protecting spaces for boys and girls separately, and so on.

It tries to be very clear, but every legal case—no, I don't think that is the aim. It is non-statutory guidance, but we are very much trying, and we are very conscious of the fact that schools are struggling to navigate this. They are struggling to navigate the contested views between various people. They can see where this is happening in other places. It is becoming quite litigious, and we want to avoid that. We want this to help. That is a big call, because I am not sure that many places have actually tried to do this either yet. We are trying to push this as far as we can, based on where we are with our existing laws, but this conversation just shows how difficult it is.

I always come back to it: this is non-statutory guidance. If the guidance is not helpful or does not have any use, it does not have to be followed. That is why we have been working to try it. We have also been consulting with a few, to make sure that it is useful to schools. It has to be clear enough. Otherwise, they will be like, "That doesn't tell me anything." That has been one of the things we have been going back and forth on. There is no doubt that it is difficult to do. I don't know whether you have anything to add, Susan?

Susan Acland-Hood: I don't think I have anything I particularly want to add.

Q42 **Caroline Ansell:** With the consultation to come once the guidance is published, how will you ensure that heads, teachers, parents and maybe pupils and students can contribute effectively? I am afraid that in conversations I have had with all those groups, people often talk about feeling quite intimidated in this space. It is very difficult, very contentious and hugely challenging, particularly for heads and school leaders. How will you ensure that the consultation is open and people can engage effectively with it? Those who have wanted to raise this issue with me have wanted to do that in a very discreet way, for fear of the repercussions.

Gillian Keegan: This is the challenge. We have seen the impact of it; we have seen people cancelled. It is horrendous. The whole discussion has really been taken to a new level. With the consultation, we have tried to make sure that it is clear, accessible and available, so that we can get pupils as well as teachers and everybody else who has an interest—parents, headteachers.

Susan Acland-Hood: I will just say a couple of things. I think it is a really good question, incidentally, because usually what we would do to ensure that we made a consultation as accessible as possible would be to run large events or webinars. Actually, I think that we should be really thoughtful about that in this case, because you will have people who will be very nervous about expressing their view in that kind of forum. I think we will do that, but I actually think that this is one of the few occasions on which a boring Government consultation response form might be rather a good thing. The form allows anybody to respond. It is not a particularly difficult process.

Q43 **Caroline Ansell:** Will it require them to self-identify?

Susan Acland-Hood: It doesn't require you to. It also allows you to say that you don't want your name or anything identifying to be used. In other words, you have the option of not giving your name. You also have the option of giving it, but it effectively being not revealed. There are a couple of safeguards in there on that, so we will try to do everything we can. That in itself I think is helpful, but we will try to make sure people understand as clearly as possible the routes available to them to make their views known, if they don't want to do that in a way that they are worried about.

Q44 **Caroline Ansell:** And if the consultation were to deliver feedback that suggests that a prohibition or a ban, if you will, on social transitioning in schools was sought after—for its clarity as much as anything else—is that something that you would take forward? I understand that it would require a change in the law, but is that a finding that you would be able to progress?

Gillian Keegan: Obviously everyone is going to be interested in what comes back. If a change of the law was required, that would not be my decision. That would be a decision, ultimately—well, it is equalities law, so

it is not within my Department's remit. If there was a change, that would require a change to equalities law—

Caroline Ansell: If that was a finding of the consultation—

Gillian Keegan: Not only the consultation. As we introduce the guidance, we do need to make sure that we are—this is something that no school, and nobody here, had to deal with about five years ago. It was very, very small numbers. It is new; it has changed. It has created quite a lot of division in certain places as well.

We are not just going to put it out and forget about it. We will be monitoring very carefully. We always review guidance after it goes out, but we may probably be reviewing it earlier than usual because we do want to try and get it right if there are things that need to be improved.

My personal view is that, from where we are today, this guidance needs to be useful and legal and helpful. If anything more has to be done, we need to consider that after this. I think this is an improvement from where we are today, without any sort of particular guidance in this area. That is the approach I have always taken. I think we should therefore seek to introduce this, and then, if either the consultation or other facts suggest that that is the right approach, then that would be something for the Equalities Minister to be considering, or whoever is responsible for the equalities law. I think it is the Equalities Minister.

Q45 **Chair:** We do need to move on, but I note that when RSHE was introduced to the curriculum, the Equalities Minister and the Education Secretary were, I think, one and the same person. It is interesting to see the change to the machinery of government that has taken place since then.

There have been a lot of calls from the sector for more specific materials and training for people in this space. Obviously you now have within your reach the Oak arm's length body, which is doing work on this. When do you expect it to be able to set out high-quality materials for RSHE? Will those be publicly available alongside any sort of consultation?

Gillian Keegan: They are definitely working on it. I don't know if we have the date—it will be in here somewhere—but Oak is definitely working on it.

Susan Acland-Hood: We do not have the date here; I am sorry. We can write.

Chair: Thank you.

Gillian Keegan: But there will be a full curriculum on Oak in this area, so that we know that there are materials that are in line with the Government guidance that we can start to point people towards.

Q46 **Ian Mearns:** What has been done to progress your commitment to this Committee to introduce the strategic action plan for careers education, information, advice and guidance in 2024?

Gillian Keegan: We are building, which I think is great news. When I was the Apprenticeships and Skills Minister, we set off the Holman review, which was to look at careers. It is one of those things that you always want to improve, but we were asking, "How can we do better?"

Obviously a number of things have happened: stronger collaboration between schools, colleges, employers, careers progression, careers professionals and so on, understanding career entry and how to progress. We have over £90 million of investment in that in 2023-24. We are driving the Gatsby benchmarks within schools, and I think many more schools are now taking up the benchmarks. We have also seen, by the way, a big increase in students having first-hand experience of the workplace—a 12% increase. That is starting to meet some of the things that Gatsby says, such as making sure that you can have work experience or access to work experience.

We are working on the single unified careers system that focuses on skills training and work experience. We have committed to publish this in 2024, and that will confirm our next steps; I can't tell you when in 2024, but it will be part-way through 2024. We are working on doing that. I think it is going to take the best of what we've got and what we've built and hopefully have this single unified system, which will be available to children, young people and adults.

The one thing that I think is super-strong about our system—I look at this from the perspective of business—is that we have an all-age apprenticeship system. That is a massive strength. Not many countries in the world do this, and those that do not are quite envious of the position that we have, particularly when you consider the retraining challenges later on.

Q47 **Ian Mearns:** You are saying that there has been a 12% increase in youngsters who are accessing work experience. What is the overall proportion of youngsters who are successfully getting work experience now?

Gillian Keegan: Well, 77% of schools report that the majority of their students have an experience of the workplace in year 12 or 13. Some 68% of schools report that the majority of students have workplace experience by the end of year 11.

Q48 **Ian Mearns:** In your response to our report on careers education, you said that you would work with the Careers & Enterprise Company to remove barriers to work experience. Could you provide the Committee with ongoing updates on this work? Have any barriers that have been identified being removed?

