

Education Committee

Oral evidence: [The impact of Covid-19 on education and children's services](#), HC 254

Wednesday 13 January 2021

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Members present: Robert Halfon (Chair); Fleur Anderson; Apsana Begum; Jonathan Gullis; Tom Hunt; Dr Caroline Johnson; Kim Johnson; David Johnston; Ian Mearns; David Simmonds; Christian Wakeford.

Questions 1060 - 1146

Witnesses

I: Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP, Secretary of State for Education; and Susan Acland-Hood, Permanent Secretary, Department for Education.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Gavin Williamson MP and Susan Acland-Hood.

Q1060 Chair: Good morning, Secretary of State and Permanent Secretary. Thank you for coming to our Committee today. For the benefit of the tape and for those watching on the internet can you kindly introduce yourselves with your title?

Gavin Williamson: Certainly. Gavin Williamson, Secretary of State for Education.

Susan Acland-Hood: Good morning, everyone. I am Susan Acland-Hood and I am the Permanent Secretary in the Department for Education.

Q1061 Chair: Thank you. Secretary of State, can you give an update on the food boxes issue? As I understand it, schools have an option to use either local vouchers or will have a national voucher scheme, as they have had previously in the first lockdown. Apart from telling the food contractors to go to Specsavers, who have been supplying parsimonious food boxes, will you name and shame those companies and make sure that schools who do these deals are not ripped off on behalf of the taxpayer and that families get the nutritious food that the Government guidelines suggest?

Gavin Williamson: When I saw that picture I was absolutely disgusted. As a dad myself, I thought how could a family in receipt of that really be expected to deliver five nutritious meals, as is required. It is just not acceptable. It has been made absolutely clear to Chartwells and to the whole sector that that sort of behaviour is just not right. It will not be tolerated. We will not live with that.

It is so important. There are clear standards that are set there that they need to deliver against, and if they do not deliver against them, actions will have to be taken. The Minister for Children met with Chartwells yesterday. Chartwells were made absolutely clear that this is not acceptable and they have apologised for this. We will support any school that needs to take action against any group contractor and will absolutely name and shame any of those that are not delivering against the standards.

Q1062 Chair: Is it right that there will be a national Edenred scheme starting soon?

Gavin Williamson: Mr Chair, there are a number of things. First, schools do have existing food contracts in place, so they can provide food boxes through those existing contracts. They can also take on local voucher schemes, and the Department will reimburse them for that. It is important that they have local flexibility. From next week, the national food voucher scheme will be available to all schools, which we are running with Edenred, where we successfully distributed hundreds of



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millions of pounds worth of vouchers to families through free school meals. That will be available to all schools from next week.

All schools still have the option of doing locally procured vouchers if that is the route that they want to take, but the national scheme will be available from next week.

Q1063 Chair: Thank you. You have kept nurseries open. Will nurseries be staying open and can you confirm that they are safe for staff who work there, who are doing so much to keep those children learning, and for children?

Gavin Williamson: Mr Chairman, I am very much like you. I always want to see all education settings open all the time. I always want to ensure that every child is in a position to be able to go to school. As you will be aware, transmissibility among those who are youngest is the very lowest compared to all of the settings. When you are in a position to be able to keep part of the education sector open, in terms of early years, I believe it was the right decision to make because so many families rely on that nursery provision. Most importantly, those early years are so important—

Q1064 Chair: Are you going to keep them open, guaranteed?

Gavin Williamson: The advice that we have had is that we can keep early years settings open. There is no intention to close them and we have not received any contrary advice to that.

Q1065 Chair: If I can turn to mental health, is the DfE carrying out any audit on the impact of lockdowns and school closures on pupils' mental health? What are the Government doing to ensure that people have adequate access to mental health support while schools are closed? You will have heard the evidence from the Royal College of Psychiatrists, the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, and just last week Dr Karen Street, an officer at the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, wrote harrowingly about the 400% increase in eating disorders among young people, partly due to school closures and social isolation. Can you guarantee that mental health professionals will be put in schools and that parents and children who are at home in social isolation can have access to those professionals whenever they need it?

Gavin Williamson: I think all members of your Committee, and much wider in society, have all had to deal with loved ones or people that are close to us who have issues with mental health. What we have seen during the pandemic is that it has put quite extraordinary strain on so many young people and families. I would like to pay tribute to the work that has been undertaken by the Department of Health—a £2.3 billion investment in mental health—and this is about how we bring together both education and health services locally to make sure we deliver the best mental health support that is possible.



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We had the Wellbeing for Education Return programme that was an investment in training for teachers and those who work in schools and colleges to best be able to help young people, as well as those who work in education, to support them with the mental health issues that they may have. I have also asked the Minister for Universities and the Minister for Children to convene a taskforce to look at some of the real issues that children are having to deal with, and also professionals within the sector, both within schools, colleges, nurseries and, of course, universities, and about how the Government can best respond to some of these real challenges that we are dealing with.

Q1066 Chair: Would the answer not just be that because we know it is a serious problem and getting worse, sadly, to have either incredible organisations and charities like Place2Be, for example, that the Government supports for children and parents to be able to have access to a mental health counsellor in their school whenever they need it, especially during lockdown? That would make possibly a huge difference to families who are struggling.

Gavin Williamson: That is where the Wellbeing for Education Return programme is aimed, in terms of giving people training in order to be able to deliver that support at source. Of course, having children back in schools was an incredibly important moment in order to be able to spot some of the challenges, and that is why I am so keen to ensure that schools are closed for the shortest time possible. It does not just help children in their educational attainment; it also helps them in their physical and mental wellbeing by being in school.

We are looking right across the spectrum as to how we can leverage in as much mental health support for children. This is why I have asked both Michelle and Vicky to look right across the whole education sector, looking at what more we can do and bringing in those important partners. You are absolutely right to highlight the voluntary sector that does such excellent work in there. We have continued to support so many children's charities through financial support that are so vital in terms of helping and supporting children in their mental health and wellbeing, but we do want to look at how we can step that up.

Q1067 Chair: Thank you. I hope you will consider that and that it will happen quickly. Given that you have rightly said that you want schools to open again as soon as possible, ideally after the half-term—and I hope that is signed in blood—with all the activities and investment the Government are doing in terms of testing regarding children and teachers, surely it might be better to put that investment into rolling out vaccines for teachers and support staff and perhaps having mobile vans, a bit like the blood donor vans, as much as possible go up and down the schools vaccinating teachers and support staff. That would be one way that teachers would not feel at risk but, more importantly, we could get our schools open again sooner rather than later.



Gavin Williamson: You are right to highlight that there has been a lot of focus on testing, and testing will continue to remain a really important part of supporting children in education. As you are aware, Chair, there has not been a completed trial on children or people under the age of 18 on any of the vaccines. We are not going to be in a position to be able to offer vaccinations for children until there have been those fully completed trials. Testing is going to remain important. We have already seen with the rollout of testing hundreds of thousands of tests completed for those children attending schools and for those staff.

Q1068 **Chair:** Not because one favours one group of workers over another, I completely get that, and it is always going to be very difficult who you choose, but why not ensure that teachers and support staff are a priority for vaccination so then we get our schools open? There are 450,000 teachers roughly. If you spent a few days doing that, given the capacity now is 200,000 every couple of days, you could get teachers and support staff done pretty quickly.

Gavin Williamson: There is a school workforce of one million, and it is absolutely vital we do not forget support staff in this. It is often the support staff who will be the ones who are the most exposed. I think there is also a special need in the area of special schools as well, where there is often a crossover between not just an education setting but also a care and health setting.

It is quite understandably right that the Government have decided to prioritise those who are most at risk of being hospitalised and, as a result of catching Covid, most at risk of death. As the Health Secretary and Nadhim have said, in that next wave where we need to prioritise others, I will make no apology for the fact that I see the top priority is for all those who work in schools—not just teachers, but all those who work in schools. Every single one of them is absolutely vital for delivering education.

Chair: Thank you. I always say support staff, and I am glad that you mentioned support staff, too, because they are often forgotten about and people just talk about teachers. Before I carry on, Tom Hunt wants to ask a question about vaccinations.

Q1069 **Tom Hunt:** Good morning, Secretary of State. I am aware that there was a letter sent to you recently by I think it was HMC, and I have a school in my constituency that is working with other schools that feels as though it has the facilities and also the trained staff to be able to vaccinate all of the local teaching staff in the area. It would simply be a matter of them getting the vaccine but they would be able to take care of everything else without detracting from the other, wider vaccination strategy. What are your thoughts? I think the letter was sent pretty recently, but what are your thoughts on that? It does seem that a lot of the schools are prepared to roll their sleeves up and be part of getting teachers vaccinated.



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Chair: Concisely, if you can.

Gavin Williamson: Of course. Tom, I have not seen the letter but I will make sure it is dug out immediately. The JCVI has set out those who are most at risk of death and most at risk of harm, and so they have to be the top priority. My priority is to see teachers and support staff be in a place to be able to get the vaccine at the very earliest moment. I agree with you; there is a real appetite and a real ability, as we have already seen with testing, that schools can play a major role in the rollout, not just in testing but in terms of vaccination, making sure we get to that position where we are protecting that really critical workforce that is so vital for all of us, but most importantly so vital for our children.

Q1070 **Chair:** It is good to confirm that you are fighting that teachers and support staff get moved up the priority list for vaccinations.

Gavin Williamson: Absolutely tooth and nail. It is the thing that I have conversations about every single day. Tom, on your point I would be very happy to meet up with you to have a bit of a discussion in detail on the back of that letter.

Q1071 **Chair:** I have a couple more questions before I pass to my colleagues. I want to talk about disengagement from learning and vulnerable pupils. We know that before the most recent lockdown, overall truancy rates almost doubled in autumn 2020. Average absence rates in the recent autumn term were 4.4%, which rose to 8.5% in late November, and that is after Covid-related absences were factored in. Wraparounds and access to social services diminished during the lockdown. Children's social care teams received 18% fewer referrals than in the same period over the prior three years. My concern is that the lockdown could further exacerbate a rise in disengagement seen during the autumn term and that fewer children will be able to access local support services.

Covid aside, what is the Department's plan to re-engage learners who are falling off the radar and how will you support multiagency working at a local level?

Gavin Williamson: I think we would all say that Covid has created enormous challenges for every sector, certainly and not least education, but there are sometimes good things that can start to emerge from this. One of the things that has really started to emerge is much closer working between schools, social services and local authorities, but also the police forces in local areas and how they are engaging and working together to have a constant dialogue, constant communication, constant support with children.

In the initial data that we have already seen starting to come in from just the first day of this week, we have seen a much higher level of children with social workers in school than we saw last time. We saw a variability of between 4% and 28% of children who had a social worker in schools in the last term, in the first lockdown where schools were closed. This time, and it is still too low, that is at 40%. We have a clear strategy in terms of



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working with local authorities with our REACT teams, supplementing and supporting local authorities with Ofsted in terms of helping them if they need extra support in order to be able to reach out to the most vulnerable children.

There is a bigger issue in terms of long-term engagement and you have highlighted it, as to the fact that there are more of those children who were not attending school when schools were fully up and running with all year groups invited. This is where it becomes really important in terms of getting the discipline and behaviour structures right within schools, making sure that all schools have really strong policies in terms of truancy, making sure that there is an exceptionally low tolerance level of truancy within schools, and how we best support schools in order to be able to implement that so that those who are most vulnerable recognise that school is the safest place for them and it is the best place for them.