Gillian Keegan: I did a business roundtable yesterday, and I asked every business, "How many young people are you hosting for work experience or for T-level placements?" This is a culture change that we are going through; it is one that takes time. I have spoken to people in many other countries where they have successfully done it, and it does take a few years to bed in.

Thank you for continually questioning, even when I came here as the Minister. You have been very focused on this for a long time and it is the right thing to focus on.

Ian Mearns: I should declare an interest: I used to chair a careers company in the north-east of England.

Gillian Keegan: It's a specialist interest.

Ian Mearns: It was a local authority-owned company, but it was over four local authorities and I chaired it for the entirety of its existence.

Gillian Keegan: Getting access to high-quality work experience is the challenge. Some of the other countries I have looked at do manage to do this. We are working with businesses more and more. In a way, the skills shortage kind of helps us, as will even some of the changes to immigration from yesterday, because it basically says to businesses, "We have to all work together to develop the pipeline of talent." And that starts in schools. Obviously, the careers programme is now extended to primary schools as well, which starts that understanding of jobs and the jobs that are available, but there is more work ongoing, more work to do. The T-level nine-week work placement has been a big challenge, but a big step. But pretty much every company who engages in it is saying that this is great.

Q49 **Ian Mearns:** But you know, you have just highlighted there the challenge of T-levels. That was going to be my next question, because the Department revealed that from August 2025, a total of 215 BTECs overlapping with T-levels will have their funding withdrawn. But given the difficulty in actually getting youngsters into one week's work experience, and if we are planning a massive expansion of T-levels, getting that many youngsters into nine weeks' work experience will be a significant challenge for the Department—unless you can achieve that cultural shift in businesses that you have talked about. Okay, there might be some green shoots, but we are not seeing huge evidence of that so far.

Gillian Keegan: We have obviously worked with many businesses and there are some brilliant businesses that are really embracing them. In my own area, I remember that when I was going around the vaccine centres there was a very entrepreneurial NHS worker who was going around signing up everybody to go on work placements, on apprenticeships. She said, "I'll take every T-level placement you have as well." So if you are strategic and understand that you have to work to build your own talent pipeline, we have all the building blocks in place to help you.

I think we've done an enormous amount to reform our skills system. The apprenticeship system is not perfect, but it really is something to be proud of—680 standards and 170 degree apprenticeships, which are my personal thing. These are really solid steps. T-levels are a part of that. Careers are a part of that.

What we need now is to have that more strategic conversation. It is starting to happen. Just one last thing. We are also making available £250 million to help providers prepare to deliver industry placements,

and we offer an employer support fund up to £12 million. It is particularly for smaller employers, I think.

Q50 **Ian Mearns:** What you need to be cognisant of within that is that the employment place in different locations is very, very different. Within my constituency in Gateshead there are, I think, only a couple of employers with more than about 800 employees. Where there used to be very large, heavy engineering works nearby—many of them—now there are not. The vast majority of those companies that are into engineering, for instance, are now small and medium-sized enterprises where the capacity to take on apprentices is totally different from the heavy engineering concerns that existed 20, 30, 40 years ago. So it is a question of how we get those employers to engage in the process. The Department's own 2022 Employer Pulse survey showed that the majority of businesses were not interested in providing work experience for T-level students. That cultural shift is going to be difficult, Secretary of State.

Gillian Keegan: It is, but if you were to ask them, are they interested in having the next generation of workers who can support their growing advanced manufacturing business, which means we are the eighth largest manufacturer in the world, just overtaking France—if you put the question like that—they will say, "Absolutely, yes". Then you say, the way you answer that is to go back in the pipeline and start early on. This has happened over time. When there are particularly skills shortages, companies do tend to get a bit more strategic and look to try and build their pipeline. T-levels and work placements are an excellent way of doing that, as are apprenticeships, because they broaden access to lots and lots of different people. I do not underestimate the task, but I think it is the right challenge and I think it will massively benefit our country if we get it right; so we will work to get it right.

Q51 **Ian Mearns:** There will have to be a significant partnership. Significant partnership includes a huge number of players, but it includes employers. It includes further education providers. It includes people delivering careers education advice and guidance. It is all of those people, and many more probably.

Gillian Keegan: And all the people involved in the local skills improvement plans, which have been an addition this year to the landscape. We have got the first drafts and I am really looking forward to working within those local areas to make sure that we do get the providers providing the courses that the businesses want. Then you start to have those conversations about, "Who's going to do the work placements?" This is really a big part of bringing business and organisations and education much closer together at all levels.

Q52 **Mrs Drummond:** I am a great fan of the idea of the advanced British standards. I have a problem with the name, as I have mentioned many times, but I just want to know what detail you have on it so far, and when we can see the plans in detail.

Gillian Keegan: Well, obviously it is a new investment—a new announcement. If you imagine what Michael Gove and Nick Gibb were doing in the period from 2005 to 2010, they were thinking, "How are we

going to completely change and reform our education system to get these standards?" This is looking out; this is the equivalent. We have done, I think, a great job with those reforms. I am talking about the Department, teachers and headteachers, and everybody who has been involved.

But you need to look at what is next, and when we look at what is next, there are three problems we are trying to solve. The first is to make sure that we have more breadth in the 16-to-18 stage. The second is to make sure we have more time in school or college for 16 to 18-year-olds. And the third thing is to break down the artificial barrier that we have between the technical and the academic. This will build on the excellent work that the maths advisory group did as well, because one of the other things is to continue to do more maths—and English. We will invest over £600 million over the next two years. That will increase the taught hours, but also has additional levelling-up premiums, because we know the obvious question is, "How are you going to make sure you have enough teachers to teach all this when that is always a struggle?" Well, it's not always but in the current climate it is a struggle. We know that we have that challenge to do as well, and we are working very much on trying to do that.

We will be putting out a document for consultation, which you will see and which has more of the discussion. It is a decade-worth of reform, but it has the start of that discussion. Have we said when that is going to be?

Susan Acland-Hood: I think we have said "shortly".

Gillian Keegan: Shortly. It goes like this: imminently, shortly and then a season. Shortly is not far.

Q53 **Mrs Drummond:** Which is great, because vocational and academic subjects should be side by side, but what impact is this going to have on T-levels?

Gillian Keegan: Actually, a lot of it builds on the brilliant work of T-levels. T-levels are what has given us, in working with employers—250 employers—the understanding of the up-to-date way of doing technical education with an occupational or broader occupational focus. So a lot of the work that we have done to develop T-levels we are absolutely going to be using as part of the building blocks of the Advanced British Standard. We have a brilliant T-level system; we have a brilliant A-level system. But if we want to tackle breadth, time and, most importantly, to remove that artificial divide, this is the vehicle by which we are going to do that.

Q54 **Mrs Drummond:** So you can continue with the good work that you are doing on T-levels—getting employers and so on—because that is all going to be part of the same thing, we would hope, even though the consultation document has not come out yet.

Gillian Keegan: Absolutely, yes. Susan, did you want to add something?

Susan Acland-Hood: I only wanted to say this, and I hope it will be as clear as possible in the consultation. I think, partly because T-levels are relatively new, people really worry about this. The technical aspects of the

Advanced British Standard will look more like a T-level than like any other existing technical or vocational qualification. So if people are now thinking, "What do I bet on that takes me closer to the Advanced British standard?", the answer is T-levels.

Q55 **Mrs Drummond:** The teachers I have talked to in a sixth-form college have been slightly sceptical about the ABS—I can never remember the name, because it is also an acronym for brakes. That is why I think you should change the name.

You have missed the recruitment target for secondary teachers by 48%. I completely agree with maths and English going to 18. But again, teachers are sceptical about that because of the recruitment of maths teachers. So I am wondering how you are going to increase the number of classroom hours, which you will have to if you are going down this route, and how you are going to increase the number of teachers, particularly maths teachers up to 18.

Gillian Keegan: This is definitely part of the challenge, but, again, one that we are very focused on delivering on. There are now over 468,000 full-time teachers in England, which is an increase of 27,000 teachers since 2010. It is the highest full-time-equivalent number of teachers ever. That is since the workforce census began.

What we did to address this—actually, my predecessors were involved in this—was to put in place a retention and recruitment strategy. The first thing is to focus on retention—always—and the second is to make sure that you are recruiting enough, particularly in tight labour markets. That was put together in 2019.

We have met the commitment in there to introduce a starting salary of £30,000 for new teachers—typically those coming out of university. That was met in September this year. We have put in place a levelling-up premium to retain teachers in particular areas in particular subjects. We have obviously got a range of bursaries, and not just in STEM subjects. They also include RE, music, and other things, so we have a flexible bursary system. We've also developed the initial teacher training and the NPQ professional development. We also have the early careers framework to help in those first two years, because that was actually one of the retention challenges. We are doing a lot of work there, and 500,000 teaching and development opportunities will have been delivered by the end of 2024.

One of the other things that I am excited about is what the multi-academy trusts—the change in our school system—have done. They have actually provided a lot more career prospects for teachers and teaching, and most teachers now are aware of this. They can become a head of year, head of house, or head of a subject. They have got many, many more opportunities because the schools are sort of pooled over a broader set of resources. We are also trying to make it a bit easier for teaching vacancies to be listed. We have a free listing service and also a digital application service to make it quicker as well.

The last thing we have ongoing is the work were doing previously on the workload reduction taskforce, which took five hours out of the average week. It was delivered previously, but we have set that up again, working with the unions and others to deliver the next five hours, which Minister Hinds will be taking forward to see what progress we can make there. There is a lot of focus on it.

I still believe it is a really attractive job. We will have a campaign going out at the start of the year to encourage people to come into teaching, either from an early age or as a second career as well. And just over 23,000 postgraduate trainees were recruited to start training in 2022-23, so they are going through that.

Q56 **Chair:** That is a very helpful answer. A lot of it focused on the school system, understandably, and on the teaching challenge. I guess part of the challenge is that all the evidence that we have heard is that in the post-16 space, FE in particular, all the retention challenges are significantly greater. If we are talking about a significant increase in the teaching capacity for maths post 16, there will need to be a particular focus on that space.

Gillian Keegan: Yes, 100%. That is something we are aware of. We do not have as much of a role in the setting of salaries and the scales, but we have provided an additional £470 million across the financial years 2023-24 and 2025-26 to support colleges and other providers with recruitment and retention challenges. We also have the STEM and technical shortage subjects. Those working in disadvantaged schools and colleges in particular will receive up to £6,000 after tax annually on top of their pay, and that is equivalent to about £100 million a year. That is sort of mirroring what we have done in in terms of the levelling-up premium for schools. We are very conscious of that, and we have a number of different schemes as well to encourage people to come from industry into FE and also to consider FE as a second career.

Chair: I think Nick wanted to come in on the vocational point.

Q57 **Nick Fletcher:** I take Ian's point that at one time it used to be these huge employers, and all the children really had was, "You're going down the pit or"—

Gillian Keegan: Or the factory.

Nick Fletcher: That's it. I recently met with my chamber of commerce, and I basically told a lot of businesses what I thought, which is what I usually do. They were complaining about the fact that they have not got young people knocking on their doors, which I think is quite a bizarre thing for especially some self-employed people to say. As a self-employed person, I have always gone knocking on doors. There is definitely a disconnect between the children at school who think that employers should come to them, and the employers who think the children should come to them. There is definitely a piece in the middle that needs to happen.

I genuinely do not believe that the Government are the answer to everything. I just wanted to get it on record, really, that employers out there need to be part of these job fairs. They need to get on that social media. They need to get into that space where these young people are, because there are lots and lots of young people out there who maybe have not got that help to get into that place.

I encourage all young people to write in. I wrote to 50 different employers in my town. Every single one of them was a handwritten letter. I wrote to 50 of them, and I ended up with four job offers. We just keep relying on the Government for everything these days. I think employers, teachers and children all have their bit to do, and I think Members of Parliament have got their piece to do as well—I spend a lot of time in schools. I just think we need to get that on the record.

Very quickly, I am obviously doing an awful lot of work on men's and boys' issues. We have got an issue with not enough male teachers in schools, and because we do not have enough male teachers in school, I think we get an issue with boys because they need someone to mentor them. There is an awful drop-out rate among boys and this, that and the other, which means we end up with less boys going to university, which means you end up with less male teachers. You have got this circular thing.

I asked last year whether the Department is doing anything, so is it doing anything? Because we've had the "This Girl Can" campaign. I have got a report here from STEM Week 2021 referring to all the work that had happened within this field, and it says there had been an increase of 50.1% of girls into STEM subjects, which is amazing. Where is the piece of work to get boys into teaching? We really need this, and I genuinely believe that reports like this are the proof of the pudding that when we really want to do something, we can achieve it.

We need to be getting boys interested in teaching in schools, because that has a fantastic effect on boys going through life. Even if they do not end up in teaching, it is about having that male role model at school, because a lot of boys are lacking it at home, unfortunately, with the separation of families. What are we doing on that and what can we do?

Gillian Keegan: I completely agree. We want to have diversity in our schools. We want to have a lot of male teachers in our schools. You do go into some schools, and you do see many more female teachers than male teachers. All of what we are doing—making sure it has a higher salary, making sure that there are more career prospects and opportunities—are all part of having a very strong pitch as well. I do not know whether there is a specific campaign, but we are always conscious of ensuring that we have male teachers in our campaigns and of showing that experience in the classroom. I do not know whether we have done a specific campaign.

Susan Acland-Hood: It is as you say. In all our recruitment campaigns, we will look at not just the overall kind of recruitment we are looking for, but particular areas with under-representation that we would like to target. If you look at our adverts for primary teaching roles, for example,

which have particularly low rates of men applying, you will see that we consciously and deliberately use men, male influencers and so on in order to kind of drive those numbers up.