Q1072 Chair: We know that in the last lockdown, just 6% of vulnerable children attended school. I am talking about the main lockdown starting last March. Am I correct in saying that last week, the Department suspended the attendance data collection they have run since last April? If that is so, it means that it will not be possible to assess whether schools are being inundated with pupils, as many are claiming. Will the publication of this data resume so that we can find out exactly what is happening to vulnerable children, whether or not they are attending school?

Gavin Williamson: Of course, Chair. In terms of the changed circumstances, we obviously had to change the way we were collecting data as they would not be reflective of the circumstances that schools found themselves in. Just this morning, we made an ad hoc release of data to give people a clear sense of where things were on the first full day of collecting that data. I just referred to 40% of children with EHCPs being in attendance. It was 46% in primaries, 25% in secondaries, 29% in special schools and 36% in alternative provision, and 40% of children with social workers were in attendance. As you can see, a much higher rate than last time but recognising there is still much more work to do. The overall attendance rate was 14% of pupils were in school.

Q1073 Chair: I am very happy if you call me by my first name, by the way. Finally, I want to ask you about alternative provision. Can you confirm that alternative provision is obliged to stay open for all of their pupils during lockdown? If there is no obligation to do so, are they allowed to stay open for all pupils even if some are not on the vulnerable and critical workers list? Finally, the Government softened the requirement in the last lockdown for councils to support pupils with EHCPs. Can you confirm whether you are doing the same this time?

Gavin Williamson: It is really important. As I said in my statement last week, where parents are in a position to be able to keep their children at home we do ask them to do so. If they are in a position where that is not possible, if they are a critical worker or they are a vulnerable child, we do



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want to see those sorts of places made available to them. We do not have any plans in terms of changing the EHCP—

Q1074 **Chair:** You are not going to soften the requirement on the EHCP, as happened last time?

Gavin Williamson: There is no intention of doing that.

Q1075 **Chair:** On AP, are they going to be obliged to stay open for their pupils or not?

Gavin Williamson: We are asking AP to stay open and we have seen already in the first cut of data that we have had, if I look through, trying to find the exact data on the AP opening—I do apologise.

Chair: You can send us the data.

Gavin Williamson: As I say, 24% are attending in alternative provision. What we are asking is for alternative provision to work with parents and children.

Q1076 **Chair:** Are they open to all of their pupils or just critical workers and vulnerable children?

Gavin Williamson: It is open to all those within the EHCP, which obviously is a very big proportion, but we are asking them to work with parents where there is a very specific need in order for them to be able to do that and to work with parents to work within the needs of the child if that needs to be made available to them.

Susan Acland-Hood: Secretary of State, I hope this is helpful. I think the first thing to understand is the definition of vulnerable children is one where we give some discretion to the school, because we think they have the best understanding of which children are most vulnerable. That means for AP they are open for all children with ECHPs and all those that they deem vulnerable. For many AP settings, that will be all the children in the school, but we have also offered them some flexibility to work with parents because again they understand their children and their parents well and they understand what is going to work for them. Many settings talk to us about the value of being able to design patterns with parents, as AP settings do quite a lot of the time in normal times, to try to manage patterns of attendance that are going to work and keep the largest possible number of those children engaged. Yes, they can open for all their children but they can also design sensible patterns of attendance with pupils and parents that are going to make sense for them and their cohort.

Q1077 **David Johnston:** Good morning, Secretary of State. In September the Department issued a tier system to manage school openings, where you could move from having a rota for different children to attend school at different times through to wholly online learning. Whose decision was it to move away from that system and why was it taken?



Gavin Williamson: The decision to move away from that system was done in conjunction with the Department of Health, Public Health England and also through the formal process of the Covid-O Committee that convenes all parts of Government. In terms of the design of these systems, these are never done in isolation purely with the Department for Education. It is done most critically and importantly with the Department of Health and Public Health England to make sure it meets the need.

In terms of working with the Department of Health and Public Health England, we felt that by moving to the contingency framework this would be a better way of doing it. Having spoken with the sector and their experiences of operating schools throughout the June and July period, and then into the September and with the full opening of schools, we felt that the contingency framework best met their needs and it also worked best with the Department of Health and Public Health England.

Q1078 **David Johnston:** Is that what you imagine we will revert to when schools come to reopen?

Gavin Williamson: We already have the set scheme in terms of a contingency framework. As I have said many times before, I want schools to be closed for the shortest period of time available, but the contingency framework would sit there to continue if there are areas of particular need where we have to have school settings continue to remain closed, and it would be through the contingency framework that they remain closed.

Q1079 **David Johnston:** You issued a temporary continuity direction to Greenwich Council on 13 December, and I happen to support your determination to keep schools open, but people understandably have asked on what basis you made that decision, given where we find ourselves now with children having to use online learning anyway.

Gavin Williamson: As you can imagine, right across the north of England and right across the Midlands, we have seen many local authorities and many schools having to really tackle very high levels of Covid infections. What has happened on every one of those occasions is we have been in the situation where we work really closely with those local authorities where they have had particular concerns. We have dealt with dozens of local authorities where they have had particular concerns and we have never been in a situation where we have had to move a direction, because what has always happened is those local authorities have come to us, we have had detailed discussions, and we have looked at working with Public Health England and working with the local director of public health as to how we deal with some of those challenges. Sometimes that has meant schools closing where there have been particular challenges, but we have really taken the approach of partnership working. You have had areas of the country with case rates of over 800, where by working with the local authority we have been in a position where we have been able to keep schools open and protect children's education.



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What we had in the situation with Greenwich is that there was no conversation and there was no discussion, where Greenwich had flagged up an issue beforehand. Usually these have been flagged up by directors of children's services and directors of public health. This had not been the situation in Greenwich and we found out by a clear announcement that this was the approach that Greenwich was taking, when they had a case rate load of 250 per 100,000, which was not that different from the all-London case rate and it certainly was not one of the areas that had been flagged up to us by Public Health England or anyone else. We were obviously also in the position where the knowledge of the new variant was certainly not something that we had any understanding of.

We have seen authorities and schools right across the north of England and right across the Midlands, being in a position where we have had this amazing partnership working, where we had worked together, dealing with some really tricky issues and case rates much higher than we were seeing in Greenwich, and being in a position where children were able to continue to get an education. It would have been remiss and wrong of us not to take action where there was a local authority where case rates were just so much lower than all of those other local authorities right across the north, right across the Midlands, where we had that partnership working together to keep schools open, but taking action where necessary to help and support them in the containment of the virus. As I say, at that stage none of us were aware of the new variant and we were not aware of the impact that would ultimately have in terms of case rates and the impact more widely right across the country and including London.

Q1080 David Johnston: Could you quickly describe how hotspots are brought to your attention as Secretary of State?

Gavin Williamson: Of course. We have a very detailed bronze, silver and gold command structure that is run by the Department of Health, where local authorities, directors of public health in those local authorities, regional directors of public health, the NHS and the Department of Health and Social Care and other interests are represented on there. That is the mechanism where it would be flagged up, but also we have a lot of dialogue with local authorities who, as I say, in so many cases all the way from June through to December where local directors of public health were having regular discussions with regional schools commissioners, highlighting where they had concerns, and we were taking action wherever we could do to help support them in terms of tackling Covid.

Q1081 David Johnston: This is the last question from me for now, which is more of a long-term one. What is your assessment of what we have been through with education in the last year, and what impact is it going to have on the disadvantage gap? Some estimates say it is going to wipe out the progress we have made in closing the disadvantage gap over the last decade. What is your view of the damage this has done?



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Chair: I think the DfE officials said the attainment gap could be as much as 75% between disadvantaged pupils and their better-off peers once Covid is out of the way.

Gavin Williamson: This will be one of the greatest challenges that we face over the coming years and how we take the action to make sure this pandemic does not haul back the progress of children from whatever background they come from. We have to make sure that this pandemic does not scar the lives of children. We have to take every action that we can. We saw that with the Covid catch-up fund, we have seen that with the National Tutoring Programme. We must not rest in terms of doing everything we can do to close that disadvantage gap. This is why I will never make an apology for being the greatest champion of opening schools, because all the interactions that we know make for the greatest progress and that have the greatest impact on children mean that schools are open and children are in the classroom. That is why I must never apologise for being the greatest champion of keeping schools open, because I know it makes such a big impact and it makes the biggest impact on children who are the most disadvantaged.

Where we take action, it has to be evidence based. This is why schemes such as the National Tutoring Programme and when we roll out further initiatives, whether that is more support for learning through the summer for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, these are the actions that we will have to undertake because we know that they can make a real difference to children's lives and we must be relentless to close that gap.

Chair: Thank you. You have been great with the concise answers, Secretary of State. If you could keep it up that would be appreciated.

Gavin Williamson: I will endeavour to be more concise.

Chair: Before I bring in Jonathan Gullis, Ian has a question on truancy.

Q1082 **Ian Mearns:** On truancy, Secretary of State, the trouble is how we are couching this in language, because there is attendance and then there is absenteeism or non-attendance. I think the general understanding of the bulk of the population of "truancy" is where children are bunking off without their parents' understanding or knowledge, whereas there is an awful lot of absenteeism that has been occurring within the current context that has either been parentally condoned or parentally supported. Have you done any analysis of what the attendance rates have been and how much truancy there has been where kids are bunking off without their parents knowing? I think that is important in terms of understanding the problem that we have to deal with of getting kids back into the classroom.

Secondly, what is being done to support the learning of children who do not currently have a school roll—in other words they have been off-rolled by a previous school or they have never got on to a school roll in areas of high demand, which is still the case with some children in some parts of the country?



Gavin Williamson: Ian, those are really important points. The only way we can get to a solution is if schools play a vital role in it, but it does have to be a collaborative approach across all agencies. We often fall into the habit of saying this is purely a school problem, but the consequences of that long-term absenteeism, either by almost parents not being the driver to make sure their children are attending school or where it is happening without the parents' knowledge—the only way we can really tackle this is, yes, schools play an absolutely pivotal part in it, but it is also working with local authorities, with the police and social care. It is also working with health as well, who will often have a good picture of sometimes family circumstances, especially those children in the earliest years.

We are working with local authorities in terms of providing the data of where there is that absenteeism. By providing that data, obviously they are held by the schools but it is really important to share that data across with local authorities, who again have some of the levers to be able to work and have an understanding of how we can tackle this challenge together. We are working on sharing that data in future releases going forward again, so local authorities have the tools to do the job. We will be looking at publishing that data for the autumn term on 19 January, so not too far away. I think it gives a really important insight and a really important tool.

Longer term, we must not be neglectful of the real challenge that we are going to have to face in how this cross-Government working is going to have to do it. Family hubs, I think, are going to play a really important part in tackling some of that disengagement.

Chair: Jonathan Gullis, you are on a train so if you cut off we will bring you back later on.

Jonathan Gullis: Thank you very much, Chair, and thank you, Secretary of State.

Gavin Williamson: I could maybe make up Jonathan's question at this point.

Chair: Jonathan, you can text me the questions if the internet connection is not good. It is not working, unfortunately. I would like to move to Christian, please, and we will come back to Jonathan if he can get an internet connection.