Q58 **Nick Fletcher:** It is one man to three women in secondaries, and one to seven in primary schools. If those figures were the other way around, would we be jumping on it a lot more?

Gillian Keegan: Well, it is the other way around in many industries.

Nick Fletcher: And we are jumping on it, which is proof. Why aren't we doing it in education? We really need to be doing this because this is super-important.

Gillian Keegan: I am committed to ensuring that we have—I think teaching is a fantastic career. If I asked every single one of you, "Who was the teacher who changed your life?" you would within a second say "Mr This" or "Mrs That". That is how powerful teaching is—40 years later, you still remember that intervention.

Nick Fletcher: Mr Field and Mrs King.

Gillian Keegan: Mr Ashcroft. It is the most unbelievable profession, and it can have a massive impact on every child in this country, which of course, as you say, is our future. We will take a look at this to see whether there is more that we should be doing. I am very keen to have teaching open to everybody. Actually, it cheers me up when I go into schools and see male teachers and that mix, because it adds to the overall diversity and mix in our schools. Let me look and see whether we have enough focus on that.

Chair: Thank you. I will bring in Andrew.

Q59 **Andrew Lewer:** Welcome. Do you agree that financial education is a crucial subject for young people to learn? If so, will the Department take steps to ensure that every pupil receives dedicated time within the timetable for delivery of that, and, following on from what we have just been hearing, possibly including it in a core subject such as maths, or indeed making financial education the focus of maths education—certainly post 16, given the difficulties of fitting everything in, and maths recruitment that we've heard about already?

Q60 ***Gillian Keegan:*** Yes—to answer the question simply. It is a compulsory part of the national curriculum and it is taught as part of maths in primary and secondary, and citizenship. I think the reason the question gets raised is around the definition of financial education, how far we go and up to what age. There is a big opportunity, particularly within the advanced British standard, with the push to do more maths to 18, to see what more could be included, particularly in financial education. If you say to any young person, "You may have to do maths to 18," they are not always that enthusiastic, but if you asked them about financial education, most of them think, "Absolutely."

I was talking to two employers yesterday and they were saying, "Because of the way technology is moving on, it's not so much that we'll need loads

and loads of people to be coding in the future, but we will need lots and lots of people who really understand how to analyse data, data as a science, and how to read the outputs of data and make good decisions based on that." We think we do a lot in maths already, and of course they do a lot in maths already, but I think it is the opportunity for us, with the ABS, to ask what that extra teaching time in this area would be usefully applied to.

Q61 **Andrew Lewer:** Yes, and the application point is important because I have never understood, for instance, primary schools doing coding when 15 years later what the students do will have no relationship to that whatsoever, whereas you are always going to need financial education. But financial education is not the only subject that is important, and that the Government have said they need to give priority and focus to. Can you confirm that the DfE will ensure the success of the national plan for music education and the wider music education sector by confirming that financial support for increased employer contribution to the teachers pension scheme' will be extended to music services and hub lead organisations, to give them proper parity as employers with schools and academies.

Gillian Keegan: I think there have been a few bits of potentially misleading information in this regard so, Susan, probably it would be good if you could clear it up.

Susan Acland-Hood: Some people have suggested that music teachers working with the music hub partner organisation cannot be on the TPS, and that is not right. It is up to the employer and they absolutely can be. I think your question was specifically about increased employer contributions. We will publish more details on that for implementation in April 2024, including the approach for centrally employed teachers and the funding rates and allocations. We will be announcing that shortly.

Q62 **Andrew Lewer:** One of my concerns is that successive DfE Ministers have encouraged music hubs to be sort of standalone organisations and operate in that way, and yet have been told that they will be given full support in doing so. But there is now this concern that by not being a school or academy, that employer contribution will actually eat up, in some cases, all of the additional grant that music education has received, and therefore the ability for younger people from more lower-income families to access that. The classic stereotype of those who received music education will be perpetuated, unless that pension hole is filled. Are you telling me that your announcement may provide me with some degree of comfort about that?

Susan Acland-Hood: I don't think I should pre-empt, because we haven't said anything about how we are filling the pension hole for anybody yet. The point you make is really well understood, and we will make sure that it is properly covered in the announcement.

Q63 **Anna Firth:** I welcome the additional £470 million that you have mentioned across the financial year to support colleges with recruitment, but why have you not brought forward a wholesale review of further

education spending, considering the difficult position that many colleges and sixth forms have been in since the large cuts of 2020?

Gillian Keegan: We have actually put in place the skills Act, and we have funded an additional £2.6 billion in FE and capital programmes, such as the T-level capital programme, so I do not think it is right to say that we have not been looking at how we can better support FE. It is a vital part of our landscape going forward. That is why the institutes of technology, looking at level 4 and 5 FE, are working with universities and businesses to do that. From that perspective, there is more investment than ever going into FE. But of course, there is never a time when people do not ask for even further investment.

Q64 **Anna Firth:** I am so glad you said how vital FE colleges are. We are all in furious agreement that they are the engine rooms for technical education and skills in particular. I will press you on two specific points, which have been raised with me by some very good FE colleges: first, they cannot reclaim VAT costs; and, secondly, they cannot benefit from a guarantee for local government pension funds. The latter would not cost the Government anything, but it would reduce their college contributions, therefore giving them more money in their budget to help with recruitment and resources generally. Will you comment on those two points in particular?

Gillian Keegan: They have been raised before—regularly. Obviously, a VAT decision is not a decision for me; it is a decision for the Treasury. I do not know if there is anything more specific—

Chair: Is there not a greater logic in that decision being taken due to the reclassification of the FE sector?

Gillian Keegan: There are definitely conversations that will be happening, but on the reclassification, we have to consider a number of things as a result. We will consider them and work with the Treasury over time to do that. I do not know if there is anything specific that we can say at this point.

Anna Firth: I have raised this with the with the Skills Minister, the previous Chair of this Committee, who fully supports both those points. It would be a powerful submission to the Treasury in advance of the spring Budget to have a united front from the Department for Education and the and the Education Committee to try to put that wrong right.

Gillian Keegan: We have discussed this before and we are happy to continue the discussions. There is the reclassification, but we also have the college capital loan scheme—we have been looking at the loan scheme and how that works—and we have brought forward an additional £300 million of payments to improve colleges' cash flow, so it is not like nothing is happening. There are things happening as a result of reclassification to support that change in status for colleges, but although we have these conversations, there will always be something else and something else. We will continue to have the conversations.

One of the things we were very focused on this year was making sure that we had additional funding to enable pay rises, and colleges dealing with inflation. Of course, there are always lots of different things that we prioritise, but we will continue to work with colleagues to look at any of those anomalies.

Anna Firth: Would you take those two points away and perhaps—

Gillian Keegan: We have already got those points on our agenda. They are not points that we have missed or are not willing to discuss, but in all such discussions, we have to have them and then prioritise what we think are the things to do at the right point in time. But there is no doubt that the FE sector is a priority. If you speak to the FE sector, I think it is fair to say that they were delighted with the additional funding they got this year to deal with—

Q65 **Chair:** May I press for shorter answers so that we can make a bit more progress? On teacher workload, you mentioned earlier the reduction toolkit and that figure of five hours before the pandemic, which had been reduced. Clearly, with all the pressures that have emerged since the pandemic, some of that gain has been lost, and we all hear from schools about the enormous amounts of extra work that teachers are taking on. In the working lives of teachers and leaders survey, 72% of teachers and leaders disagreed that their workload was acceptable. That is not a great place to be either from the perspective of retention or relations with the sector workforce. What extra steps could be taken to address that and ensure that the workload becomes more acceptable?

Gillian Keegan: There are a number of things. The first thing is some of the other reform programmes that we have will also have a positive impact on workload for school teachers, such as the SEND and alternative provision improvement plan. We were just talking about gender questioning guidance. That will help if schools having to go round that particular matter. Obviously, you mentioned the workload reduction taskforce, which we will continue to look at. A number of things are ongoing. We are looking at AI and how that can help in schools.

Overall, there are a number of pressures on schools. We are trying to have—with children's social services, for example—a much more multidisciplinary approach, so that there is a clearer understanding of how you get the support you need to support families. We have family hubs going out that will help within those early years.

Everything is looking at the wider system around families, children and schools, and of course we have the roll-out of childcare, which we have not talked about. There are two objectives there. One is, obviously, to reduce the burden on working parents, but the other is to ensure that all kids can start school school-ready, which is the other advantage of that service. We are very conscious of that and are working hard to ensure that we improve the systems that need to be improved. That will support everybody working in that sector—everybody working with children, actually.

Q66 **Andrew Lewer:** Something that has been mooted to help reduce teachers' workloads has been the Oak National Academy, but there has been a judicial review of it because of the damage to the publishing industry. Is the Department open to Oak being more of a signposting service towards existing publishers—one of our most important national industries—rather than some sort of nationalised ed tech publisher? It seems like a very un-Conservative approach, at least with regard to the 99% of non-contentious educational curriculum materials, further to Nick and Robin's points earlier.

Gillian Keegan: My understanding is that Oak was developed to provide additional support with learning during the pandemic. That was its initial goal, but it is a very useful resource for both home educators and teachers, with curriculum materials, lesson plans and so on. It is one of a range of options—I think about 30,000 teachers use it on a regular basis—but the plan is to use Oak, for example, to have reference materials in RSHE and where we find that it would be a useful addition. It has added a lot to the landscape. I don't know whether you have anything further to add, Susan.

Susan Acland-Hood: I will pick up on a couple of things. There is a part of what Oak is doing that is about signposting to good-quality material, but it is also providing its own content. That partly builds on what we know about not just good materials, but a good-quality, sequenced curriculum that build on itself in a well-focused way. Trying to have a spine of good-quality, well-sequenced curricula and link materials available freely to schools and teachers—with no obligation to use them—will actually be quite an important addition to what we can do on both teaching quality and workload.

Oak is also doing a lot of work on AI that will allow teachers to make the material bespoke, so they are still using something that is well sequenced and based on good research, but it can be tailored to their circumstances. We know that teachers spend a huge amount of time on this, so we are not actually seeking to replace large amounts of published content. A huge number of teachers are still creating resources from scratch day in, day out, which is a massive workload burden and is very unusual internationally. Internationally, it is much more typical for education systems to use textbooks, which are pre-approved. We do not want to go down that route; we want to be more flexible and give more ability to people to choose, but we do not think it is right that teachers should feel they have to create new resources from scratch every day to give a good-quality offer to their children.

Q67 **Andrew Lewer:** Looking to fill in gaps, not looking to compete in a sector that already has a very good-quality British educational sector, and focusing on signposting in future, may mean that the Department avoids some difficulties in the coming judicial review.

Gillian Keegan: Respectfully, we may have to agree to disagree on that one.

Q68 **Chair:** Turning to higher education, we have launched an inquiry to look at the marking assessment boycott and its impact on students. Recognising that in your role you don't have the same degree of control with universities as schools, how do you feel the Government's effort to reduce the impact of the boycott on the students performed?

Gillian Keegan: As you say, we obviously don't have much of an impact. We did write to those schools, and I met with the universities who were dealing with that. It did affect a small number of universities. But of course, if it affected you, it was a massive impact. At the time, we said that the marking boycotts were outrageous. I think they were very damaging to the sector and the brand image of the sector, and I urge the unions and the universities to work to make sure they don't happen again.

We have published our consultation on minimum service levels, which was largely focused on schools, but also included a question on universities to see whether it would be helpful to equip universities with an additional tool to be able to deal with these situations. The boycotts had an impact on young people. I have a very simple view: young people are paying a lot for their university education; they deserve a high-quality university education, and part of that includes getting their work marked. This is a paid-for service, so they absolutely have the right to expect that. But, as you say, we are one step removed from actually handling those discussions or negotiations.

Chair: It is something we will certainly look into in more detail. Ian, did you want to come in on the minimum service levels consultation?

Q69 **Ian Mearns:** Yes, indeed. The Department's consultation into minimum service levels in education has received pretty widespread backlash across the education sector. Can you outline what you hope to achieve with the consultation, and how you will ensure relations between unions and employers don't deteriorate?

Gillian Keegan: Obviously that is a conversation that we had with the unions in the hope of trying to come up with voluntary arrangements—

Ian Mearns: And how was that?

Gillian Keegan: We get on very well, but there are differences—you know, what am I trying to do? I am trying to protect children's education. We know the impact of lost education on children; we probably know more about it than we ever have because of the pandemic and the strikes, as well as the absentee and attendance rates. All those things give us a lot of concern about the disproportionate impact of lost education on young people, and particularly on vulnerable young people, those with special educational needs, very young children and, of course, exam cohorts or people who are relying on their hard work being marked. That is what we are trying to do.

Of course, we completely respect the right to strike. This is the first time the unions have had this conversation about having any curtailment on that. It is difficult because we have very different starting places.

However, I have said that the door is always open while the consultation is going on. We do have constructive relationships, but I also understand the difficulty for the unions, because they are not really mandated to have the conversation—they would have to go back to their own executive, because the right to strike is absolute as far as they are concerned. That is why we are doing the consultation.

If you look at what happens today, there are lots of schools and unions that work very hard if there is strike action to put support in place for vulnerable children, children with special educational needs and young children; exam cohorts have been very much protected as well. But it is not a uniform picture, and parents don't know, actually—there is a lot of worry there. We wanted to consult on whether we can kind of codify what already happens to make it uniform. We want to make sure everybody is aware that, yes, there is a right to strike—although we hope not to have any more strikes in schools, and I personally will work my hardest on that. I don't think the ones that happened should have happened. We should have waited for the independent pay review body, as I said at the time. Obviously we agreed what the independent pay review body suggested. All we are trying to do is to make sure that there is a system where we know that those most vulnerable kids—those young kids and the ones who face a disproportionate impact—can go to school, and where it is more of a uniform picture across the country.