Q1083 **Christian Wakeford:** Thank you, Chair. It is difficult to follow that, but good morning, Secretary of State. In regards to the decision that was made on mass testing of secondary schools, in many schools this was taken on the last day of term and some schools had already broken up by that point. In regards to the decision, why was it thought that was an appropriate time to make that decision, and why was the announcement not brought forward or put back so it allowed more time to be understood and to be implemented fairly?



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Gavin Williamson: As you will appreciate, and I think all members of the Committee will, in any global pandemic things move at an incredible speed. We were in a situation where we could be able to, at that stage, make an offer to schools—it was not going to be a compulsory offer, but it was an option that they could take up—in terms of testing. Obviously, we wanted to be able to get that offer out at the very earliest stage. I very much recognise that that is not the time that any school wants to get that type of information and it is not a situation that we ever wish to be in, but we were in a place where we were going to be able to offer them a full testing regime to take up and we were going to be in a position to be able to offer them the financial support for them to be able to roll it out. It felt the right thing to do, because of course by that time, as I am sure you are aware, the Health Secretary had made a statement to the House of Commons about the emergence of the new variant and it felt that it was going to be an important call in terms of supporting schools, supporting the workforce and most importantly supporting pupils in order for them to be able to get back into education at the earliest possible stage.

Q1084 **Christian Wakeford:** Thank you. In regards to those areas that had a high prevalence of the virus prior to the lockdown, and I am thinking predominantly of the north-west and the Midlands, for example, where before the second lockdown we were up to over 600 cases per 100,000, at any point during that surge was there a push from the Department to try to implement mass testing in schools, and if so what was the Department of Health's response in regard to that?

Gavin Williamson: We have wanted to roll out mass testing at a very early stage. We have seen mass testing rolled out in schools in a number of areas; the first one was Liverpool and schools played a really important part of that community mass testing response. What we did following that is we quite understandably did an extensive number of pilots across the country in very different types of schools in very different types of areas, because if you want to roll out a mass testing programme, we wanted to see whether it was feasible and whether that would deliver the results that were of value to public health and also worked in the schools.

The pilots that we ran across the country came to a conclusion at the close end of that term, which meant that was the first time that we were then in a position to be able to start to look feasibly at the rollout of mass testing, because we had to test those pilots to see what worked for the schools, see what worked for the pupils, and see whether it was feasible to do it. We found out that it was. The evidence from the first week or more of schools operating testing regimes—we have already had hundreds of thousands of tests come back of testing children—does show that this is a system that can work in both schools and colleges.

Q1085 **Christian Wakeford:** In regards to the testing, it is very helpful to be rolled out to secondary schools, but with the number of children who



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have missed days of education not just in the secondary setting but in further education, primary education and early years education, what thought is there to extending mass testing to cover all education settings and not just secondary?

Gavin Williamson: The mass testing already includes further education colleges in part of the drop of tests. It was not just the secondary schools, it was to all education establishments: secondary and further education colleges and sixth form colleges as well. They all received the initial drop of tests on Monday 4 January, with further tests coming forward. I want to see mass testing rolled out across all education settings. What we are seeing from 18 January is the rollout of staff testing for primary school teachers. Testing is a really important part of bringing children back into school. It is also a really important part of not just making schools as safe as possible but fighting against Covid right across the community. If we are testing a child, in essence we are also in the position where we are testing a household as well.

Q1086 **Chair:** In a nutshell, are you going to extend it to non-secondary school settings as well?

Gavin Williamson: We have already extended it to further education colleges and sixth form colleges. We are extending the staff testing as of next week to primary schools and I would like to see it rolled out to all pupils. That is my ambition. That is where I want us to get to.

Chair: Okay, thank you. Christian, do you have any more questions?

Q1087 **Christian Wakeford:** One final one. Given the call on teachers and support staff time in the classroom, obviously teaching those children who are in school but also providing education for those who are out of school in regards to virtual lessons, what extra resources are being given to schools to carry out the mass testing on a weekly basis?

Gavin Williamson: Where we are moving to in terms of the testing of staff in primary schools, these will be tests that teachers are able to do at home. They will be in a position to be self-administered at home for teachers and support staff.

In terms of the rollout of the mass testing, there is a £78 million package to support schools in terms of doing that, as well as additional support that we have put in place.

Chair: Thank you. I have a quick question from Dr Caroline Johnson before we bring in Ian.

Q1088 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Secretary of State. I have two questions very quickly in relation to some of the answers you just gave to Christian. First, you talked about a £78 million package to support schools in terms of delivering these tests. You also talked about how it is fighting Covid right across the community, but these tests are voluntary. Why has the package not been given to support independent schools in delivering what is a health rather than



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educational measure to ensure that every school participates and we protect all children regardless of their parents' educational choices from these health challenges, when health is free at the point of use?

Gavin Williamson: If I can, I will bring Susan in, but just to add that we are supporting all education settings, including private schools, with the provision of all the testing kit and all the equipment as well. If I could bring the Permanent Secretary in, who wanted to make a point, and also pick up a little bit more on what you asked.

Susan Acland-Hood: Thank you, Secretary of State. It was really in relation to the last question to say that in rolling out testing in primary schools, we are working very closely with PHE, with Test and Trace and with the MHRA, because for primary pupil testing, getting to the point where parents can administer the tests at home unlocks the ability to do primary testing on a much greater scale in a way that is more straightforward but also, we think, is more appropriate for primary school children. It was just that point I was going to add.

On the independent schools, they are getting the provision of all of the test kits and materials. The aspect of support they do not get is the support for staffing and, of course, that is consistent with the fact that we would not pay for independent school staff for any other purpose.

Q1089 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** Is that entirely accurate? If you were delivering the vaccination schedule for senior school pupils, perhaps girls to have the cervical vaccine for HPV, then the NHS does provide that service. That is why I was raising this as a slightly odd thing—that a health provision is not being provided to all students regardless of parents' ability to pay for it.

The other question I have is about the primary school rollout. As a paediatrician, I am aware that performing tests on older children is significantly easier usually than performing tests on younger children. Yes, the tests are very easy to perform; I have a box at my own house to do as an NHS worker. What are your plans for trying to ensure that younger children particularly can be tested? Having a teacher trying to do a whole row of them would seem to be incredibly difficult. When I spoke to the primary heads of my local primary schools, they had very mixed feelings about whether they should be done in schools or by parents.

Gavin Williamson: I do not think it would be right or appropriate to ask school staff. Obviously, in a secondary setting staff are supervising the tests done by pupils, whereas it is not going to be in a primary school setting. If you tried to have a similar approach, you would have to ask staff to do the testing themselves and I just do not believe that is appropriate or right. What we would be looking at doing is having a system where it is a test that would be carried out by the parent on their child rather than asking staff to do it, and that would have to take place in the home. Susan, I am not sure if there is anything further you want to add on that.



Susan Acland-Hood: Only two things on that. The first thing is that that is something we are going to pilot before we roll it out fully in order to look at some of the issues around making sure that it is possible for parents to do that, and that we can understand test fidelity and other issues. As I say, we are working with Test and Trace and with the MHRA on that. I think the other thing that is worth saying is that if you go for a PCR test in a community testing centre, then for primary age children the procedure is that a parent performs the test on the child, so the parent swabs the child. They do it under supervision but it is, in a sense, consistent with the position on other testing.

Chair: Ian, Fleur has a question on testing, so Fleur, please.

Q1090 **Fleur Anderson:** I would like to ask about the early years sector. You have not mentioned them in the testing regime and I think anyone watching will be wondering where they are in it. There is confusion at a council level, so can you confirm that the early years sector, state-maintained nurseries, private nurseries and childminders, will be included in the testing regime at the same time as other teachers?

Gavin Williamson: They are very much included as part of a community testing programme. Obviously, where schools have nurseries as part of them, that will be part of the school staff, but one of the key parts of the community testing programme will be ensuring the early years workforce have access to that testing.

Q1091 **Fleur Anderson:** Will that be at the same time as other teachers?

Gavin Williamson: That will be at the same time as the rollout of the community testing programme, which was announced the other day.

Chair: Thank you. Fleur, are you okay?

Q1092 **Fleur Anderson:** It is just that certainty that they are seen in parity with other teachers. State-maintained nurseries that just happen to not be attached to a school do not seem to be considered in the same tranche as other nursery teachers. There is a bit of confusion there.

Gavin Williamson: The whole community testing programme was making sure that we pick up the early years settings. We recognise how important this is. Fleur, you will be as aware as I am that there is such a range in terms of numbers of staff and the ability to reach them. You obviously have some nurseries that are very large and others that are very small, with almost one or two people operating them. It was felt the best way of being able to reach that whole breadth of them was through the community testing programme and be able to deliver testing through that.

Q1093 **Fleur Anderson:** Okay. I think that needs to be clarified at a council level, because it is leading to confusion about whether nursery schoolteachers are included in nurseries—state and privately owned.



Gavin Williamson: I will certainly take on board the task and task officials to make sure that is clarified with local authorities. As I say, through many educational establishments, in terms of a rollout of school testing, there is an ability to pick up a lot of nursery settings as part of that, but there will be a number that we need to have a community testing programme in order to pick those settings up for us.

Fleur Anderson: Thank you for taking that up, Secretary of State.

Chair: Thank you. Ian has been waiting very patiently.

Q1094 **Ian Mearns:** Secretary of State, in answer to my earlier question, I do not think you really covered the issue about off-rolled children. Can you write to us in a bit more detail in terms of what is happening in provision for off-rolled children or children without an allocated school place, of which there are still some around the country from last September? Could you let us know what is happening about them?

Gavin Williamson: Of course, I will more than happily write to you in detail on that important issue.

Q1095 **Ian Mearns:** Secretary of State, what practical help and support are you providing teachers and school staff during this unprecedented time—particularly, what access have teachers, support staff and pupils got to mental health support? We have covered pupils earlier on, but I am not sure if we looked at the support that the teaching staff and school staff in general will have during this time.

There is an additional reason I am asking that question. Since the new lockdown, I am certainly aware in my own locality of a massive additional stress being placed on teaching staff and management staff in terms of having to allocate the places that are available. If we are going to be successful about managing social distancing with the children who are allowed to come to school, there are huge demands from parents and, of course, from vulnerable children as well in order to come and get those places that might be available. It seems to me that if we acceded to all of that demand, it would defeat the object of social distancing in the classroom and in the school context. Frankly, some schools in my area are reporting that for 85% of the children, the parents are asking for places because they are key workers, they are vulnerable children or they do not have a device and all the rest of it. That is an additional stress.

What are we providing in terms of that support for teaching staff and for staff in schools, and what are we going to do about that real tension there? As Susan pointed out before, there is a lot of discretion being given to schools, but that is an additional management burden, and there is real demand from parents demanding basically that their children should be allowed in.

Gavin Williamson: I think we need to be guided by the clear data that are emerging. In terms of attendance rates nationally and from the initial cut of data that we have shared today, that is running at 14%. You are right to highlight there will be particular areas where they are close to a



hospital or close to a critical industry where they are at much higher rates. What we want to do is work with regional schools commissioners and work with those schools as to how best we can support those schools in order to be able to support those children—either they are vulnerable children or they are children of critical workers—to be best able to support them to be able to be in the classroom if that is where they need to be.