Q70 **Ian Mearns:** I think the vast majority of teachers share your lack of enthusiasm for being forced to take strike action. It is, from their perspective, a last resort. They don't take strike action easily or readily. It just seems to me that this is another unwarranted input of Government into an already weakened industrial relations relationship, and I think it will actually create more animosity.

Gillian Keegan: It is certainly true that some people will resent it—that's why we are having a consultation—but I think it is also true to say that 25 million lost school days is a serious thing that an Education Secretary needs to look at.

Something that I did find frustrating was that the strikes were happening before the independent pay review process. I can understand if the independent pay review process comes out, and then we do not manage to reach an agreement based on what they had recommended—then, okay, that is a different set of circumstances. But we did agree with the independent pay review body. It was a lot higher than we were anticipating and that was affordable, and we have funded that in its entirety. I believe we have done the fair and reasonable thing, and I will always try to do that. Our teachers do an amazing job. They deserve a £30,000 starting salary and to have lots of career prospects that reward the invaluable work they do. But the independent pay review body is there for a reason, and I think we should have at least waited for them to come up with their findings, so I do not actually think it was a last resort.

Q71 **Ian Mearns:** But the context, of course, is that we know that there is a recruitment and retention problem—a crisis in some people's view. Pay is

a large part of that recruitment and retention crisis. I think what we have seem is a manifestation of the frustration of people working within the sector.

Gillian Keegan: Actually, a lot of the results show that pay is not actually the biggest driver. Workload, respect, recognition, opportunities to progress and investment in continuous professional development all have a massive impact. A lot of teachers at the time said, "Actually, I wasn't striking for my pay; I was striking because I thought the schools were not funded at the right level."

There was a lot of confusion because, of course, we got the extra £2 billion. When I first started this job—probably the last time I was in front of this Committee—I had received a letter from the union saying, "We need £2 billion of additional funding." Nobody expected us to get it in the autumn statement last year; we did get it. I thought that might be enough, as we met the union demands, but it turned out not to be. I do not think anyone could say that we did not act in good faith.

Chair: Let's come to Flick next.

Q72 **Mrs Drummond:** Oh, is it my go? How exciting! This is my big thing.

The Committee has long been calling for a register of children not in school, and I put forward a ten-minute rule Bill on the matter in May, so it had its First Reading. Why didn't you take it forward then?

Gillian Keegan: First, thank you for all your excellent work on this issue. I think we are absolutely aligned on the need to do this and on our desire to do it. My understanding was that it was a procedural matter—that there was not long enough for the Bill to go through. We are fully supportive of the desire to do it and we are very much looking forward to getting it done. We just need to make sure that there is enough time in the parliamentary timetable.

Q73 **Mrs Drummond:** Can I ask why you didn't try to get it into the King's Speech?

Gillian Keegan: Obviously, you put forward—

Mrs Drummond: Are there any education policies there?

Gillian Keegan: Everybody puts forward their views, and with the King's Speech they have to focus. A lot of education legislation and reforms have gone through, and we have had a lot of reform focus as well. Most of what we do is delivering against those reforms. We have always said that we wanted to do this, but of course with the legislative choices there are more options. I don't know whether Susan wants to add anything.

Susan Acland-Hood: It might be easier for me to say this than the Secretary of State, who is being an outstandingly good collective Cabinet member. What is in the King's Speech is not the same as what we tried to get into the King's Speech. I think that would be the thing I would say on that.

Mrs Drummond: Okay. I am putting forward a presentation Bill—it has to be in on Thursday—and if I'm on the list, I hope you will support it.

Gillian Keegan: We will absolutely be supporting it. We've been supporting it all along, but we just need to make sure that we have got that approach that can be successful. As I say, thank you for all your determination in this area, because it is important, and it is something that we look forward hopefully to working with you on.

Ian Mearns: I couldn't help but notice the permanent secretary's implied criticism of the Prime Minister and the content of the King's Speech. *[Laughter.]* That's neither here nor there.

Susan Acland-Hood: It is a perfectly functioning part of the system that Departments will try to put things into the King's Speech and then it's a perfectly reasonable part of the system that there is a central decision between those things. The question implied that we hadn't tried.

Q74 **Chair:** Thank you for that clarification. What I would say is that I hope that if there are private Members' Bills that address either this issue or the provision of the statutory guidance on attendance, which I know is another priority for the Department, that will be something that the Department can get behind and work closely on with whoever is promoting those Bills, because that is another route for finding parliamentary time, which we, as a Committee, are very keen to support you in doing.

Let me turn to the early years, which we recognise are hugely important as well. You announced very ambitious reforms and we got a fantastic move forward at the Budget, in terms of the commitment to this space. What work are you undertaking to ensure that the sector has the capacity to deliver the reforms and aspirations that were set out in the Budget?

Gillian Keegan: This is very ambitious reform and I am delighted that we have the opportunity to introduce it. This will transform the lives of children and working parents. We are seeking to introduce 30 hours of free childcare from the age of nine months through to a child starting school, and then also to have wraparound care from 8 am to 6 pm in all our primary schools. The ambition is for the whole of it to be rolled out by September 2025, so we'll be working hard to do that.

One of the key things is getting enough people trained and getting enough places. We have provided additional funding to increase the rates and announced capital funding to support the delivery of the expansion of existing facilities. We have also put in place and announced new schemes to attract more childminders, which was a part of the market that was there that seems to have disappeared or been reduced in some ways. We are looking at many different things in terms of routes into the workplace and how to upskill, but also how to have a broader range of options for people to get into the profession, and we have a campaign to encourage people to go into the profession.

We have announced a lot of different things with rates, but we are doing some particular work, because I think some concern came from the Ofsted report that said there was a decline in provider numbers. Of the 3,320 that are in that report, 3,080 are childminders or home childcares; only 210 were non-domestic premises—nurseries, as they were, which provide the vast majority of places. Overall, the places have only declined by 1% and the actual population of zero to four-year-olds has declined by 6%, so they are steady. But we do recognise the importance of childminders, so we are putting specific things in place to make sure that we grow that sector. We do have a huge challenge to get more and more people into the sector, and more and more places, but it is one that we have a plan to deliver.

Q75 **Chair:** It is great to hear about the plan. It is a sector that employs an awful lot of people at or close to the national minimum wage or national living wage, and that has increased very substantially. In terms of conversations with the Treasury and about the funding rate, will that be taken into account? How do we ensure that the funding rates are adequate to deliver on the aspirations to have really high-quality care and to give people career progression in this space, so that hopefully in the future fewer people in the sector are on the national living wage?

Gillian Keegan: Yes. The £400 million that we have already announced for 2024/25 includes £67 million to reflect the increase in the national living wage from April 2024. There is also £57 million in recognition of teacher pay and pension costs in ’24, as well as the existing entitlement. We did take that into account, and we were actually waiting for that from the Autumn statement, because it was a key input to part of our calculations. We have made sure that we have covered additional funding for that.