We will work right across the sector, not just with the schools directly but also with unions, headteachers' unions and with everyone else, as to how best we can put the support there for schools to be able to manage that, and also with local authorities where there may be particular challenges within local authorities. One of the great things about our education system is the amazing spirit of collaboration between schools. Sometimes there is an element of rivalry, but more often there is a clear understanding of how one plays an important role in supporting the other.

You raise a really important issue again about mental health. When we had rolled out the Wellbeing for Education Return training, it was really important to pick up staff as well as pupils. We have also funded some additional education support for the mental health needs of school leaders, because the real heroes, headteachers, have been amazing heroes during this pandemic. They have not had really any respite at any moment through this, from the moment the schools first had to make those changes back in March through the holidays, getting ready for a full return in September and having to continue to deal with those challenges. We have recognised some of that need, and 85% of local authority areas in England have told us that they are delivering additional training and support into local schools and FE providers. It is important for us as a Department to work with them in terms of those discussions of how we can support them in delivering that support.

Q1096 Ian Mearns: An additional thought, though: the new variant, I am afraid to say, is no longer confined to London and the south-east. My own director of public health told me that within the last week or so, 55% of those people who have tested positive have the new variant and, of course, the new variant is much more transmissible. Teaching staff and school managers and other school support staff are at home, with parents, partners, wives, husbands, daughters, sons and people who they live in the household with. With that new variant and the transmissibility, obviously there is additional worry that if schools do become over-full, the likelihood of transmission really does magnify. It is a genuine concern expressed to me by many teachers and school managers.

Gavin Williamson: Ian, I know you are aware of this. The reason that schools were closed was to take the overall approach of reducing movement across all of society. The Chief Medical Officer and the Deputy Chief Medical Officer are the greatest advocates of having children in



school because of the amazing benefits, but we did have to make that decision in terms of reducing movement—

Q1097 **Chair:** I beg your pardon for interrupting, but we were told a few days before the school closures, by a survey from Public Health England as I understand it, that school closures had a marginal effect on the rate of transmissions.

Gavin Williamson: Schools are the best place for children always to be and they are a safe place and a safe community with the measures that are put in place. However, the reason that the decision was made when we reached Covid alert level 5 and we were seeing that incredibly strong spike in cases was that it was a measure that would reduce movement among the whole community. It was an additional measure that we always—as you can understand, as Education Secretary, it is not a step that I ever wanted to take. We were taking quite extensive actions to try to avoid that, including the rollout of mass testing, but the advice was that it could play a useful role in terms of reducing movement in the community and ensuring that this national lockdown had a greater impact in terms of suppressing the virus.

Ian, the data does bear out that it has had the impact of the fact that only 14% of children are in school, so it has had that immediate impact overall. But it is really important that we continue with our testing regime because that plays, again, an important role as one of the measures for ensuring that we tackle Covid and do everything we can do to stop it coming into school, but it also helps make sure that people are aware that they have Covid wider in the community by doing that mass testing.

Q1098 **Ian Mearns:** Secretary of State, you do need to clarify that 14% number, because I am certainly aware that in my own locality here, many more than 14% of children have access to some schooling, possibly on a rotational basis. I would be interested to see what the number of children who have some input into schools, actually attending schools, even on a rotational basis, would be. It is much, much more than 14%.

Gavin Williamson: I am just going on the data that we have collected from schools, Ian. This was the data that was taken nationwide.

Q1099 **Ian Mearns:** I think that is a snapshot, Secretary of State, rather than an indication of how many children are having a physical interaction with their school.

Gavin Williamson: It was the data taken from all schools on 11 January.

Chair: That is a snapshot.

Gavin Williamson: It is a snapshot but it is a snapshot we do every single day.

Q1100 **Ian Mearns:** Secretary of State, it is important for parents and the wider population to have an understanding that 14% is not the number of



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children who are having a physical interaction with their school, even on a rotational basis. It is much, much more than that.

Gavin Williamson: What you will see is if you have children have an experience on a rota basis, when you have the data across all days you will have a clear picture, but this is data that is based on evidence submitted by schools. Could I bring Susan in to comment on the data and the veracity of it?

Susan Acland-Hood: Yes, this is the collection that we do daily. Reference was made earlier that we had been doing attendance collections through last term. We changed the attendance collections precisely so that we could understand the picture under these new circumstances and collect information about vulnerable and critical worker children attending school. The picture is that overall, 14% of the total cohort were in schools on Monday.

Ian Mearns: A particular day.

Susan Acland-Hood: But we collect it every day and we will publish the data as we have been doing. I do not think there is hugely widespread use of rotas, although I am very willing to hear more about that from schools and so on. In terms of the question you are raising, which is how far are we reducing movement in order to help reduce transmission, the number of people who are moving on any one day is highly relevant to that. Effectively, we have taken 85% of the movement that is due to schools out of it.

What you may be hearing is that there is quite a different picture for primary and secondary schools. Within that 14%, attendance in primary schools averages closer to 20% and attendance in secondary schools averages closer to 4%. Further, we also saw lots of people raising concern about individual schools where levels of attendance were very high and we have looked for that very closely in the data. What we see is that the proportion of schools with more than half their children in is around 2%. There are a small number of schools out there—as the Secretary of State said, they may well be schools that are next to a hospital or near a place, for example, like the docks where people are handling food. We need those people to be able to do that in order to keep people fed and healthy, but it is a very small proportion of schools.

The public health advice we have is that the key driver, the reason for closing schools, was to reduce that overall amount of transmission. They are comfortable that an individual school may have higher levels of attendance than another. As long as the school has the same measures in place that they had last term when they had all children in and they are comfortable that that is a perfectly reasonable thing to be doing, as long as the overall numbers across the whole system have come down significantly enough to reduce that movement. Those numbers suggest we have reduced that by 85%, and we will clearly be keeping a close eye on that.



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We are also able to look at what proportion of those who have requested a place have been given one, and we want to look at schools that are worried. There are three issues: transmission across the whole of the country and how schools play a role in that. There is an issue about individual school safety and again trying to make sure that people are comfortable. The public health advice we have is that there is not a proportion limit at which you become unsafe; it is about the measures you have in place in your school to manage the children you have in. The third issue is about the practical management of that.

We know that for some schools, they were expecting much lower levels of attendance and they had organised themselves in a way that meant that managing the children who were in school and the children for whom they do remote learning was difficult. What they are doing is working through the RSCs with schools to help them find the models and the ways of working that will help them manage sensibly and safely for all those children so that we can educate in school the children who do need to be in school and educate remotely the children who need to be educated remotely, and we can do that sensibly. We want to support schools in doing that. We completely understand that this is really difficult for people as well.

Q1101 **Chair:** Thank you. Very briefly before I pass to Tom, on 2 January the Department for Education sent out to myself and some other MPs, saying that the Public Health England survey with the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine said that, "School closure would have only a minor and temporary effect on transmission rates, and the wider impact of this on children's social, physical, educational and emotional development would be significant". That was sent out to us on 2 January, based on, as I understand it, looking at the new variant of Covid. What changed in a few days that school closures would suddenly have a dramatic effect on transmission, whereas on 2 January the PHE advice was that it had a marginal effect?

Gavin Williamson: We were all incredibly committed to making sure that schools opened and we saw a high proportion of schools open in non-contingency framework areas on 4 January. But when the Prime Minister had received the advice about the change of moving to Covid alert level 5 and also the most recent data, it was a decision that was felt needed to be taken.

The place that we never wanted to be in, the situation where we—it has always been a national priority to keep schools open. For me it has always been clear they should be the last things to close and they should be the first things to open. But it became clear as a result of that further data that was coming in that it was a decision that would have to be taken because it would play a role in suppressing movement within the communities where schools are and would play a role in helping suppress the virus. It was something that was done with reluctance.

Chair: It was only two days later that this evidence changed. The



Permanent Secretary wants to say something.

Susan Acland-Hood: Thank you very much, Chair. My understanding is that the PHE evidence, though published on 2 January, related to a period earlier in the autumn term before the new variant was dominant. The second thing that changed was that even marginal changes in transmission started to become very salient because of the reproduction rate of the new variant but also because of the pressure we were seeing on the NHS. The thing that happened on the morning of 4 January was that shift to level 5 for the NHS and that moment where we were clearly told that the NHS was under extreme pressure. At that point, even things that in the past we had considered to be outweighed by the benefits to children of remaining in school, we started to be advised we have to do everything we think could have an effect of any significance.

Therefore, there were two things. First, the assessment of effect size changed a bit with the new variant. Secondly, we moved from a place where doing something with a relatively small effect was not outweighed by the benefits to children of remaining in education. We just had to do anything that might help.

Chair: Thank you. It would be good to know and we will question next week whether the survey was based on purely the old variant. Tom has been waiting patiently. He is going to ask his questions plus Jonathan Gullis's.

Q1102 **Tom Hunt:** A lot of questions. Secretary of State, I could not agree more that it is a very challenging situation for teachers who are required to teach online but also in the school at the same time. It is very challenging and very stressful, I can imagine. However, it does seem that the last time schools closed most schools did a brilliant job, but sadly most of the surveys we have seen would indicate there have been some occasions where this was not the case. Your view is that Ofsted should play a much more proactive role this time in ensuring that there is good quality across the board. I have seen some detail on this but I would be grateful if you could outline practically how you expect this to happen. If there is a particular school where it seems as though they are not stepping up, what actions would be taken?

The other question I have is in relation to live online lessons. I have seen that some of the teaching unions have expressed views on this. They have concerns about live online lessons and what this might mean for privacy. I have seen others who think that live online lessons are very important because there is a degree of interaction you simply do not get when it is prerecorded and it especially gives young people the chance to interact with their teachers and other members of their class and so on. What are your views on those two key points?

Gavin Williamson: Thank you very much, Tom. We have seen a massive step shift in terms of the offer and what schools are providing in terms of remote education for children since March of last year. Even in March, April, May, there were many schools that were trailblazers and led



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the way. They have started to set the standard as to what we want to see in all schools.

The reason that back last year we set out our expectations of what remote education would look like was because we did recognise the fact that there was a very real possibility that schools could be closed again. I know that that was a controversial thing to do that did meet with some opposition, but I firmly believe it was the right thing to set out clearly what standards were expected. All schools and FE providers are expected to publish information about their remote education provision on their website by 25 January for schools and 18 January for FE providers.

As I say, I think we have seen a seismic shift in terms of what is being delivered. It is a tribute to the teaching profession and the whole school community who have embraced this and are doing wonderful things. Then you have the additional support of the Oak National Academy, which we have invested in heavily. If there are issues in a school or a parent's house, we would always ask that parent to have that conversation with the teacher to try to resolve it and to sort that out. If that is not resolved we would then ask them to have that conversation with the headteacher in order to be able to resolve it and sort it out.

There is a duty on us to ensure standards in education, a little bit like what we expect in terms of children in a physical classroom. If the education is not being provided to the standards that would be expected, there has to be some form of recourse. The ultimate last form of recourse would always be Ofsted and that would be the same in this one. That is certainly not something that people should be going to as a first stop and it should only be very much a last course of action.

In terms of live online lessons, this is where the development of remote education has moved so rapidly. Live online lessons can be an important part of the whole package of what teachers and schools are able to offer and it is certainly something that we would encourage them to see as part of that whole package of what they can deliver children.

Q1103 Tom Hunt: DfE guidance indicates that children without access to remote learning can be treated as vulnerable and attend school during the lockdown. Is this provision being adhered to by schools and headteachers, and what impact is it having on the numbers attending school and on teachers?

Finally, a question about teacher recruitment and retention. This was a big issue before the pandemic, but what are your thoughts about how this pandemic may have impacted or may impact on the Government's strategy for teacher recruitment and retention going forward? There may be some aspects in which it is quite helpful because the role of the teacher has been at the forefront, and because of the heroic way in which many of them have carried out their business. On the other hand, with the amount of stress that teachers have been put under, the concern is that some may leave the profession and some might be put off going into



it.

Gavin Williamson: Yes. In terms of the allocation of vulnerable—those children who do not have access to laptops, the data would indicate an overall 14% of children in attendance. It does not seem to have indicated that there has been an abnormal impact on it. We do need schools and leadership of schools to make a judgment, and where there are families in that difficult situation, we would very much hope that teachers and the schools would be able to work with that family to help support them.

In terms of teacher recruitment, people have seen at first hand the amazing job that teachers are doing right across the country, the important role and the important impact that they are having on children's lives. It is showing that it is driving teacher recruitment numbers. We are seeing a large increase in the number of people who are wanting to come into the teaching profession. This is a positive sign in terms of substantial increases in the number of people who are leaving university, doing PGCEs, taking on the initial teacher training, really driving numbers up.

We still recognise we face challenges within some of the most difficult recruitment areas, but we still have a strong package to highlight what a brilliant career teaching is. The numbers are incredibly positive and I am confident that—

Chair: Secretary of State, we have loads to get through. If you could do it in a nutshell as much as possible, that would be great. Tom, have you finished?

Tom Hunt: That is me done, yes.

Chair: Do you want to ask Jonathan Gullis's questions?

Q1104 **Tom Hunt:** One of the questions was about the potential additional pressure on school budgets. Many schools, certainly a number in my constituency, have gone above and beyond when it comes to making sure that when they were open the environment was safe and secure, it was regularly cleaned and there were adequate measures in place to make sure everyone was safe—both pupils and teachers. This has meant an additional cost to them. In future, will this be taken into account?

Gavin Williamson: You saw in the first national lockdown where schools were closed, we put a package of measures there in order to support schools during that period. Over 14,000 claims were lodged with the Department, 14,075, and so far 13,000 schools have received payments in terms of reimbursement and we are working through the final ones of those. We also put in a package of support for winter going up to Christmas and we will be looking at what additional help and support is required for schools.

We very much recognise that they are having acute pressures. We understood that when we were rolling out the testing regime and recognised there needs to be a financial package put in place there to



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support schools when they are fully rolling that out. There will no doubt be pressures on school budgets as a result of some of the things they are having to do.

We have made it very clear in terms of free school meals that if there are locally derived vouchers, we are covering the costs of that. We are putting in extra payments in terms of school food if they are delivering those food parcels locally within the school. That is why the national food voucher scheme will be online from next week for schools to be able to use. We do recognise as we go through the coming weeks there will probably be further measures and further support that will be required.

Q1105 Chair: I want to read a question from Jonathan Gullis, whose internet connection is not working. Will the Secretary of State understand the frustration felt by both teachers and parents over who can and cannot be in school at present? Many schools are rightly using health and risk assessments from lockdown one and, therefore, limiting sizes of pupils in classrooms, yet who is eligible to access school is broad and vague. This is causing conflict between parents and school leaders unfairly. What can be done to resolve this? Schools in Stoke and Kidsgrove in his constituency are telling him that due to those student numbers coming in, they might as well be open to all pupils as all staff still have to come in. Could you comment on that please, Secretary of State?

Gavin Williamson: First, the guidance that we have in terms of critical workers has been very consistent from the initial guidance that we issued back in March of last year. There have been some small changes. The eligibility of the number of the workforce that potentially have come into scope is 11,000 nationally. It has been largely static from where it was before.

We are getting the first cut of data both at a national level, at a regional, local authority level and also at a school level. What I have asked regional schools commissioners to do is to target those real hotspots where there are challenges and see how we can work to support schools, first to put them in the best position to be able to make the full provision that is needed for those children who need to be in school and to work with those local schools but also those local authorities if there are particular concerns around the impact and deliverability on that. We are very confident that we can work through some of these issues.

The initial cut of data indicates it is quite a small number of schools that will be facing that challenge, but we do not underestimate the challenge that those schools are facing and we will work with them and support them in order to deliver the places for critical workers that need them, but at the same time making sure that this is done in a way that is sustainable for the school.

Q1106 Kim Johnson: Good morning, Secretary of State. I have some questions in this section on connectivity and laptops. It is estimated that over 1.7 million children suffer from digital poverty. What estimates do you have



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of the number of disadvantaged and vulnerable children who still remain without a device or internet access? Will the Government consider rolling out free wi-fi access to all families in receipt of universal credit so no child is left behind?

Gavin Williamson: It is so incredibly important, the actions that we take in terms of devices and access to the internet. That is why at the start of the pandemic, we made the bold decision to start investing in digital devices. By the end of this week, we will see a total rollout of 750,000 devices to schools across the country.

In terms of looking at the numbers that were required, what we did was use the latest data that we had of the amount of laptops and tablets that are available in the sector. That is about 2.9 million devices that already sit within the sector. We have made a commitment to procure, on top of those 2.9 million devices, an additional 1.3 million devices. The rollout is going very well and we believe that with such a range of devices within the sector, it puts schools in the best possible position to be able to support children who maybe do not have ownership of their own device or access to one in their own home.

You make an important point about internet access. During the first stage of the pandemic we trialled a number of approaches, working with BT and other providers. What we found was the most beneficial to most families was working with mobile access data partners in order to be able to increase the limits. This has had a big impact for many young people. I would like to take the opportunity to thank EE, Three, Tesco Mobile, Smarty, Sky Mobile, Virgin Mobile, O2, Vodafone and BT for what they are doing.

Q1107 **Kim Johnson:** Yes, and I appreciate that so many devices have been sent out and issued, Secretary of State, but members on this Committee are still hearing from schools within our constituencies that are still to receive access to resources. It would be useful if you could let us know what DfE information is available and whether you could share that with this Committee.

Gavin Williamson: By the end of this week, all schools will have received their full estimated allocation of devices. We do recognise there will be some schools that are in a position that maybe do not have the number of devices in schools that they would have procured over a period of time. That is why we have continued to invest in devices over and above the estimated level that they need. Schools are able to come to the Department for Education where they do have specific needs. We have had over 400 schools make requests on this basis. Of course, we are very happy to share with the Committee the working that we did in terms of the initial estimates of the procurements that we made and how we are in the best position to support schools.

Q1108 **Kim Johnson:** Also, Secretary of State, we have heard that those laptops that have been issued to schools have to be wiped by teachers



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because they do not have the necessary monitoring systems in place so that children cannot access inappropriate sites. The schools have had to install their own systems. Can this be reviewed and fed back to the Committee as well, please?

Gavin Williamson: Do you mind if I bring in Susan on this one, who is wanting to come in and speak to it?

Susan Acland-Hood: We know that lots of schools already have in place different systems that they use, so the basis we have done this on is first that schools can select the type of device they want so that it fits with what they are already using in school and, secondly, they can manage how they set the device up so it fits with existing devices that they might have in schools so it can be part of their system. I am very happy to look and see whether there is more we can do within the Department that would be sensibly done across all schools and would not mean they had something on but they wanted to take it off and put their own thing on because it fitted with what they are doing in school already.

Kim Johnson: That would be useful in terms of safeguarding children. That would be great if you could let us know.

Susan Acland-Hood: Schools use their own different things and we are trying to be flexible to what they are doing already.

Gavin Williamson: One of the challenges is you have 22,000 schools, often with very different systems. The ability to second-guess what is the best system for every one of those schools is going to be incredibly challenging. By imposing a system on all of them, it may reduce their operability between the current devices that they have. We are happy to look at that if there is anything we can do that would more support schools.

Q1109 **Kim Johnson:** I understand the logistical issues relating to that, but it is about making sure children are safeguarded.

Will the Government consider establishing a new dedicated technology budget for schools to help them tackle the digital divide in communities if this is going to be the new normal going forward and there is more online learning?

Gavin Williamson: Kim, I feel as if you are almost trying to get me to engage in a debate with Treasury, via you. I am going to duck that a little bit, if you do not mind. All the actions that we have taken in terms of the mass rollout of devices show that we see devices as an important part not just in terms of supporting children's learning while we are in a national lockdown and schools cannot be open to all children, but they will play an important role in terms of children catching up not just within school but outside of school time as well.

Kim Johnson: Thank you, Secretary of State—something worth considering for the future.



Q1110 Chair: You still get a lot of schools who say they have not got their allocation for one reason or another, or they are missing 10 or 15. Is there a dedicated helpline they can call and that is genuinely answered? Schools say to me they try to get hold of the DfE and they cannot get the allocation that they need. What is the situation?

Gavin Williamson: Obviously, the allocation is done—if it is a maintained school it is done through the local authority. If it is part of a multi-academy trust, it is done through the multi-academy trust. There is a dedicated email that schools are able to go to. For example, if a school had a query, that would be immediately come back to, but the whole allocation for all schools will be clear—

Q1111 Chair: If there was a problem, why not just give the school vouchers so they can go and buy Chromebooks at their local Currys? If they are missing 17 computers, as one school told me, why not make it very simple and say, “Here are some vouchers, you can go down to Argos or Currys”?

Gavin Williamson: We are doing one of the largest laptop procurement exercises in the world at the moment, so we have been bringing in supply. There is the supply that has come into the country in terms of being able to satisfy that. We were not moving to a voucher scheme at present because all the information that we have is that we should be able to deliver the full allocations by the end of this week. There may be compliance issues with local authorities passing those devices through to the school, but if that is a problem we do have the ability to look at that and have those conversations with the local authority or the multi-academy trust.

Q1112 Chair: To confirm, either from you or from the Permanent Secretary, what is the updated figure of those children who do not have access to computers at home at the moment? Even after your laptop scheme, what is the updated figure that you know of children who do not have access to laptops or tablets at home?

Gavin Williamson: If you look at the total numbers of devices that are available to the school system, by the time the full rollout of the digital devices programme is out there, there will be an estimated 4.2 million laptops and iPads or iPad equivalents within the school system. That is substantially higher than all the estimates that people put in terms of where there are challenges that people have with digital devices. But we do recognise that—

Chair: Can you send us the updated figure, if you do not have it with you? Unless the Permanent Secretary has it?

Susan Acland-Hood: No, I am afraid I do not.

Chair: If you could send us that, that would be helpful.

Susan Acland-Hood: We do not get data from families on whether or not their children have private laptops at home, I am afraid.



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Chair: What I am going to do, Fleur, is take yours and Ian's question together so they can both be answered at once, because we are behind time. Ian, if you could go first and then I will bring in Fleur and then I will ask the Secretary of State to answer them together.