Q76 **Chair:** There were some other recommendations in our report on the early years and childcare. I appreciate that you cannot necessarily accept them all on behalf of other parts of Government, but in terms of reviewing the disability access funding and disability living allowance system, so that more children in the early years with additional needs can access the support they need, have there been any discussions with DWP and the Treasury?

Gillian Keegan: My understanding is that the eligibility for the disability access fund, along with the early years pupil premium and SEN inclusion fund eligibility, will be extended to all children accessing free entitlements. The rate has increased from £615 to £800 a child, and that will be £881 and then go to £910. Two-year-old children in receipt of disability living allowance are also eligible for disadvantaged entitlement. But of course we are always in these discussions with DWP, and we always keep under review whether there is more we need to do to support disabled children and ensure they get access.

Chair: I will not ask you to make a commitment, but I draw your attention to family hubs. You talked about the opportunity for family hubs to help to reduce some of the pressures of workload. Obviously, we did make a very

strong recommendation around expanding the roll-out of family hubs beyond the regions where they are initially targeted. I hope you will be able to discuss that with the Treasury ahead of upcoming spending statements. Miriam, can I bring you in on SEND?

Q77 **Miriam Cates:** Yes, I will try to be as quick as possible. There has clearly been quite an increase in the number of children, particularly lower-age primary, with special educational needs, behavioural difficulties, developmental difficulties, or things like not being potty trained when arriving at school. I have two questions on the back of that. First, has the DfE done any research into why the prevalence of some of these issues is increasing? I think there are some quite interesting ideas coming out of the United States, in terms of links with screens, lockdown, and a wide range of things that need researching.

Secondly, how should primary schools cope with this? I have spoken to schools in my patch that are moving TAs from year 5 and year 6 down to the early years, because they practically cannot cope with the level of need. Now, they can do that for a certain amount of time, but obviously there is a big implication for the learning of the year 5s and years 6s, and it is just not sustainable. Where in the past you might have had one or two children in the whole school needing an adult with them all the time, you now have one or two in a class. While school funding is higher on paper than it has ever been, the need is off the scale. How are you looking at this?

Gillian Keegan: We have increased the higher needs funding, but there is no doubt that we need to improve this system. We do have a larger number of children identified with special educational needs. Some of them have an EHC plan; some of them are just identified with special educational needs. We have put together the reform plan because we recognise that we need to improve the system, and my colleague, Minister Johnston, is working on a whole load of things.

The simple answer to your question is: that is why we've got the improvement plan. We can see the pressures not just on how schools do, but also on special educational needs school places. That is why we have introduced a load more free schools. I have announced more; there is more to come. That is one of the reasons why we are investing in school places and in SENCOs. We are training another 7,000 SENCOs; I think 4,800 have started. We are investing in educational psychologists. We are investing in making the system more standardised. That will be difficult, but we will do some pathfinders for that. A lot of work is ongoing, all of it aimed at helping schools. We are also trying to help schools to be more inclusive of neurodiversity panels—

Q78 **Miriam Cates:** That all sounds brilliant, but of course the elephant in the room is why? Why have we now got here? It is not just a matter of reporting. We have got better over the past 20 or 30 years at identifying and diagnosing special needs—of course that is true—but it is not just that. There is clearly a very much increased prevalence of serious behavioural, developmental and emotional problems, particularly in

younger children, and it is not confined to this country, by any means.

Gillian Keegan: And they are included. In previous times, they have not been included, and there was a new group that recognised social, behavioural and special educational needs, and more. I think the simple answer is that we know more, and I personally think we care more.

Q79 **Miriam Cates:** I want to push back on that, because I just don't think that is true at all. We have changed, but if you go around a primary school and ask the teachers, "Have you, objectively, got more children now with needs?", they say, "A hundred per cent, yes." This is not about diagnosis—"Have you got more diagnosis?" It is, "Have you actually got more children who are emotionally incapable of surviving the day?" For example, potty training is an obvious thing. Fifteen years ago, it was unheard of for a child to come to school not potty trained—

Ian Mearns: No, it wasn't.

Miriam Cates: Okay, it was not unheard of, but it was a very, very small problem. Now, 90% of reception teachers report having one or more children in their class not potty trained. The implication of that, because of safeguarding, is that two adults have to take that child out of the classroom to change them. There are also implications for the child, because the psychological impact of wetting yourself in front of peers is clearly very different when you are six from when you are two. This is having long-term implications economically for the whole of society, and it is a relatively new, or at least newly grown, problem. This is not the fault of teachers or education, of course, but what are the plans to deal with this? Because the long-term implications for the sector are huge if we do not get a grip on it.

Gillian Keegan: I hear some of the same things, and I think some of the secondary things that the childcare reforms will hopefully help to deliver will be an improvement in not only kids' readiness for school but, as you say, the sort of cultural or societal norm factor as well. I remember when you couldn't have your child in a nursery unless they were dry.

Q80 **Miriam Cates:** Do you think the opposite could be true? Because nurseries, by and large, don't do the potty training. So if you have more time in formal education, especially from a younger age, it is harder to potty train that child, potentially. Certainly the research on under-twos in long hours of institutional childcare is not good for their outcomes; it is really poor for their outcomes, in fact, the longer the hours spent. My concern is that the policies will actually make that worse.

Gillian Keegan: I don't know. You are talking about the policies at the moment, but parents are responsible for training their children to go to the toilet.

Miriam Cates: But if they spend a lot of hours in nursery, it is then harder to do so.

Gillian Keegan: But you started with, "Well, it's not happening today," so the parents are not doing it. I would say that, potentially, for some

parents, it could be improved by that system. The reality is that children need to be trained to go to the toilet. A number of people can play a role in that, for sure.

On the research factor, I do not know whether we have done any particular research into that. By the way, though, special educational needs and potty training are very separate things and I do not want to confuse the two.

Miriam Cates: Absolutely, but I am talking about the overall level of need that schools are then faced with.

Susan Acland-Hood: I have a couple of things to add. We are seeing higher incidence of identified special educational needs, including higher rates of EHCP. We have done quite a lot of work on what the key drivers for that are. It tends to be that there is much more growth in what we might think of as somewhat lower-level needs: speech and language, emotional mental health and autism, particularly autism in girls, which is one bit where I think we might be seeing something that is more about improved diagnosis and certainly about early identification.

It is also certainly true, however, particularly with some of the post-pandemic increases in need, that it is very difficult to disentangle what we might think of as a long-term, lifelong cognitive difference from something that has come about because of environmental impact. On one level, why distinguish? Because if there is a need, we want to meet it. On another level, there is an impact on a child of having an identification with SEND very early in life—we know that losing those identifications later is hard. We are thinking really carefully about those intersections. One of the things I hear a lot in schools—particularly in schools managing the early years—is that on one level, you want to identify and name what you are seeing. On another level, the label isn't always the thing that helps. Sometimes it is about the nurture, or the other support you can wrap around a child.