Q1113 **Ian Mearns:** Secretary of State, I have heard what has been said about the distribution of devices and how many have gone out and how many more are ordered, but there are still schools with nil. When you have schools with nil who have 40% of pupils on free school meals or 50% of pupils on free school meals, there is something wrong with the system there. How can they have nil in terms of devices provided by the DfE, even via the local authority? I do not understand that.

Gavin Williamson: That should not be the case.

Q1114 **Fleur Anderson:** Sorry, I was going to come in first. To add to that about data provision, it is all very well having a laptop but for many of the most economically and educationally disadvantaged families, they are on pay-as-you go records. They are on giffgaff, Lyca and Lebara, who you do not have agreements with, and they do not have data. Some 40,000 data routers have been distributed, but there is a big digital gap there as well. Is that a problem that you recognise, and what can you do to support more data routers to be distributed as well, alongside the laptops?

Gavin Williamson: If I could pick up Ian's point, all the data shows that in terms of the allocation of devices, that is proceeding very much at the pace that we have continued to ramp up to. Ian, would you mind sending through the particular schools you have an issue with? We will have the data in terms of where it is going out. If there is an issue we would rather look at that, as against me giving you not a fully informed answer.

Fleur, routers are an important part of the answer to that. As you rightly say, it is great when you have the likes of EE, Vodafone and so many others coming in, but the routers are an important part in terms of having that sort of data capacity. We have delivered 54,000 5G wireless routers and continue to provide this. We continue to look at how we can upscale that. There has not been as high a demand for them among schools as we were initially expecting when we initially rolled out the programme, but I think that demand is going to increase over the coming weeks and we will look at scaling up the capacity of what we can deliver.

Chair: Kim now has a question on the catch-up fund.

Q1115 **Kim Johnson:** Many disadvantaged children have experienced significant learning loss, as we know, widening the education gaps—particularly black kids. Nick Gibb in his answer to the Women and Equalities Committee claimed there is emerging evidence of a potential for greater impacts on these children, and for schools and colleges to consider the diverse needs of the cohort when providing support. Can you let us know what further funding there will be beyond the £1 billion that has been already announced to prevent children from disadvantaged backgrounds



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from falling further behind? What have you learnt so far from the money that has been spent and what impact has it made?

As you know, not all learning will be online. As a result of 10 years of austerity, community centres and libraries have closed, denying disadvantaged kids reliable, safe and free access to technology and reading materials. Will the Government invest in our communities to support children to access learning outside of school, which is also very important?

Chair: See if you can summarise that in your answer.

Gavin Williamson: It was broad and extensive. I thought Kim was going to pay tribute to the record funding settlements that the Government have announced for schools over the last couple of years, but maybe she got cut short, Mr Chairman.

We are looking very closely at the real benefits and the delivery of the Covid catch-up fund. All the evidence points to it making an enormous impact to schools, so many schools, not just for children from disadvantaged backgrounds but children from all backgrounds, are giving extra lessons, extended learning in the day, extended learning even on weekends and in holiday periods, giving booster sessions, and, of course, there is the National Tutoring Programme, which is seeing an incredibly successful rollout. We were able to ensure that it was to span across two years, which is important for putting in roots.

This additional national lockdown is creating additional pressures on especially those who are most disadvantaged. We want to take the evidence of what works best and provide those evidence-based solutions to continue to drive the change in support that those children need from the most disadvantaged communities. That is what will inform our actions about what we do, additional to the already extended £1 billion programme we have outlined.

Q1116 **Chair:** Very briefly, the National Tutoring Programme has suggested that the catch-up session may be postponed because of the lockdown. Just 22 of the 33 providers are on the list that can deliver tutoring online to pupils in their home. To understand, given the need that you have set out to help disadvantaged pupils recover lost learning, I am concerned that part of the programme may be put on ice. Also, why have a third of registered providers not yet been approved to deliver that online enhanced at home, and what can you do to make sure that more can?

Gavin Williamson: We are very rapidly moving to ensure all of them will be able to deliver online. What we are doing is we are giving schools the option as to whether they want to pause it or continue it. I think it is best to leave that to the local decision of the headmaster, who will know the local circumstances best, but my hope is that the overwhelming majority will continue to pursue it and continue to see that rollout, which has already seen such a successful uptake.



Q1117 Apsana Begum: Good morning, Secretary of State. Teachers and support staff across the country are using their own budgets and sometimes their own income to cover costs linked to managing schools for the children of key workers and those still attending for things like cleaning, and there are expected to be extra costs linked to work associated with teacher assessments. Is the Government making further additional funds available for schools in light of these extra costs caused by the latest lockdown?

Gavin Williamson: If I could refer you to an answer made earlier, at all stages through this we have looked at what additional financial support would be needed. In terms of the tasks that we are asking teachers to do in terms of teacher assessment for grading, we are looking at how we put the resources and training around that to support teachers in doing that. In terms of the issues to do with running a school in this national lockdown, we will obviously look at what steps we can take to support schools in terms of making sure they are not out of pocket.

Q1118 Apsana Begum: Last week in your speech to the House, you promised that the national voucher scheme would be relaunched. Coincidentally, as we are now in this session of the Committee, there has been an announcement that the national voucher scheme is back on Monday. That is two weeks since schools closed to most children. Children are going hungry. Given all the errors and challenges of this scheme in the first lockdown, what has been taking so long this time?

Gavin Williamson: No children should be going hungry. What we said, and you will probably recall in the statement, is that schools would be—we asked them to provide either food parcels or locally procured vouchers, of which the cost would be covered by the Department. Edenred has set up the system that is going to be ready to be activated for all schools from Monday of next week. A lot of schools in the first lockdown said that they wanted to do their own local provision and we did not want to be overriding them in terms of that.

We believe that that national voucher scheme is really important. It is ready to roll and schools will be able to order it. Any costs that schools have incurred by procuring vouchers themselves locally are going to be covered by the Department for Education. We want to give schools the maximum amount of choice in terms of what they think is right for their pupils.

Q1119 Apsana Begum: It is Edenred again. What assurances can you give that the errors and challenges experienced in that system in the first lockdown will not be repeated? Can you guarantee that families eligible for free school meals will have access to the voucher system as long as there are at least some children out of school because of the coronavirus crisis?

Gavin Williamson: It is a choice for the school to make as to whether they do a local solution or whether they use the national food voucher scheme. It is the choice of the school in order to be able to do that. We



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have also made it absolutely clear—and you will probably remember from the contingency framework when you looked at it back in October time—that, as you said, while schools are in a situation where they are in lockdown, not fully open, free school meals will be provided.

In terms of the system, if we think back to March/April last year, we effectively set up an enormous substantial welfare scheme at incredible speed in order to deal with the challenges of free school meals. Obviously, there were real challenges in doing that and we have learnt a lot from that. Can I bring the Permanent Secretary in?

Chair: Very briefly, if you can, because we still have a fair bit to go.

Susan Acland-Hood: You asked what we were doing to make sure that we have learnt lessons from the last experience with Edenred. We have been working with it very closely, but we have also used the last few days to make sure that we have looked again at the negotiations that we had with it on the terms but also the management information and the standards we are setting around the contract. That is one of the reasons why we did not turn it on on day one. We wanted to make sure we had done the tightening and then turned it on.

Q1120 **Apsana Begum:** Thank you. Who was consulted over the new guidance for free school meals?

Gavin Williamson: How do you mean who was consulted?

Apsana Begum: I will pick up one part of the new guidance. You might not be aware of this, but the new guidance states that they strongly encourage schools to provide food parcels to pupils at home. At the same time, the guidance suggests that schools will only be able to claim up to £3.50 in additional funding for food parcels, compared to £15 for vouchers. That is both things in the guidance for free school meals. It is very confusing.

Gavin Williamson: Apsana, what we do is we top up the level of funding. If you take an example of Reach Academy in London, all the way through the last lockdown it did an amazing job of supporting children on free school meals by using its kitchens to be able to produce highly nutritious, fantastic meals for students. They had great nutritional content and everything else. We wanted to be able to expand the amount of money that it would have to be able to do that.

Equally, if the route that schools wanted to take was to do the locally procured vouchers, we wanted to give them the clear guidance that it would be up to £15. Equally, if they wanted to use the national voucher scheme, which is something that a lot of schools got used to using and got used to the ordering process, we wanted to make sure that that whole suite of options was available to them. We felt that giving them the maximum amount of options for them to choose from was the best way of doing it.



Q1121 **Apsana Begum:** In terms of food parcels themselves, what kind of standards or official school food standards are they required to meet and what steps are you taking to enforce those standards?

Gavin Williamson: We are very clear in terms of what we expect. It is a variety of different types of fruit and vegetables, it is about the importance of protein foods, the importance of dairy and dairy alternatives. The guidance is really clear. We should not tolerate—and we will stand absolutely square behind schools in supporting schools where providers are not delivering what is required. It is just not acceptable.

Q1122 **Apsana Begum:** How do you do that? I understand the commitment, but what is the way in which you enforce the standards?

Gavin Williamson: The standards are there. Every contractor that has a contract with a school, a local authority, a multi-academy trust, should be meeting those standards. That is an absolutely essential part of what they are meant to be delivering. If they are not meeting those standards, ultimately those contracts can and will be cancelled by the school, by the local authority, by the multi-academy trust, if they are not delivering what they are meant to be delivering for that school and, most importantly, for those children.

Q1123 **Apsana Begum:** Are you aware that the process of food distribution is placing enormous pressure on schools themselves, being asked to pull together very quickly with lots of challenges, particularly in rural areas?

Gavin Williamson: We are and that is why we put a whole variety of different mechanisms in place. It was either food parcels to support pupils or meals going directly to pupils, whether it was locally procured vouchers. You mentioned in rural areas the distances might mean that there is only a certain supermarket that people are able to go to and it may not be included on the national voucher scheme, so it was important to give them the flexibility to do that, and also standing up the national voucher scheme.

One of the reasons that I am meeting all the major caterers and the food distribution companies that support schools this afternoon is hammering home the clear message that they have to be meeting our national food standards in terms of what they are delivering, and there will ultimately be consequences to them not meeting those.

Q1124 **Apsana Begum:** You may not be aware of this, but there is an increased stigma for many families and an unnecessary stress and distress caused for pupils and parents with food parcels distributions. The National Education Union is calling for a sensible, safe and non-stigmatising system to be put in place until normal—whatever normal is—school attendance resumes. Is that something your Department will explore? I was thinking about the fact that building the infrastructure needed for free school meals could be crucial for pandemic recovery. In the long term, is your Department willing to explore bringing the delivery of free school meals by involving all of the community in food provision, looking



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at unionised jobs and utilising community infrastructure, to ensure high quality of food—in other words, a public free school meals programme over and above the outsourcing to companies, which cannot guarantee standards?

Gavin Williamson: First, I pay tribute to so many people who are working in school kitchens up and down the country producing brilliant school meals to so many. We must not forget the brilliant quality that is being done for so very many. Our thanks to all those staff who are delivering on that. This is why we have taken a broad and flexible approach with schools in order to be able to give them as much choice about how best to deliver. As I say, that might be a locally procured scheme, it might be the national variant scheme, it might be delivery direct from their kitchens.

Chair: We are going to have to move on because we are running out of time. Apsana, just one more question, please.

Apsana Begum: I have a few questions, if I can, especially on the cancellation of exams, Chair. It is important we cover that. I will be as quick as possible.

Chair: If you could ask them together, that would be great.

Q1125 **Apsana Begum:** I will ask them together. I take it the answer to the last question was a no, Secretary of State.

Moving on to the cancellation of exams, in a letter from you to the Select Committee, you stated that you wished to thank Ofqual for the collaborative work over recent months to prepare for all potential scenarios in relation to the exams this year. First, why did that reach us at 9.15 this morning?

Gavin Williamson: What we wanted to do is to be able to share the information in terms of what we are doing with Ofqual. What I said in the House of Commons last week is these grades are going to be based on teacher judgment. It is teachers who know the pupils best and we wanted to be able to share with you as much information as possible of how that is going to be structured.

Chair: Okay, thank you. Apsana, can you ask your questions together, if possible?

Q1126 **Apsana Begum:** Ofqual's letter to you, again received by the Committee this morning, mentioned lessons learnt from last summer. Can you outline what lessons they are that the Department and you have learnt from last summer? Given all the education unions and the National Governance Association wrote to you in October with detailed suggestions for exams, including a plan B for exams if exams could not go ahead, we assumed that the contingency plans were developed. Where are they and what do you think the assessment situation should look like going forward? I appreciate that there is consultation that is going to be launched next week for two weeks. Can you provide specific timelines as



to the consultation and the outcome of the consultation, and when you expect to have a plan of action in place for this year?

Gavin Williamson: As you can imagine, the work in terms of contingency plans has been a very long body of work where we have had to work very closely in terms of listening to the sector as to some of the challenges that moving away from exams will present. As outlined in my letter to Ofqual, we set out quite clearly how this is going to be a teacher judgment in terms of the awarding of grades and how we create the structure and support for teachers. One of the things that was very clear from teachers is that they wanted the structures to be clearly outlined that would be there to support them in arriving at the right and appropriate grade for pupils so they can explain to both pupils and to parents as to when that is done.

These are important measures. The consultation is being undertaken from the start of this week. It will run for two weeks and the information will be shared very, very rapidly, but we set out very clearly as to how teacher grading is going to be done.

Q1127 **Apsana Begum:** One more question. In terms of teacher-assessed grades being moderated, are you in favour of that moderation? If so, who do you think should be involved in that and how do you think an appeals system should work, given the concerns that many students, particularly of BAME backgrounds, have about outcomes and fairness?

Gavin Williamson: Quite simply, teacher judgment is what we are relying on in terms of working with the sector to make sure that there are proper and fair checks and balances. It is teacher judgment that is what we are relying on. It is absolutely vital and clear that any changes to grades as a result of any external quality assurance process should be an absolute exception, because it is teacher judgments that we are relying on, not algorithms.

You are right to point out there needs to be a very strong and robust appeals process and that is also what we have asked Ofqual to put in place in order to be able to back up this process.

Q1128 **Apsana Begum:** Can I conclude, Chair, with one more question? Will you apologise to the National Education Union and school leaders for not heeding their advice on safety and closure of schools and for the repeated last-minute communications given to them, causing undue stress and pressure on their resources and their mental health?

Gavin Williamson: We always want to be in a situation of having pupils in school. People who work in schools want to be welcoming children into the classroom because they realise that that is the best way of imparting their knowledge, imparting their enthusiasm, imparting their passion for the subjects they teach to the children. Being passionate about having children in schools is an absolutely vital part of being Education Secretary and I will continue to work with headteachers, teachers, all those who work in the education sectors and unions, to ensure that all children are



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welcomed back into schools at the earliest possible moment. We all want to see schools open and children having the benefit of being in the classroom, being with a teacher, learning from a teacher.

Chair: Thank you. Caroline, could you just do a brief one and also ask about private candidates as well, please?

Q1129 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** Two relatively quick, not essentially related, questions. The first question, Secretary of State—and I will ask them together—is when you have new teachers training at the moment, have you added anything into the teacher training with regards to teaching people online, particularly in relation to the younger children where that is especially challenging, so that our newest teachers qualifying this year will have those skills in case they are necessary?

The second question is this. I know we have talked about the difficulty of finding an algorithm to replace exams being a challenge last year that has not gone away with the cancelling of exams. It seems to me that you have problems with motivation and emotional wellbeing from cancelling exams and how to keep students going. Many students are keen to show what they know. What do you think of the concept of a narrative verdict? Employers want to know how much knowledge a student has gained, how much knowledge a student might have gained in the teacher's view if they had been able to be in school, and how much their education has been disrupted if there is a difference between those two figures.

What would be your view of asking students if they wished to sit exams to allow them to do that—and we are expecting a much more favourable environment in terms of restrictions by the summer—and then providing the students with a certificate that gives those three pieces of information, which allows a completely fair assessment of students' abilities and also the difficulties students may or may not have faced during this period?

Chair: Could you also just explain what is going to happen to private candidates at home who do not go to school and need to do their exams?

Gavin Williamson: We have been absolutely clear that there has to be a very accessible route for all private candidates to be assessed and to receive a grade. The consultation is going to seek views on the options to do so and set out what those options are.

We are very confident that this is something that can be delivered and we do not want private candidates to feel as if they are in a position of missing out, and they are going to be in a position where they will be receiving an awarded grade, along with all other pupils within the school system.

Caroline mentions a very important point about keeping motivation. One of the great advantages of having exams at the end of the year is it is a key focus point for the children to be aiming towards, working towards and keeping their attention. This is why we are asking teachers to make the final assessment of a grading at the tail end of the academic year in



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order to be able to keep those motivational levels up. It is very important that children are in a position to be learning and maximising the amount they do learn while they are in school. It is a very strong focus around how to do that.

Q1130 Dr Caroline Johnson: Thank you, Secretary of State. The two questions that you did not answer were, first, have online teaching skills been added to the training curriculum for teacher training? The second one was the concept of a narrative verdict that gives an explanation alongside grades for students.

Gavin Williamson: Regarding the narrative verdict, this is not something that we are looking at doing currently. We will always look at different options but at the moment that is not part of our consideration.

In terms of changing the initial teacher training framework, that is also not currently an option that we are looking at doing. We do recognise that teachers who have newly qualified are entering a very different teaching environment than any of them would have expected. This is why we continued with a rollout of the early career framework and we are looking at how we can put extra levels of support to support those newly qualified teachers as part of that early career framework. The experience of online teaching is quite substantially different.

Chair: Susan, if you could do it in a sentence or two, thank you.

Susan Acland-Hood: One sentence: not in ITT, but we have delivered a one-stop-shop for schools with support on remote education, including good practice guides and school-led webinars to support effective curriculum delivery. That is on the "Get Help with Remote Education" pages. That is available to all teachers and there are sections for teachers, for middle leaders and for school leaders.

Q1131 Christian Wakeford: Moving on to vocational and technical exams, the Association of Colleges wanted the DfE to be much more definitive as to whether vocational and technical exams should be continuing at this time, considering that all other exams have been cancelled. How will exam boards deal with the situation where some students have continued sitting exams, such as those doing BTECs currently, and feel quite unsettled doing so, while others will not have had any opportunity to take them at all?

Gavin Williamson: We face a potential challenge because obviously with a lot of technical and vocational qualifications there is almost a licence to practise that many youngsters, and people of all ages, often have to have. If they are not able to gain and demonstrate that competency level in the area that they are working in, it can often create a barrier for them to be able to enter the place of work.

We have taken the decision in terms of technical and vocational qualifications that it was best to have a permissive approach where we were able to let colleges make those decisions, as they are the ones who



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would know their students best. We saw about a third of colleges using that flexibility in order to be able to proceed on that.

What is absolutely clear is—and you have probably seen from the letter an exchange with Ofqual—the importance of making sure that there is parity of approach with general qualifications and vocational and technical qualifications. That is at the heart of what we are doing. It is so important that there is that parity, but recognising that there are some particular needs that technical and vocational qualifications will need to have included, in terms of making sure that some of the assessments are to prove a professional competency. That will need to be preserved in order for people to be able to continue to access key areas of employment.

Q1132 Chair: Just to understand, if the colleges are happy they carry on doing their exams in January, but you are saying it is not going to happen in February and March, is that right?

Gavin Williamson: That is correct.

Q1133 Chair: So why is it okay to do it in January but not February and March?

Gavin Williamson: As you will be aware, there is a whole stage of assessments and a lot of technical and vocational qualifications have a competency assessment in various different aspects. If you take accountancy, for example, you still need to be able to demonstrate a certain competency element, and the same in electrical work, gas and plumbing, in order to have the ability to practise. It was important we were not in a position where we are ruling out so many youngsters from being able to move on to the next stage of their career and potentially into work by having a unilateral approach.

Youngsters will still have to show that technical competency and that licence to practise—they will still need to do that in order to be able to access some of those careers. In terms of a broad assessment, going forward we will be having that same approach across technical and vocational qualifications assessments done. That is a much more standard practice in technical and vocational qualifications for that continuous assessment done by teachers and lecturers.

Chair: Does the Permanent Secretary want to add to that?

Susan Acland-Hood: Very briefly. We did also have BTECs going ahead in January, which are applied general, of course. The reason for that was we had quite strong views, not all pointing in the same direction, from the sector themselves, some saying the children are ready to sit these exams and we want to enable them to do that, and others saying they thought they should be cancelled. The permissive approach effectively allowed the people who wanted the child to be able to sit exams to go ahead and others not. I think it is different when you look forward to February and March, where you have the ability to plan and do not have the same situation of children literally being on the point of taking a qualification as the decision was taken.



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Chair: Fleur, who has magnificently waited for a very long time, has a series of questions. I will probably have one or two at the end, and then we will close, hopefully by 12.20 or 12.25, with any luck.

Q1134 **Fleur Anderson:** Thank you, Secretary of State. Just coming back on the contingency planning and the fact that you are having consultations now, as soon as the decision not to have exams was taken, then it went into consultation mode and on private students and others. Why were these consultations not held last summer, when it was clearly obvious that it might have been a possibility that you would have to not have exams, then shared as possible contingencies with teachers, instead of teachers having to think all last term that they might have to do some kind of teacher assessment and planning for that, but not knowing what it would be, so it is not the same, and then finding out at the last minute they now have to do it?

Just to follow up from that and it may be connected, 92% of teachers in a recent poll have said that they have lost faith in your leadership. I would just like to ask what your reflection on that is and how you can regain their trust.

Gavin Williamson: As the chief regulator was setting out, we have been working very closely with the sector around a whole set of contingency measures that would need to be put in place if we found ourselves in the situation where we could not proceed with exams as we had hoped to.

Those contingency measures would be different depending on the point of time at which we would have to deploy them. Some of those contingency measures may have had to have been about changing the way we conducted exams so that we could continue to go ahead with exams but they would have to be done in a different format or slimmed down. When we would have to move to contingency measures would dictate what they looked like and what shape it would be in. We were not going to ever be in a position last year to truly know how we could put in a package that best suited the circumstances.

Ofqual and ourselves had an extensive range of clear policies that were able to be implemented if that was needed or if that was required, but it was going to be situation dependent. That is why we moved exceptionally quickly to give clear clarity to the sector last week as to the approach that we would be taking because we had the opportunity to have those contingency measures in place. That is why we were in a position to be able to roll out the consultation this week. Of course, schools have to think about the situation that they—

Chair: Okay, got it.