I was in a school in north Somerset—two weeks ago, I think—and saw one of the ways people are using things like our safety valve programme. They had used the safety valve funding not to put more one-to-one adults with children in class, but to create a small nurture class. That class was taking the children who were developmentally behind—again, they were trying not to label it too soon—and putting them with a skilled, fully trained teacher in a smaller group. They were then working towards reintegrating the children back into class, and they were having quite significant success with that.

So I think there is both something there about the understanding, but also about the approaches you use that are appropriate when what you are seeing is a developmental challenge, but your aspiration is to bring that child back to a level where they can function really well with their peers.

Miriam Cates: Is there time for one more question?

Chair: Very quickly.

Q81 **Miriam Cates:** Okay, perhaps it is one for writing then. To completely change the subject: birth rates are falling, and primary schools are now reporting classes where they have two or three children missing. Obviously, from a funding point of view this is very difficult because you might have three fewer children in your class, and have therefore lost £12,000 a year, but you still need one teacher, one classroom, and so on. Is the Department planning for this in terms of whether the funding formula will need to change?

Gillian Keegan: First of all, local authorities are big part of planning for that as well. It is something we have to do from time to time. We obviously don't control the population, but it does fluctuate.

Miriam Cates: The fertility rate has steadily fallen from the 1970s and is now drastically falling—it is now 1.56. It is only going in one direction really.

Gillian Keegan: We did have to create 1 million new school places since 2010.

Miriam Cates: That is because of immigration.

Gillian Keegan: In terms of the impact on schools and school places—

Miriam Cates: The fertility rate is falling.

Gillian Keegan: Yes, because obviously they come in at different ages, and from different stages and different places. But that capacity planning in terms of school places—which is the impact it has on us—is something we do work closely on with the local authority. That is part of a regular thing, but we are seeing, particularly in some parts of the country—London has often been discussed—that there was perhaps an acceleration of maybe what is a natural trend because of the pandemic, and there are other factors as well. It is one of the challenges of managing the school estate and managing capacity, but although it is difficult, it is a normal challenge.

I don't know whether you have anything to say, Susan?

Susan Acland-Hood: Two very quick things. We have increased the amount of flexibility we give local authorities in their formula to protect schools with falling rolls to a greater extent, and to help them manage their transition. You're right that the long-term trend is down. One of my favourite facts about demography in education though is that you can see the effect of the post-war baby boom in the demographic figures as a wave that repeats for at least 100 years. It comes in a wave of people having more kids, and then more kids and more kids. So it is not quite smoothly down, and that means we also have to be able to manage a generally declining line, but with humps that periodically come into it. That is why, for example, we had quite a big period where we had to look at an increase—

Miriam Cates: Yes, in 2013-14.

Susan Acland-Hood: Exactly, and that bulge is still going through the secondary and post-16 stage, so we are very acutely aware of it. The balance we try to strike is not to become people from Whitehall with sticks on a table who push everybody around a big map, but to try and give the flexibility to local areas to respond intelligently. It will be very different in different local areas and circumstances whether sustaining a school that might see a rise later is more sensible than looking at different configurations.

The other thing we are looking at is the role that schools can play in supporting the expansion of the childcare entitlement. We are seeing more schools looking at pulling their provision down the age range, which again is another way that a primary school with falling rolls can look at their space and sustainability.

Gillian Keegan: There is the whole multi-academy trust system as well. Looking at the pipelines and the feeders so they have an end-to-end view, I think that has been helped by the MAT system.

Chair: We are going to have one more question, which we're not going to have much time for answering because I realise we have extensively overrun and Prime Minister's questions is about to start. I am grateful for the time you have given us, Secretary of State, but I did want Ian to pick up on one of our upcoming inquiries.

Q82 **Ian Mearns:** The Committee has recently launched an inquiry into children's social care in England. I am certainly aware through my roles outside of this place that school referrals about safeguarding and welfare concerns are quite often met with significantly increased thresholds for intervention by children's social care departments around the country. On Miriam's point, we have seen significant numbers of special educational needs and development and disability tribunal success for parents because, sadly, all too often EHCPs are written by local authority staff with resources in mind, rather than the needs of the child. We have this inquiry coming up. What do you, as the Secretary of State, see as the current major challenges in children's social care? What will you do to tackle them?

Gillian Keegan: There definitely are challenges in children's social care. We have had three reviews across children's social care, and earlier this year we published "Stable Homes, Built on Love" as a response to those. That has some short-term things in terms of cash and cash injection, so there has been additional money. We are moving from a real focus on the quality of local authorities to their ability to manage these services as well. We now have 60% good or outstanding, which is not good enough, but better than where we were, which was 36% in 2017. We have also introduced virtual school heads in local authorities, so we want to have that focus.

There is a huge amount of work. The first thing is around prevention: we have some work around fostering, kinship carers and supporting families in terms of supporting families and family hubs. The next thing is children's homes. The children's homes market concerns us. We have had a big rise in very expensive places, which I know the inquiry will be looking into.

Ian Mearns: And previous inquiries have done so as well.

Gillian Keegan: Right. Well, I wasn't aware of that, but let us see if we can work on that together, because it needs to be resolved.

Chair: The Department's risk register describes it as market failure.

Gillian Keegan: Yes, and we are concerned about that market. We are also concerned about the commissioning and how it works. This is something that local authorities do not commission every day; it is not a regular commission. It is rather unusual and there are quite a lot of often complex needs, but we are investing £259 million in children's homes and building out more children's homes. We are trying to get some work going on regional commission, even though it is tough, but we need to do that.

We obviously have a huge focus on care leavers as well, on the individuals and on ensuring that we support them better. I think all these things should help to make a massive difference, but the most important thing is that we really care about this. Johnny Mercer, my colleague, is taking a huge role in trying to ensure that care leavers have really well-supported services, similar to what he has done for veterans. It is something that we are very focused on, but we will also be looking at the market and working with the Competition and Markets Authority, which has obviously considered that. We will be looking at and financially analysing it as well, and we will be looking at what more we need to do.

Susan Acland-Hood: We have implemented all the recommendations of the CMA report that we commissioned on this because of the concern we had about it.

Q83 **Ian Mearns:** Does it not concern you, though, that headteachers in schools report that when they pass on concerns to local children's services providers, the thresholds for intervention seem to have gone up and up and up?

Gillian Keegan: That is obviously not appropriate; if somebody needs support, they need support. We are working on child protection. There is a lot of focus on those children in need, on multi-agency protection and ensuring that the decision is not just made with one view and is on not just the social worker, but made by the social worker working with many other disciplines and trying to have a family-first support system as well. There are many different schemes, but we are working with them to try to see that we can support the family first. The family hubs will help with that as well. If intervention is required, intervention is required, and it is the judgment of those teams to get that right. I have not heard of lowering the bar or anything like that, but these are tough decisions. They are very

balanced decisions; they are difficult decisions. I think that having that team around you to enable you to make the decision—I have seen it in action—seems to work well, but the most important thing is that we protect children and support families.

Chair: Thank you, Secretary of State. I will bring the session to a close.