Gavin Williamson: In terms of your final question, at every stage, everyone—myself and the whole Department—wants to do everything that we can do to support schools. We want to always give them as much notice and as much clear guidance as possible, but we are in a global



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pandemic and, frankly, some of the decisions we have had to make are decisions that I wouldn't wish on you or anybody else.

Chair: Thank you.

Q1135 **Fleur Anderson:** I have one on early years and then one on university. On the early years sector, the funding is now going to be switched to be funded based on attendance, which is obviously down because of lockdown, instead of attendance a year ago. Could you relook at that decision because the costs are the same for the nurseries and it will spell financial ruin for many nurseries?

On state-maintained nurseries, they do not have parity at the moment with our other schools so they do not have access to the catch-up Covid funding, they are not being given the same testing and vaccination, and they are also under extreme financial pressure. Could you confirm that you will look again at the parity of the state-maintained nursery schools, and have they been left out on purpose or by mistake?

Gavin Williamson: We announced the spring funding position before Christmas at a time when attendance levels were getting back to—

Fleur Anderson: Yes, before the lockdown.

Gavin Williamson: Absolutely. Obviously, attendance has been dramatically lower this week and much lower than anticipated before Christmas and this is going to cause quite substantial challenges in the early years sector and for local authorities. We are going to look at the attendance data. We are wanting to move forward with the census because obviously that provides important and useful information and data for the Department, but we are going to be looking at different approaches of how we can support the early years sector and the different approaches to how we would have been doing it in the more normal circumstances that we had anticipated to be in before Christmas.

In terms of how we support early years, the reason that we wanted to keep early years open is because we know the impacts that it has on those young lives and how important it is for their educational development and their social development. That is why we took the decision to keep them open because it is so important for them. We will continue to look at different measures of how we can support the sector and sharing those thoughts with the sector over the coming weeks.

Q1136 **Fleur Anderson:** They are feeling unsafe and unfunded at the moment, so a relook at that census number and the safety procedures would be very welcome.

Will you also be considering putting youth services into the Covid catch-up fund? It is a whole sector and very important for a Covid catch-up. They have not been included in that catch-up fund but are essential. Would you consider that or a special youth services fund, as they say they are running on empty?



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Gavin Williamson: I am afraid that is not something we are looking at. We have put our catch-up focus within the schools sector. Youth services do actually fall outside of the Department and fall within DCMS.

One of the things that we will be looking at as we cast our eye towards the summer is how we can work with different providers in terms of providing additional catch-up over summer. That is maybe something that the sector would look at—how we can support that educational provision. Educational provision is so important but it is also about mind and body as well. We are seeing with the national rollout of the holiday activity programmes how important other activities are as part of that.

Q1137 **Fleur Anderson:** They would say they are the experts in providing catch-up for years, so that would be very welcome as well.

Finally, on universities, many of the newer universities especially do not have financial reserves and are now struggling financially and there is a concern that it is survival of the fittest in the university sector. There is also a problem for students. I have two sitting in my house now who cannot go back to university but are paying high accommodation costs. What will you be doing for the students but also for the financial security of our university and academic sector?

Gavin Williamson: We saw action undertaken in supporting universities for how they can give that additional support for students before Christmas. We are obviously reviewing that currently as the Prime Minister mentioned the other day.

You are right to highlight that there are some institutions of all ages that are potentially in a place where they may find themselves in financial difficulty. This is why we set up a restructuring regime, if universities are in a position where they are facing financial challenges, so that we have a programme in place to support those universities if they are facing some real challenges. That has already been established—it stands ready to go. We have been in a very fortunate position that despite some of the concerns that people had about collapse within the university sector, that has not materialised, but we have been very aware that we have to have that contingency in place if universities do find themselves in difficulty.

Q1138 **Fleur Anderson:** Thank you. The support offered to my local university was for management consultants to come in and tell them how to manage and to be given a one-year loan, not a grant, which is not what they needed. They know how to manage their university and they need a grant, not a loan, to cover their lost costs. I hope that will be extended to something that suits them more and enables them to continue. They have had to have major cuts to staff.

Gavin Williamson: We do recognise that some universities will have to face restructure—what they offer, how they run, how they are managed—as part of that. We have been clear that there is a regime where, if universities are in a place where they are not going to be able to continue, we have a mechanism working with the Treasury as to how we



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manage those potential problems within the sector. I think that is the right approach to do.

What we are wanting to do is avoid universities getting into that place and that is why we put in the other measures in terms of how we changed the financing and the additional support for universities, including extra support for research, that has helped so many universities.

Fleur Anderson: That is all from me, thank you very much.

Q1139 **Chair:** I have one question for you, Secretary of State, and then a couple for the Permanent Secretary.

First of all, regarding remote learning, is it your view that it is a mixture of interactive, live and videos? How do you see the role of Ofsted in supporting schools, not necessarily as interrogators or investigators, but as candid friends to work with and help schools, and also help spread best practice where schools are maybe having difficulties for one reason or another?

Gavin Williamson: Where we see remote learning, you often see it as a blend of different measures that are in place, including live lessons, which play an important role obviously for setting of tests. We have put out so much information and we have learnt so much, schools have learnt so much, and it has driven the thinking of how this can be done best. That is why we have been so clear in terms of setting out the expectation and the guidance that we have put there.

Ofsted does play an important role and you are right to say about supporting schools as well—supporting them to get the very best for pupils within that school. Ofsted is taking a very positive approach around how it is speaking with schools, how it is engaging with schools and how it is supporting schools to get the very best. The spring term monitoring inspection programme will focus on remote education in adequate schools, those with two or more “requires improvement” judgments and some schools with a single “requires improvement” judgment.

Obviously, we want schools to be delivering the very best that they can do and I think that most parents have seen what is being delivered in remote education by schools has changed significantly from March/April/May of last year.

Q1140 **Chair:** Permanent Secretary, one of the things that does put enormous pressure on education staff is when the Department issues official guidance that has errors or has to be changed. I could go through numerous examples that I have written down here. There have been a significant number of occasions, highlighted on social media as well. For example, when it was announced that schools would be closed, the guidance for parents on the Government website held that schools would remain open for critical workers, but guidance for the schools stated that



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critical workers should keep their children at home if they can. There were different statements put out about remote learning, different statements about AP schools remaining open and different guidance and leaflets on mass asymptomatic testing in schools and colleges, advising teachers and so on. There are plenty of other examples of where the profession understandably gets very frustrated that guidance is being set out and often they cannot track changes.

My question to the Permanent Secretary is: what internal checks does the Department for Education have in place to verify the accuracy of information you are releasing during the pandemic? Too often it is being changed or has errors. Who ultimately is signing off this information?

Susan Acland-Hood: The first thing I would say is I completely recognise that everybody is working under huge pressure in the pandemic and if we get things wrong that adds to the pressure, so I am sorry that has happened.

In terms of the checks that are gone through, we have a set of clearance gateways within the Department for guidance. We now have a dedicated team that sits and looks at all the guidance together, having learnt from experiences much earlier in the pandemic where we were asking different parts of the Department to write the guidance and then finding that did not always entirely line up. We have a single central guidance team. It is cleared through the Department but it also goes through something called the triple lock process, which involves it going through No. 10, the Cabinet Office, and also anything that is at all Covid-related goes through the Chief Medical Officer's system.

For us it is usually Jenny Harries, the DCMO who specialises in education, who will clear the guidance, but she will personally look at every bit of guidance. That is intended to make sure that we do line up our guidance with other bits across Whitehall.

Q1141 **Chair:** You can understand when the Secretary of State makes a statement and then different guidance is issued one after the other, this should not be happening. Do you sign off these key parts of information yourself to check that they are correct?

Susan Acland-Hood: I do not sign every piece of guidance that we issue. It will go through the relevant director-general but also there is a clearance process inside the Secretary of State's office, as well as the triple lock process across Whitehall.

Sometimes it is the result of rapid movement in the situation and the policy. For example, on critical workers it was true both that critical worker places were available and that we were asking critical workers not to take up places if they did not need it.

Q1142 **Chair:** I am sure that you are sorting this out but I just genuinely think it would make things a lot easier for the profession, given the pressure they are under, if these things did not happen.



Susan Acland-Hood: I completely agree with you and I take it very seriously. The other things that we have taken on board are the importance of trying to make sure we are not putting out guidance late at night or at short notice and also that we are clearly signalling the changes.

The point that you make about teachers not always being able to spot the changes in guidance was made to us earlier in term and you will now see a section at the top of every bit of guidance that we issue that lists the changes so that they—

Q1143 **Chair:** Okay, thank you. Just to understand the Greenwich advice, obviously you would have advised the Secretary of State about that—the Greenwich order. Were you aware when the order was issued about Greenwich schools that the Secretary of State had announced in Parliament about the new variant?

Susan Acland-Hood: The Secretary of State for Health?

Chair: Yes, sorry, I should have said that. Matthew Hancock, yes.

Susan Acland-Hood: No, I don't think we were. That was the following day.

Chair: I think it was the same day, so that is what I am just trying to understand—what went on at that time.

Susan Acland-Hood: I am very happy to check the record again. When we looked at the timeline in advance, I had thought that the Secretary of State for Health's announcement in Parliament was the following day, but no, we were not aware of the announcement on the new variant at the point when the direction was issued.

Q1144 **Chair:** Would you have issued the order to Greenwich if you had known about the Secretary of State's statement about the new variant—the Covid variant?

Susan Acland-Hood: The decision is obviously the Secretary of State's decision and not ours. I think the reasons given by the Secretary of State earlier were that Greenwich was acting unilaterally without discussion and we had not had public health advice that suggested that it was appropriate to close. They were not showing rates—I think they were something like 55th out of 151 local authority areas at the time. All of that would have continued to be significant factors in our consideration, even if—

Q1145 **Chair:** I absolutely understand that and that the Secretary of State wanted to keep the schools open; I just wanted to understand the decision-making process behind it.

We have asked for the chief scientific adviser for the DfE to come next week because we are having a session on public health and education. I would very much appreciate if you could facilitate that. We have not yet



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been told that is going to happen.

Susan Acland-Hood: What we are suggesting is that you have those who advise us on health matters. My chief scientific adviser is an economist but we do have a doctor in the Department and we work very closely with Jenny Harries, who I think is also willing—

Chair: The Committee's view is that we would like the chief scientific adviser as well, if that is possible.

Susan Acland-Hood: I think it is for the Minister to decide who is the best person in response to your request for someone to attend. We will work that through with the Minister.

Q1146 **Chair:** Secretary of State, thank you for three gruelling hours, it is really appreciated. Can I just confirm that you will appear before the Committee sometime in the early spring?

Gavin Williamson: I would be absolutely delighted to, as always, Robert. I will also take the opportunity—and I am sure the whole Committee will join me and agree with me on this—to thank the sector for the amazing work that they do, whether it is in our nurseries, schools, colleges or universities, tirelessly working to deliver the very best for all our children and showing the very best spirit in putting the interests of children first at every moment. My gratitude is incredibly great, as I know the Committee's is as well.

Chair: The Committee would say thank you to all at the DfE, including yourself, for trying to keep schools open, to keep our children learning and to get schools open again, because that is what we all want as soon as possible. Thank you very much indeed, it is really appreciated and I wish you all well. Thank you.